In the practice of traditional storytelling the poet combines elements of plot and character in a productive balance, and as he develops his story, they become mutually reinforcing. At the beginning of book 11 the Greeks begin a new day of fighting. Dawn breaks, Eris shouts a shrill call to battle and makes the Greeks eager for war, and Agamemnon encourages his troops and arms among them. He then leads the Greeks onto the battlefield in a series of encounters that are destructive, vindictive, and bloody, but this rampage is the appropriate introduction to a book of Greek setbacks. He is the right character in the right place at the right time; his wounding and retreat from the battlefield are the appropriate beginning to Hector’s day of glory. In other words, the needs of the plot often seem to call forth a specific character, and individual characters mark developments in the plot.\(^1\)

Such tailoring of tradition has been analyzed and discussed often enough for critics to acknowledge the storyteller’s freedom to shape his tale by selecting elements from an earlier pattern, expanding and condensing material, and adjusting the amounts of speech mixed into the narrative.\(^2\) Characterization in the Homeric poems is equally complicated. It seems certain that Homer did not invent his major characters;\(^3\) rather, he repeatedly borrows them from earlier tales by accommodating and adapting their salient traits to the needs of his continuing narrative. In addition, a large number of minor figures appearing only once or twice in the Homeric poems probably had roles in local sagas, but their stories were never sufficiently significant to earn them a major part in the more widespread narrative tradition.

There are two sections of the *Iliad* where a relatively large number of similes are major features in presentation of the motives and values of major characters: in book 2 they underline the characterization of Agamemnon, and in books 21–22 they heighten the contrast between Achilles and Hector. In
these books the characters dictate the development of the narrative. In book 11, however, similes provide a necessary and continuing focus on a plot that roams widely over the battlefield and is vaguely structured around the shifting strength of the Greeks and the Trojans.

**Iliad, Book 2: Ironic Characterization**

Book 2 of Homer’s *Iliad* contains twenty similes, a large number. Some books contain even more; book 11 is the winner with thirty-two. And because of book 2’s length there are other narrative sections where similes are more densely concentrated: again, the first part of book 11 (1–596) offers the densest gathering of similes in a continuous narrative. But book 2 is a better beginning point for testing the poet’s choices in designing similes because here Homer employs a large number of them in a wide variety of forms. This book not only contains a collection of different simile subjects and a mix of similes ranging from the highly traditional to the uniquely structured (e.g., 144 and 478); it also presents the greatest simile cluster in the Homeric poems (455–83) and three rare juxtaposed similes (144 + 146, 468 + 476, and 780 + 781).

Book 2’s series of extended similes concentrates on the major character, the army. The subjects are taken from familiar similemes—wind, fire, birds, gods, and insects—and tradition firmly underlies the placement of each simile. Yet there are signs that Homer significantly adapts traditional features of the similemes to enhance his story. And, of course, it is important to the interpretation of the individual similes to acknowledge that the audience had a firm knowledge of the alternatives the poet considered and thereby could evaluate what he was accepting, modifying, and suppressing in structuring his narrative.

Book 2 of the *Iliad* falls easily into two narrative units: (1) efforts to organize the army (1–483) and (2) its final marshalling and marching to meet the Trojans (484–877). The division between these sections is clearly signaled in lines 441–52, when Agamemnon orders his heralds to summon the Greeks for battle; leaders encourage their men, and Athena marches with the army to rouse its spirit. This division of the book is echoed by the differing poetic strategies in each part. The first section describes the Greek leaders’ frenzied attempts to establish a direction for the army, while in the Catalogue the army is presented straightforwardly as a unit of impressive and unified power. The
organization implicit in, and imposed by, the catalogue form itself presents
the army for the first time in the epic as a potent fighting unit; the names of
men and the numbers of ships are listed as components of corporate strength,
and individual lives and fates are mentioned only briefly. After the Greek
Catalogue the narrative continues to move toward battle as the Trojan heroes
and troops are also listed.

While the narrative of book 2 develops from the army at rest to the army
marching to its first battle in the *Iliad*, the theme of the book is leadership. In
neither books 1 nor 2 does Agamemnon mold his troops into a strong fighting
unit. Of course, the Greek army is big—the length and scope of the Cata-
logue exhibit the massive power that the Greeks possess at Troy; but this
force must be organized to move effectively toward a single goal if the war is
to be won. When Agamemnon misinforms the troops about his dream, he
misreads the spirit of the army and causes extreme disorganization.

In order to understand the functioning of the similes in supporting the
theme of ineffective leadership it is necessary to examine each simile closely
as the product of the poet’s choice. There is good evidence that the inherited
language of early Greek narrative suggested a limited number of subjects at
certain common junctures; on some occasions the poet chose to follow these
prompts, often he made modifications, and at times he opted not to use a sim-
ile at all. On each occasion his aim was to make the choice that allowed him
to tell his story most effectively for an audience who also knew the similemes
and could appreciate the poet’s art.

*The Similes of Book 2*

2.87

just as the swarms of thronging bees
flow ever anew from a hollow rock;
in clusters they fly to the springtime flowers —
some flitting here and some there

This simile, describing the army gathering for the assembly, is drawn from
the insect simileme. In the other two bee/wasp similes (12.167 and 16.259) the
insects are stirred up to attack their provokers or else to defend themselves;
appropriately, in each passage the narrative describes the fierce spirit of war-
riors. At 2.87, however, the army is only marching to a meeting where they will
sit down and listen to their leaders; the poet has fitted the insect simileme to this calmer context by removing any threat from the bees. They leave their homes only to seek the flowers of spring; they fly in different directions and gather in clusters wherever there is a flower. The crucial idea of an organized and spirited self-defense, so central to the other two similes, is deleted.

There are few parallel descriptions of groups that gather but do not go to war immediately; usually armies are mustered to attack each other or at least to advance to battle. In such scenes the similes center on lions, wind and waves, fire, and rushing rivers. At 16.156 the simile of bloodthirsty wolves stresses the gory aspects of their attack on a stag—even though the Myrmidons are only arming themselves. Perhaps the closest parallel to the movement of troops not directly involved in battle occurs in the Epipolesis, where Agamemnon encounters the two Ajaxes and their followers readying themselves for war:

as when from a cliff a goatherd sees a cloud coming across the sea driven by the blast of the west wind; as it moves over the sea, it seems blacker than pitch to him even though he is far away, and it brings a great whirlwind. Seeing it he shudders and drives his flock into a cave. . . .

In this case men in armor are on the move and war is imminent; the simile emphasizes the goatherd’s fear as he sees danger threatening his flock.

By choosing insects for the first of many similes describing the army in book 2, the poet prepares his audience, well aware of the traditional possibilities in the insect simileme, to focus on the fighting spirit of the Greeks. Yet at the same time, when he rigorously suppresses the available warlike elements to create a spring scene of untroubled bees, he counts on that same audience to realize that he has eliminated the aggressive element of the simileme in order to present the least ready army in the Iliad. The disorder and uncertainty in its movements are made clear in their random clustering (82 and 89) and their lack of direction (90).  

2.144, 147, and 209
like the long waves of the deep, the Icarian Sea, which the East Wind and the South rouse rushing from the clouds of father Zeus,

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and just as the West Wind comes to a deep field of corn,
blowing briskly, and sets the ears to bobbing.

just as when a wave of the sounding sea
thunders on the long beach and the sea roars

The unplanned and chaotic rush of the army to the ships and back again to
the assembly is described by three wind and wave similes, two of which are
juxtaposed and closely parallel in structure. Because the subjects of winds
and waves are complementary components of the same simile me and often
accompany the charge and attack of a warrior or of the whole army, it is pos-
sible to assess degrees of intensity. The clearest example of the destructive
potential in this simile me is:

as a fast-moving wave
swollen by the wind from beneath the clouds
falls upon a swift ship; the whole ship is hidden by the foam,
the terrible blast of the wind roars in the sail,
and the sailors tremble in fear — for only barely do they escape death

(15.624)

13.795 also expresses nature’s power, even though it does not specifically men-
tion the threat of sinking the ship or destroying the men:

like the blast of harsh winds
that rush over the plain driven by the thunder of father Zeus
and stir up the sea with a gigantic roar; many waves
of the loud-sounding sea boil up,
arching high and white — some before and some following after

By comparison, the three wind and wave similes in book 2 present an image
of nature offering little threat or danger. At 2.144 waves on the sea are men-
tioned briefly in a phrase; then the second line locates the scene and names
the winds that clash; the final line gives the source of the winds. For the most
part, proper names displace the direct description of the winds’ powerful
action. But the phrasing also softens the scene: the winds rushing down from
the “clouds of father Zeus” seem less dramatic than the winds that come to
the plain “driven by the thunder of father Zeus” (13.796).

The second simile describes a wind blowing through a cornfield. For com-
parison there is a simile of winds blowing through a forest at 16.765:
the East and South Winds battle one another
in shaking the deep woods in the ravines of a mountain,
beech, ash, and smooth-barked cornel.
These whip their sharp-pointed branches against one another
with an unbelievable noise and there is a crashing of shattered limbs.

This storm is a major event; the winds are strong enough to break branches.
In contrast, the bobbing ears in the cornfield recall an everyday scene on the
farm that should only arouse delight.

Each of the two similes in book 2 (144 and 147) is drawn from one of the
most traditional subjects, but the poet diminishes the dangerous potential
of the winds by omitting those parts of the simileme that menace or destroy.
It is further significant that these two similes are joined with no interven-
ing line, and the full unit is framed by the same phrase in the narrative: “The
council was moved” (144 and 149). Juxtaposed similes are found elsewhere
at 2.478–81, 2.780–81, and 14.394.16 In each case the tone of the joined simi-
les is complementary and the extending elements present the same level of
violence and power. At 2.144 and 2.147 Homer has not only suppressed the
most powerful and threatening scenes available within the wind simile family
but has also, by the device of juxtaposing two separate scenes, underlined the
army’s moderate and unwarlike qualities.17

At 2.209 the poet describes the noise of the army returning to the meeting
place. The previously mentioned simile at 16.765 also presents the noise of a
destructive windstorm. In book 2 the waves thunder on a broad beach and
the sea roars. This is a scene that could well attract picnickers and hikers —
not much threat compared to the violent whirlwind that is present elsewhere
in the simile repertoire.18 13.795 presents the strengthened form drawn from
the simileme.19

Still, the poet has not chosen the mildest descriptions of wind and waves
for book 2. There is no calmer picture of winds than that of the fog hang-
ing over the mountaintops when the winds are asleep (5.522), and no more
placid country scenes than the wind blowing the chaff around the winnowers
(5.499) or the gusts that raise clouds of dust on dry country roads (13.334).
The second half of the book will present the army’s full power and at the
moment the possibilities inherent in the simileme keep that power alive —
though in a simile that the audience would realize expressed only medium
strength. Most of the similes in book 2 present only middling or weak support

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to the actions of the army by a like diminution of the strongest traditional features within the simileme. It does not seem possible to identify a “base” form for the simile families; rather, the memories of both poet and audience recall a range of descriptions from the most powerful to the weakest and evaluate the individual simile by placing it within that range.

2.394

the Argives cried aloud just as a wave
against a high cliff when the South Wind drives it
against a jutting crag that the waves driven by every wind
from this side or that never leave once they rise

The Greeks shout their approval of Agamemnon’s order to fight and then return to their camps. This simile is curious because it seems to have two focuses in the narrative, neither of which is directly supported within the simile. It is introduced by the phrase “The Argives cried aloud” but rejoins the narrative with the troops being scattered among the ships. In the simile there is no word for sound, and the only support for the scattering of the Greeks is the winds that blow “from this side and that.” Context controls the audience’s application of the simile; sound is only implied in the simile scene.²⁰

The emphasis within the simile seems to be on steadfastness. The rock itself is a “high, jutting crag that the waves never leave”; in support of this reading, there is a parallel passage in which both narrative and simile use the image of the crag to underline the steadfast resistance of a group:

like a towering, huge crag, nearby the gray sea,
which endures the swift blowing of the whistling winds
and the swelling waves which break against it;
thus fixed did the Greeks await the Trojans and did not flee²¹

(15.618)

In book 2, however, steadfastness does not seem relevant — especially since the assembly is in the process of scattering, each man to his own ship.

Even with this change in narrative situation, the simile in book 2 is not as strongly phrased as that in book 15. In book 2 the headland is high; in book 15 the crag is towering.²² In book 2 only one wave breaks against the headland, which is daily subject to waves from this direction or that; in book 15 the winds are shrill and the waves are swollen. The crag simile in book 2 is formed
by choices that diminish the force that such a simile can express and is set in
a narrative that it is only tangentially prepared to support.

**The Clustering of Similes 2.455–83**

The marshalling of the Greek army for its grand presentation in the Cata-
logue is a major moment. In no other passage is the power of the largest expe-
ditionary force in Greek legend made so explicit, with the names of heroes
from all parts of the Greek world joined in one panoramic display. This dis-
play of the Greek forces provides a moment of order from which the mael-
strom of the *Iliad* will be generated; only in book 23 will the characters of the
Greek heroic world be regathered.

The Catalogue is introduced with appropriate weight by the unique pre-
lude of seven similes in twenty-nine lines:

455: a fire burns in the distance
459: flocks of birds fly here and there on the plain
468: the numbers of troops are like leaves or flowers in spring
469: flies swarm around milk pails in springtime
474: goatherds separate goats in the pasture
478: Agamemnon’s appearance is like Zeus, Ares, and Poseidon
480: a bull stands out in the herd

Simply stated, there is no short passage of Homeric narrative that is as densely
packed with similes. The effect is even greater because none of the seven simi-
les is short.

2.455

just as a destructive fire burns an immense forest
on the peaks of a mountain and from afar the glare is seen

The repertoire of fire similes contains two basic types: one fire is frighten-
ing in its ability to destroy; the other is beautiful and bright, an object of won-
der. The destructive fire is nowhere better exemplified than at 17.737, where it
describes the Trojans assaulting the two Ajaxes:

like a fire which suddenly rises and rushes
against a city of men and burns it, and houses fall
in the giant glare. The force of the wind sets it roaring

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But there is also the more lyrical fire that describes the gleam from the divine arms of Achilles:

\[
\text{just as when the gleam of a burning fire appears over the sea}
\]
\[
\text{to sailors — a fire which burns high up in the mountains}
\]
\[
\text{in a lonely farmstead. The winds carry them all unwilling}
\]
\[
\text{far from their friends over the fish-filled sea}
\]

(19.375)

In this simile the gleam of a distant fire is so far away that the sailors are more concerned over friends left behind than any threat of storm damage. Fire is a common comparison for the activity of warriors, alone or in groups, often describing a strong attack or an impassioned spirit. The simile in book 2 is a mixture; even though the fire is presented as \( \text{aïdêlon} \) (“destructive”), its threat is diminished when compared with a simile describing the fighting of Agamemnon:

\[
\text{As when a destructive fire falls upon a thick forest,}
\]
\[
\text{and the wind whirling it around bears it in all directions, and thickets}
\]
\[
\text{fall uprooted when they are attacked by the force of the flames}
\]

(11.155)

The simile in book 2 starts with the same formula, “a destructive fire,” and continues with a similar idea, “burns/falls on a vast forest”; but here the parallel ends. While the simile from book 11 directly focuses on the wind that whips the fire, the simile in book 2 merely defines the location of the fire, “on the peaks of a mountain.” Then the absence of danger is reinforced by placing the unnamed observer at a safe distance.

Again a traditional subject, fire, is designed by the poet to express far less than full strength. The range of power within the simile is large; there is an extreme diminution of force at \( \text{Odyssey} \) 5.488, where Odysseus, having barely survived the storm at sea, crawls ashore stripped of all but his life. Lying in his nakedness beneath a thorn bush and an olive tree, he is compared to an ember, “saving a seed of fire”; the hero’s fire still burns but has been reduced to a mere glow.

2.459
\[
\text{as the many families of winged birds,}
\]
\[
\text{of geese or cranes or long-necked swans,}
\]

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fly here and there rejoicing in their wings
on the Asian plain near the streams of the river Kayster
as they move forward with loud cries, and the plain echoes with sound

When the actions of warriors are compared to birds, the simile usually focuses on the strength of the attack.24 Birds of prey attack smaller birds or small animals that are driven in fear before them: a vulture pursues geese, a falcon chases after starlings, an eagle swoops after a hare (17.460, 16.582, Ody. 24.538, and 17.674). In addition, there are similes where whole groups of attacking warriors are compared to birds of prey; for example, Odysseus and his friends attack the panicked suitors in the final battle at his palace:

as vultures with crooked talons and hooked beaks
coming from the mountains rush on small birds
who dart over the plain fleeing away from the clouds,25
but the vultures diving down slay them and there is no defense or flight. And men rejoice in the hunt

(Ody. 22.302)

The simile at 2.459 is far different. These birds seek no prey; they fly randomly here and there as they delight in the openness of the meadow. In addition, the species cited are traditionally victims. Both Penelope and Telemachus see an eagle attack a single goose or geese, and later the interpretation is immediately offered that Odysseus is the eagle that will overpower and take vengeance on the weaker suitors (Ody. 15.160 and Ody. 19.536–50); Automedon attacks the Trojans like a vulture in pursuit of geese (17.460). At 3.2 cranes do bear death to Pygmy men, but in this case only the small size of the men allows even these weaker birds to be attackers. Because line 460 is repeated elsewhere in a similar context, it is probable that it is a traditional listing of victims:

just as a yellow eagle plunges
upon a flock of winged birds who are feeding by the river,
geese or cranes or long-necked swans,
so did Hector rush at the ship

(15.690)

Thus, another dilution of a traditional subject by selecting the weaker features in the simile. Once again the low end of heroic potential within the simile is reached when Achilles complains of his disadvantaged position in

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the Greek army: “as a bird brings food to her unfledged chicks whenever she catches it, but it goes ill for her” (9.323).

2.468 and 469
as many as the leaves and flowers in spring.

just as the many swarms of dense flies
which crowd around the sheep farm
in the springtime when the milk splashes into the pails

Homer juxtaposes these two similes with differing subjects to illustrate the vast number of troops marching against the Trojans. The passage is united internally and externally: it is composed of two juxtaposed springtime similes, and the narrative’s emphasis on number is directly expressed both before and after (myrioi hossa . . . tosoi, 468 and 472).26 The two similes join to present an enhanced scene of countryside peace, an effect parallel to the earlier intensifying similes at 2.144 + 147. The short simile of leaves and flowers seems a standard comparison repeated at Odyssey 9.51, where the poet describes the numbers of attacking Cicones. Flies also seem a typological subject for this context: there is another simile at 16.641 where the phrasing is similar, and its last line is identical to 2.471.

The poet’s choice of topics at such a narrative juncture is limited if he wishes to remain within the traditional alternatives. In the places where he uses a simile to illustrate numbers of troops, the tradition — as far as it can be defined — offers only two subjects of consistent usage: insects and leaves.27 While the subject of leaves is not present often enough in the poems to establish a reliable scaling among its customary elements, the earlier discussion of the insect simile shows that the poet has chosen features that present these insects as an image of nature at peace.28 Rather than bees or wasps, he uses harmless flies that flit purposelessly through the farmstead; the rest of the simile diverts attention from them by focusing on the season.

2.474
as goatherds easily separate the widely roaming flocks
of goats when they have mingled together in the pasture . . .

This simile describes the leaders among their men, a scene that occurs often in the Iliad and Odyssey, several times with a simile. In almost every case the tone of the simile reflects the surrounding narrative. If the men are

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involved in active fighting, the simile centers on a subject that can be developed into an appropriate parallel for warfare. As the battle-starved Myrmidon commanders arm themselves around Achilles and Patroclus, they are compared to wolves:

\[
\text{flesh-eating wolves, in whose hearts is unquenchable fury, who having killed a great-horned stag in the mountains rip him with their teeth. Their cheeks are red with blood, and in a pack they rush to lap water from the surface of the dark spring with their slender tongues, vomiting up bits of bloody gore. Their spirits are unrelenting and their stomachs, full. (16.156)}
\]

Equally appropriate analogues for a war context are the comparisons of Idomeneus to a boar, of the two Ajaxes to a dark cloud that causes the goat-herd to drive his flock to safety, of the men thronging around Diomedes to lions or boars, and the appearance of Hector among his followers as an evil star (4.253, 275; 5.782; and 11.62). In peaceful scenes the tone of the simile usually matches the narrative: Proteus among his seals is likened to a shepherd among his sheep; Nausicaa among her handmaidens is like Artemis sporting in the mountains; and Odysseus’ men gather around him like calves around a mother cow (Ody. 4.413, Ody. 6.102, and Ody. 10.410). In the Iliad even Odysseus, when he is not actually fighting, is compared to a ram walking through a flock of white ewes (3.196).

The simile in book 2, however, presents a striking discrepancy between the warrior world of the army and a scene of peaceful nature, a discrepancy paralleled in the aristeia of Idomeneus. Aeneas gathers his comrades to confront Idomeneus, and the soldiers follow along:

\[
\text{as sheep follow after the ram going to drink from their feeding place, and the shepherd rejoices in his heart, thus did the heart rejoice in the breast of Aeneas. . . . (13.492)}
\]

Because this tranquil scene introduces some of the goriest fighting and crudest woundings in the Iliad, the effect of the simile emerges only from a view of
the wider passage. The aristeia of Idomeneus is an episode in the larger battle stretching from the beginning of book 13 to the return of Hector in book 15, a long narrative section directly under the control of Poseidon as he strengthens the Greeks. Throughout this section the two armies are contrasted: the Greeks, with the irresistible support of Poseidon, versus the Trojans, who have momentarily lost the attention of Zeus. The scene from 424–95 emblematically opposes Idomeneus to Aeneas: the Greek awaits the Trojans like a bristling boar that is eager to defend himself against hunting dogs and men opposed to Aeneas, the leader of the weakened Trojans, who is like a ram among his ewes (13.471 vs. 492).

Likewise, in book 2 the mustering of the army for combat would naturally call for a simile appropriate to a warlike context. Instead the poet has developed the simile to stress the non-warlike features of the Greek leaders: the goatherds control the flocks easily, the scene is a pasture, and the flocks have idly mingled together.

2.478 and 480

among them mighty Agamemnon
like Zeus, who delights in thunder, in his eyes and head,
Ares in his waist, and Poseidon in his chest.

Just as a bull is by far preeminent among all in the herd,
for he stands out among the gathered cattle

Agamemnon is presented as the supreme king of the Greek army with two more juxtaposed similes. In the first the poet chooses to focus on Agamemnon's appearance as he prepares for battle; the simile of a god at 7.208 describing Ajax before his single combat with Hector provides a parallel for both context and subject:

thus Ajax moved forth like giant Ares,
who goes to battle among men whom the son of Cronos
has sent to fight in the violence of soul-devouring strife.29

The simile at 2.478 has several unusual features. First, though there are other similes in which alternatives are offered as comparisons, here Agamemnon is simultaneously likened to three different divinities.30 Second, while heroes are commonly compared to a specific god, they are never said to be like that god in regard to a particular physical feature. With the sole exception of Hec-
tor, who has the eyes of a Gorgon or of Ares when he is in the act of routing the Greeks (8.349), warriors are not complimented on their eyes, their heads, their waists, or their chests. Usually the comparison is to the action of the god, as in the simile describing Ajax, rather than to his physical appearance. Thus though there are precedents for the simile subject at 2.478, the passage is odd in stressing the surface appearance of the warrior, in identifying him with several gods at once, and in focusing on uncustomary features. Once again choices in the extending elements drain the potential warlike qualities from the simile.

There is even a lowered intensity in the choice of the simile form. The simile by its nature is an indirect description. While Homer does not often offer physical descriptions, the strong effect of a direct presentation is evident in the image of Hector as he advances on the Greek ships:

foam appeared around his mouth, his eyes
shone from under his ferocious brows, and his helmet
shook fearfully around his temples as he fought

(15.607–10)

Book 2 does not present such a fearful image of Agamemnon.

The second simile centers on a bull, an animal familiar from the simile repertoire. Bulls are usually victims, especially of lions. The simile describing the last moments of Sarpedon is typical:

as a lion going into a herd destroys a bull —
a tawny, spirited bull among the shambling cattle —
who bellows as he dies in the jaws of the lion

(16.487)

Similes of farm animals usually describe warriors who are helpless or dying (13.571 and 20.403). The simile of the mother cow lowing over her calf that describes Menelaus taking his stand over the body of Patroclus at 17.4 illustrates how effective such a simile can be. Menelaus is always a warrior who causes concern to others when he is exposed to danger. His strength is immediately shown to be sound when he slays Euphorbus just as a tempest uproots a young olive tree (53), and he is compared to an enraged lion as he terrifies the Trojans cowering around him (61). But then Hector confronts him; he quails and retreats to seek Ajax, who returns with him to guard the body of Patroclus. Ajax’s action, parallel to the earlier stand of Menelaus, receives a
powerful lion simile (133–36). Thus the simile of the mother cow is the first part of a parallel structure intended to underline the inadequacy of Menelaus as Patroclus’ defender.33

A related use of the farm animal simile occurs in the passage where Paris returns to battle as a horse racing to the pasture (6.506). When the wounded Hector recovers his strength and reenters battle, he receives the same simile to express his renewed energy, but it is immediately enhanced with a second simile of a lion (15.263 + 271). Though the horse simile is repeated word for word, the effect is totally different; when the second simile is missing, Paris seems a frivolous creature interested only in warrior-like posturing.

The tone of the bull simile in book 2 can be further contrasted with alternative comparisons at similar junctures. The closest parallel is at 12.41, where Hector urges the Trojans to cross the ditch—another picture of the leader among his men; he is likened to the courageous lion that terrifies the men around him. Also 11.62: Hector stands among the Trojan leaders like an evil star, and his armor flashes like the lightning of Zeus (66); elsewhere both subjects stress the impressive appearance of an effective warrior.34

From this brief survey it appears that warriors are usually compared to farm animals when the poet presents them as weak, helpless, or pathetic—and there is no warlike word or serious threat added to the image of the kingly bull amid the cattle that describes Agamemnon.

The farm animal simile that is most like that in book 2 occurs when Odysseus returns from Circe’s palace to his companions awaiting him on the beach:

as when calves on a farm jump around the herd of cows
returning to the farmyard when they are full from grazing—
all together they frisk around them and the pens no longer hold them,
but lowing endlessly they run around their mothers

(Ody. 10.410)

This simile suits the infectious joy of men who have been weeping disconsolately on the beach. In addition, the day’s activities are done, and the returning herd provides an appropriate parallel for the leader who will now neglect the voyage home to settle in with the sorceress. His leadership has ebbed to the point where his men will have to remind him of their goal. A like tone of failed leadership describes the commander Agamemnon as he musters his troops for the Catalogue.
If a simile cluster is defined as a grouping of at least three long similes within thirty lines, all of which are focused on a single scene, then there are only three other identifiable simile clusters. In book 11 after Agamemnon departs wounded from the battle (280–83), Hector advances for the day of glory promised by Zeus. To mark Hector’s entrance Homer employs a cluster of four similes, both short and extended:

292: a hunter sets his hounds on a boar or lion
295: Ares, the destroyer of men (short)
297: a blustering wind churns the sea
305: two winds clash, raise heavy swells, and the waves scatter spray

Second, in book 15 when the Trojans are on the verge of burning the Greek ships, thus fulfilling the plan of Zeus and putting crucial pressure on Achilles (592ff.), there is a cluster of six similes, two of which are short comparisons:

592: the Trojans are like flesh-eating lions (short)
605: Hector is like Ares (short) or a destructive fire (extended)
618: the Greeks remain fixed like a cliff that is battered by wind and waves
624: Hector attacks the Greeks like a wave that so threatens to sink a ship that the sailors barely escape death
630: Hector attacks like a lion that harasses the inexperienced herdsman and kills a heifer, scattering the herd

The third cluster falls at the end of book 17 and describes Menelaus’ and Meriones’ struggle to remove the body of Patroclus to the Greek camp. In this passage similes respond to the balanced battle between Greeks and Trojans:

725: hounds (Trojans) viciously attack a wounded boar (the two Ajaxes) that scares them away when he turns to fight
737: a fierce fire (Trojans) is driven against a city by the wind and destroys it
742: two mules (Menelaus and Meriones) drag a large beam along a rugged path
747: a ridge (Ajaxes) holds back several rivers (Trojans) that threaten to burst through
755: a falcon (Aeneas and Hector) attacks smaller birds (Greeks), bringing the threat of death

These four passages in books 2, 11, 15, and 17 establish the simile cluster as a form familiar to the poet. Two rules prevail in such clusters:

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1. The tone developed in the extended similes is subordinated to the direction of the narrative.
2. Each simile acts independently in reinforcing the others in order to underline that direction.

Similes in such passages are derived from a variety of similemes, but there is no need to coordinate the subjects within the cluster so that one will suggest or lead to the next, nor is there any necessity for a framing or linking structure. The grouping of such similes is a clear and economical means of introducing striking poetic background into the narrative. The simile cluster in book 2, the largest and most impressive in the *Iliad* — whether analyzed as a series of individual comparisons or as a structured whole — obeys these rules in presenting a consistent poetic background of the more lyrical and peaceful qualities of nature, even though in this book Homer’s goal is to present the army gathering for attack.

*The Final Similes: 2.780 and 781*
as if the whole earth were swept with fire.

the land groans just as when Zeus who delights in thunder is angry and lashes the land around Typhoeus among the Arimoi, where they say lies the couch of Typhoeus

While these two similes describing the Greek army on the march are not joined as closely by verbal links as those at 144 + 146 and 468 + 476, they are juxtaposed, and their combined effect is greater than either would be alone. The word “groan” (*stenachizo*) occurs before and after the second simile — and the repetition gives simile and narrative a common focus. The sound of the fire is not directly reported by *nemoito* (“were swept”), but there is no necessary incompatibility between the idea of a large fire sweeping the earth and a great sound.

Since these two similes immediately follow the Catalogue of the Greek ships, they are parallel to the earlier cluster of seven introductory similes. However, they present two images — massive fire and earthquake/thunderstorm — that are radically different from the milder, more restrained pictures throughout the previous lines of book 2.

Fire is a traditional simile subject accompanying the army on the march or in battle. Yet though 2.780 is relatively short, it threatens destruction
by stating so openly that all the earth was being consumed by fire; this is no small blaze seen at a distance by disinterested observers. This simile does not have to be extended to a great length to emphasize the change in tone, both because it is responding to the first simile in the earlier cluster at 455 — the far-removed fire that offered little threat — and because it is immediately reinforced by 781.

The image of Zeus lashing the land is insufficiently paralleled in Homeric poetry to construct a pattern of a simile family, but the story is told by Hesiod:

When Zeus gathered his strength and took up his arms, thunder and lightning, and the smoking thunderbolt, leaping down from Olympus he struck him [Typhoeus]. He burned all the wondrous heads of the terrible monster. But when he had overcome him and lashed him with strokes, he fell lamed and the great earth groaned. The flame from the king who was struck by the thunderbolt shot forth in the dark rugged ravines of the mountains. Much of the huge earth was burned by the amazing heat and it melted like tin. . . .

(Theogony 853–62)

Both the Hesiodic passage and the simile present a scene of massive destruction. Probably the simile refers either to a powerful lightning storm, reminiscent of Zeus’ victory over Typhoeus, or an earthquake created by Typhoeus moving under the mountains.39 In either case the poet has chosen to end the Catalogue with two mutually reinforcing images of nature as overwhelming and awesome in its destructive might.

The Role of Similes in Book 2

For the most part the confused and perplexed reactions of the army to Agamemnon’s commands are physical actions through which the theme of ineffective leadership is presented; but the focus on the army’s response to its leader is continuously intensified by similes. Of book 2’s twenty similes, fourteen are placed within the first five hundred lines, a rate of one in every thirty-five lines. In addition, since only four of those fourteen are short, similes play an extraordinarily important role in the telling of this tale. It is further
significant that the first twelve similes describe the Greek army: its mass, its movements, the noise it makes, and the gleam from its weapons—all topics for which the tradition offers similemes that can be designed to fit war contexts. Yet in developing each of these similes the poet consistently chooses unwarlike features: harmless insects, random winds, wandering flocks of small birds, unthreatening farm animals, leaves, and flowers. The topic of insects traditionally illustrates both the number and ferocity of a group, but both insect similes (87 and 469) stress peaceful, pastoral qualities. The series of wave similes (144, 209, and 394) emphasizes both the vastness of the sea and its chaotic qualities; in 144 it is unclear which wind is moving the waves, the East or the South Wind, and this confusion is continued immediately in the simile at 147, where the West Wind blows through the cornfield. At 394 the waves roll “now here and now there.”40 Such similes suggest that the Greek army moves in no coordinated manner or in any specific direction; thus there is no meaningful threat to humans in either simile or narrative. The fire simile (455) describes a blaze that is seen from afar by men who are unthreatened, and the birds at 459 have no goal—they too fly “here and there.” Not even the locales mentioned in the similes are related to war: the plain with spring flowers, a farm or pastureland; the army musters for the Catalogue “in the flowering meadow” (467). Even two short similes used in speeches to describe the army are highly unwarlike; both Nestor and Odysseus call the warriors children or widow women (289 and 337).41

Because the tone of the similes sharply diverges from the war preparations in the narrative, their consistency strongly supports the theme of weakened leadership. From its first scene book 2 is built from intrigue, deceit, and mistaken judgment. The book opens with Zeus instituting the plan that will accomplish his promise to Thetis; he sends a dream to Agamemnon that urges the exact opposite of that promise: arm the Greeks and seize Troy. However, Agamemnon proposes a stratagem to the Greek leaders; he will test the army’s mettle by proposing that they abandon the expedition and return home. When the troops seize upon his words and rush to the ships, their actions and thoughts threaten to abort the mission and thus run contrary to the plan of Zeus. The disabling and weakening of the vast army, which is conveyed through its backward and forward movements, is repeatedly described by similes that make the troops seem harmless.42

This ironic undercutting reaches its climax in the cluster of seven similes before the Catalogue. Homer introduces this section with these words:

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[Athena] gleaming rushed through the mass of the Achaeans urging them to march. In the heart of each man she roused unshakable strength for war and fighting. And war became sweeter to them than returning to their beloved homes in hollow ships.

(450–54)

But this firm war spirit is immediately dissipated by the similes—the fire that gleams but does not threaten or destroy, the birds that glory in the freedom of disorganized flight, the leaves and the flowers in springtime, the farmyard flies, and the goats roaming the pastureland.

Once the Catalogue has tallied the actual military might of the Greeks and they begin to move to war, the theme of inadequate leadership ends, and the size, talent, and inherent quality of the united mass of the Greek army lends credibility to the terrified Polites/Iris, who rouses Hector and his fellow Trojans. The similes closely accompany this change. At 780 and 781 the similes describe massive destruction as Zeus enters the simile world by hurling his thunderbolts at the earth, lashing the land. Now there is no mention of springtime or harmless movements. Here the forces of nature run amok as fire sweeps the land and the earth groans.

The deliberateness with which similes support the narrative of book 2 becomes even more apparent in examining those junctures where the poet chose other means to continue his narrative even though the simile was a traditional option. While it is impossible to know the poet’s mind sufficiently to construct a full list of such passages, eight such occasions can be identified in book 2.

1. 16ff. and 35f. — the coming and going of the Dream. The tradition suggested four standard means for describing the journey of a divinity: a simple two-line statement (leaving/arriving), the preparation for the trip, the listing of the route, or a simile. For the journeys of the Dream to and from the Trojan camp Homer chose the simplest form of description. Since the theme of the book is the leadership of Agamemnon, the poet introduces the Dream succinctly so that the audience can concentrate on the directions from Zeus to Agamemnon, the key to understanding Agamemnon’s “clever” device in leading — or misleading — his troops.

2. 42ff. — Agamemnon enters the action by initiating his plan. The Homeric text provides similar ways to bring an important hero into the action, includ-
ing the simple entrance, the statement of the hero’s preparation, the ponderings of the hero on possible success or failure, and the simile. In this passage Homer describes Agamemnon’s appearance as he prepares to go through the camp—his tunic, his cloak, his sandals, his silver-studded sword, and his ancestral scepter—rather than his status, valor, or emotions. At this point an extended simile would offer a parallel scene to deepen the audience’s understanding of the king. Projections of success or failure would produce a subtler, more sympathetic character, perhaps capable of inner doubt; the Agamemnon of book 2 is misguided and stubborn. Homer chooses a description of his entrance that penetrates no deeper than his clothes and equipment in order to direct attention toward the conduct of his office.

3. 93f. — Rumor urges the Greeks. As the Greeks gather to hear the message of Agamemnon, “Rumor blazed forth in their midst urging them to go to the meeting.” Several divine forces in the Homeric poems are described by similes, such as the river Xanthus, the old man of the sea in book 4 of the Odyssey (413), or the god Sleep (14.290). Rumor, as the messenger of Zeus, could be emphasized if Homer were stressing the role of the divine plan in the action of this book. But, just as with the Dream, a strong emphasis on divine intervention would destroy the focus on the book’s theme. Therefore Rumor enters in a two-line factual report. Such restraint allows Homer to present the eagerness of the army succinctly without diluting the immediately preceding four-line simile describing the human response of the army.

4. 100ff. — the scepter of Agamemnon. This scepter is important in the first two books of the Iliad. It is cast to the ground by Achilles in book 1 (234), Agamemnon leans upon it as he addresses the Greek army making his misguided proposal to the troops (2.100), and Odysseus takes it up when he attempts to stop the chaotic rush to the ships, even beating Thersites into silence with it (2.186 and 265). An object of such significance is often marked by a simile. In this passage Homer has chosen to detail the genealogy of the scepter, tracing it back through the House of Atreus to the gods Hermes, Zeus, and Hephaestus. By such an extended description Homer presents the divine and ancestral authority associated with the scepter, the very qualities that Agamemnon betrays in his unfortunate plan. By rejecting a simile in this passage, Homer isolates the king and expresses his lack of depth against the list of previous divine and human authorities.

5. 166ff. — the arrival of Athena. As the Argives rush to their ships (invalidating the plan of Zeus), Hera complains that Troy may go unpunished because
of the inept machinations of Agamemnon; Athena descends from Olympus, asking Odysseus to urge the Greeks back to the assembly. The alternatives are the same four mentioned in regard to 16ff. and 35f. above; here, as there, Homer chooses the simplest of descriptions. Since it has been made clear that Odysseus knows Agamemnon wants the army to advance spiritedly toward Troy, he needs no further motivation from Athena to bring the Greeks back from the ships. Therefore her advice to him cannot be intended to introduce new motivation from another plane; rather, the accent provided by the divine message shows that even heaven has been upset by Agamemnon’s clumsy scheme. In this case there is not much point in stressing Athena’s journey from heaven to earth through a description of elaborate preparation, or by a listing of her route, or by a simile; it is more important to demonstrate widespread dismay with Agamemnon’s actions.

6. 182ff. — the entrance of Odysseus. At this point the narrative spotlight falls directly on Odysseus as he takes the scepter from Agamemnon, rallies the Greeks, squelches all opposition, and finally makes a major speech of encouragement to the whole assembly. Odysseus, more than any other leader, provides new direction to the narrative. Often major figures receive a simile marking their entrance into the narrative, but Odysseus is not parallel to other entrants, since he largely seeks to resist a massive movement. Homer describes Odysseus’ feelings as he watches the Achaeans stream toward their ships, summarizes his thoughts in Athena’s speech, has him take the symbol of authority from Agamemnon, and shows the variety of means that he employs to rally the Greeks. A simile would only call attention to Odysseus, diverting the audience’s minds from the complexity of the situation. Odysseus, as raller of the Greeks, is the contrasting figure that exposes Agamemnon’s folly; therefore it is important to focus on the effectiveness of his leadership in order to make him a weighty foil to Agamemnon.

7. 212ff. — the entrance of Thersites. Much the same could be said of Thersites in his section of the narrative; he also could receive a simile as he emerges from the background to resist the movement surrounding him. However, since he carries Achilles’ criticisms of Agamemnon into this book, it is more important for the poet to emphasize those thoughts over the fact of his resistance. A simile would merely shift attention from the continuing inadequacy of the Greek leader.

8. 265ff. — Thersites’ tear. When Odysseus strikes Thersites with the scepter, a tear falls from his eye and he sinks to the ground. A simile is often effective
in presenting emotions, but in this passage Homer does not call attention to Thersites’ emotions. The narrative requires that the audience focus on the actions of Odysseus that will reinvigorate the Greeks’ spirit. In addition, by enhancing the sorrow of Thersites through a simile, Homer would build sympathy for a character whose subjugation is cheered by the other Greeks. The continuing focus on the contrast between Agamemnon and Odysseus as leaders directly furthers the theme of the book (2.270–77).

The major literary device of book 2 is irony, the constant exploitation of the gap between reality and illusion. In the Greek universe the plans of the gods are always stronger than those of humans. If heroes struggle against the established tide, they will suffer and perhaps die; but if they can catch the flow, they can move painlessly — even effortlessly — forward. To follow that irresistible direction they will often have to repress their own plans and highest goals. The hallmark of Greek heroism is the willing sacrifice of one’s life for a fragile illusion, but in doing so heroes gain the sympathy and approval of all mortals, for their effort provides a noble model.

Book 2 of the Iliad is rooted in this split between the overwhelming strength of the gods and the frailty of mortals. Zeus intends to kill numbers of Greeks and lures them into cooperating with his plan by telling them a lie. Agamemnon, eager to promote this plan, misreads his men and foolishly brings them into opposition to Zeus’ command. Odysseus, the voice of cool intelligence and perspective, and Nestor, the voice of authority and inherited wisdom, organize the Greeks to march on the Trojans — thus furthering Zeus’ plan and unwittingly guaranteeing many deaths. Such is the confusing situation in which humans find themselves under the reign of deceptive gods.

The situation in book 2 would present the familiar struggle of mortals attempting to interpret the riddling comments of god were it not for the intervention of the vain and haughty Agamemnon. As the king reverses the clear pronouncement of Zeus, his troops struggle to find the direction of events. Following their best judgment, they place themselves in an even weaker position than if they had obeyed the simple command of Zeus that, though misleading, at least gave them a clear direction and did not attempt to manage them through psychological games.

The similes in book 2 consistently support the pervasive irony of the strong-but-weak army directed by the powerful-yet-inept commander. They are repeatedly placed to emphasize the reactions of the army as the visible
signs of Agamemnon’s folly, and are avoided at junctures unrelated to this theme. Homer’s audience would recognize that the similemes are in most cases the ones used throughout the *Iliad* to describe a strong fighting force. Yet in the individual extended similes the strength possible in each subject is so diminished that the army, which should be ennobled by similes of fire, winds, and birds, seems only to be mocked—the fire is safe, the winds are harmless, and the birds are tame. Although the design of the similes in book 2 is deeply conditioned by the tradition, the master poet—aware how effective the concentrated use of poetic background can be in developing his theme—is at every point in control—and the co-creating audience has been prepared to follow his direction.

*ILIAD, BOOKS 21 AND 22: SIMILES TO SHOW A THEMATIC CONTRAST*[^54]

Book 21 of the *Iliad* is built from four disillusioning actions—events that reveal unpleasant and unexpected truths about the situations of the heroes: Achilles kills Lycaon, a warrior he thought he had permanently removed from the battlefield (1–135); the river god Xanthos, intent on drowning Achilles, is forced to retreat before the overwhelming power of Hephaistos (136–382); gods descend to the battlefield only to become involved in personal bickering while men continue to die (383–513); and Achilles, in pursuing an enemy, suddenly finds that he is fighting a phantom (514–611). In these four scenes the poet undermines the actions and intentions of men and gods in order to provide a meaningful introduction to the battle between Hector and Achilles; by the end of book 21 Achilles has evidence that his pursuit of honor will deprive him of all humane standards and offer him no worthwhile reward.[^56]

In the first section (1–135) Achilles leaps into the Xanthos River to continue slaying Trojan warriors and seizes twelve youths for human sacrifice, perhaps his most inhumane act. Killing enemy warriors or capturing them for ransom are familiar and suitable activities in the *Iliad*, but few warriors take prisoners to be living sacrifices. To emphasize the savage quality of his attack, Homer sketches a contrasting lyrical background:[^57]

> But when they had come to the crossing of the *fair-flowing river,*  
> *the swirling Xanthos*, which immortal Zeus begat

> Half of the men  
> were crowded into the *deep-flowing, silver-eddying river*

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[^54]: Homer’s Use of Similes to Delineate Character and Plot · 65
Thus at the hands of Achilles was the *sounding stream* of the *deep-swirling Xanths River* filled with horses and men.\(^5^8\)

\[(21.1–2, 7–8, and 15–16)\]

This mix of pastoral nature and bloodshed is extended when Achilles suddenly encounters Lycaon, a warrior that he had previously captured and sold into slavery; on the earlier occasion Achilles came upon him at night in his father’s orchard as he was cutting young shoots from a wild fig tree (36–38).\(^5^9\)

Now Achilles is so astounded to find him on the battlefield that he wonders openly whether all the Trojans slain by him will soon begin to rise from the underworld (56–63). This first questioning of the effectiveness of war as a human pursuit is ironically absurd; later questions in this book will be more realistic. Lycaon supplicates Achilles, who responds harshly, an answer foreshadowing his brutality in book 22.\(^6^0\)

In the second section Achilles slays Asteropaeus, the son of the river Axius, and many of his comrades. The river Xanthus becomes so choked with corpses that it begs Achilles to stop, but he continues his bloody rampage (136–297). The juxtaposition of these first two sections firmly establishes Achilles’ uncompromising intent. In the first scene Achilles meets a weaker warrior and not only denies him the humane treatment that he gave him on an earlier occasion but also refuses his request for supplication; in the second scene a force of nature itself rebukes Achilles for his arrogant behavior. But no sooner does the river begin to pursue him than Poseidon and Athena — with the approval of Zeus — protect Achilles and encourage him to continue fighting until he pens the Trojans within their walls and slays Hector. Although he will be triggering his own death by this act, he fights ceaselessly even against the river god because of the honor code’s demand that he avenge Patroclus and the gods’ promise of glory (294–97).

Achilles has become a pawn in the hands of powerful divinities who carry the battle to a cosmic scale (298–382). Hera’s goal is the defeat of Troy; Achilles is the device through which she can most easily accomplish her individual desires. Hephaestus sweeps the plain with fire to drive back the river, and finally a number of gods are drawn into battle — leaving the concerns of men far behind. Even though Poseidon encourages Achilles to pursue his own desires in slaughtering Trojans, the god is more interested in pursuing his own more personal cause (288–97) — and such self-interest characterizes other gods’ clear motivations for the remainder of the book.

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\(^{66}\) *The Artistry of the Homeric Simile*
At line 383 the third section begins as a variety of gods enter the battle, and it is explicitly stated that Zeus laughs as he watches the scene (388–90). Divine emotions throughout this section are typical of the petty jealousies and vindictiveness that motivate the gods in their dealings with one another. Athena and Ares trade insults, and she lays him flat with a large boundary stone. Aphrodite tries to lead Ares away, but she too is struck by Athena. Poseidon urges Apollo into battle by reminding him how thankless the men of Troy have been to their patron gods, but Apollo curtly replies that men are not worth fighting over. Artemis tries to shame her brother into fighting with Poseidon, but Hera grabs her by the hands and whips her with her own bow until she flees in tears from the battlefield. Throughout this section the serious toils of humans are ignored as individual divinities vie for momentary prominence. The utter disdain of gods for men's activities is clear in Apollo's famed lines:

Mortal men, pitiful wretches—like leaves, at one moment
they are full of the blazing fire of life, eating the fruit of the field,
but suddenly they shrivel away to death.

(464–66)

Finally, at line 514 the focus returns to men's actions on the battlefield. Apollo enters Troy to plan the final deception of the book; he rouses Agenor, whom Achilles now chases in his insatiable pursuit of glory. But this pursuit is futile on all fronts. Apollo himself had urged Agenor to distract Achilles so that the other Trojans could flee safely into the city. Though Agenor considered fleeing or facing Achilles, this was senseless; Apollo had no intention of letting him actually confront the Greek hero. Both Achilles and Agenor are openly manipulated.

The four sections of book 21 all present war as an unworthy—even irrational—pursuit for men. Achilles’ words to the corpse of Lycaon show how distorting the single-minded pursuit of honor can be to a warrior's basic humanity:

Lie there now among the fish who will care little for you
as they lick the blood from your wound. Your mother
will not lament placing you on a bier, but the swirling Scamander
will carry you to the broad bay of the sea.
And a fish swimming in the wave will rise up above the black ripple
and feed on the white fat of Lycaon.

Die on, all—until we reach the city of sacred Ilium.

(122–28)

Achilles then so pollutes the river that nature itself rebels against his intrusion. In section 3 it is made clear that divinities are so obsessed with their own prerogatives that they treat the decisions and debates of humans as frivolous. The gods insult and strike one another in an almost comic scene; they brag and boast, but typically none of them are deeply concerned about mortals' deaths and sufferings on the battlefield. The book closes with a divine game in which Apollo sets all the rules, deceitfully hindering mortals from pursuing their own goals.

In this book two separate dramas are going on at once; the earthly drama takes place on the battlefield around Troy. Men respond to their thoughts and feelings in choosing the most rational course; the result may be an unfortunate and ugly war, but its heroes are actively striving to gain honor within their own value system. The second drama is among the gods, a drama that produces no profound or lasting results because of their continual quarreling and jockeying for position. When these two opposed dramas conflict, the interests of the more powerful Olympians predominate. Warriors who have planned and committed themselves to a set course of action are compelled to replan and pay the price for their natural inferiority. If humans could learn the lessons of book 21, they would make commitments only on the understanding that all such planning might be futile. As it is, men live on and die on as best they can only to find that such thinking is useless; they can devote themselves to pride or purity, righteous anger or the seeking of individual honor, but in the larger world none of these decisions matter because the gods will manage affairs to suit themselves. The heroic code, the continual seeking to maximize one's honor and avenge hostile actions, is a defensive ethical system developed by mortals that allows them to make sense out of an existence dominated by chaotic and often malignant gods. It is important that Homer presents these four scenes focused on mortal insignificance as an introduction to the battle between Achilles and Hector, in which the extreme demands of the heroic code will be exposed. The similes reinforce this interpretation of book 21 by continually picturing the actions of men as dangerous and destructive while the events sponsored by gods are presented as risk-free—and finally comic.

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In the first section, centering on Lycaon (1–135), the similes describe a world where overwhelming powers (= Achilles) threaten small, innocent victims (= Trojans). Achilles is immediately compared to a threatening fire before which locusts cower in the river hoping for safety (12). Fire has described Achilles since his reappearance on the wall in book 18, and he will be defended by the irresistible fire of Hephaestus later in this book. At line 22 he is compared to a killer dolphin who scares small fish back into their holes; and at 29 in a short simile the twelve captured Trojans are described as fawns. Each of these three similes is built around a traditional subject: fire and fish to describe warriors, and fawns for the victims.

In addition, at line 18 the short simile describing Achilles as “equal to a god,” a common simile for a fighting warrior, points directly to the theme of this book—men versus gods. At line 34, when Lycaon enters the narrative, it would be possible to use a simile because he will be such an important character in the first episode, but instead Homer tells the story of his previous meeting with Achilles. A simile would be so indirect that it would blunt the narrative’s focus on Achilles’ change of judgment in his second meeting with the defenseless warrior. The following speeches could contain similes, but the issue between Lycaon and Achilles, the worth of human life, is so fundamental to the theme of the book that Homer avoids outside comparisons in the rest of this episode. The “god” simile is repeated at 227 to describe Achilles’ destructive attack against the Trojans—the moment at which the river Xanthus chides Apollo for forgetting Zeus’ command to support them. The two early similes of a god represent Achilles as a hero, but they raise him only to prepare for his fall; at the end of the book the only man compared to a god is cheated of victory by the clever and effortless stratagem of a real god.

In the second section (136–382) the warlike actions of Achilles are accompanied by juxtaposed similes from the world of risk and loss at 251 and 252; the topic of the first is a spear cast, and of the second, the attack of the hunting eagle, the strongest and swiftest of the birds. The actions of the river god and Hephaestus, however, are accompanied by similes of a different tone. At 237 the river bellows like a bull, and in a longer simile (257) the river threatens to overtake Achilles just as water in an irrigation channel runs beyond a man who is guiding it through his garden. This scene is the equivalent of a Wordsworthian country tale—and the same tone underlies the next simile, at 282, where Achilles fears that he, the very model of the heroic warrior, may now be drowned like a swineherd boy swept away as he tries to cross a large river.
Achilles reduces his own situation to a scene of absurd futility—making such a death equal to the passive result of a child’s mistake. When Hephaestus battles the river Xanthus there are two similes presenting the effectiveness of the fire god, both drawn from scenes of nature at peace working in an orderly and nondestructive way. At 346 the plain of Troy is parched by Hephaestus’ divine fire just as the North Wind at harvest time dries out an orchard and makes men glad. At 362 the river boils just as lard bubbles over a fire.

In the next two sections the similes continue this pattern of nature at war for Achilles versus nature at peace for his opponents. When the gods confront one another, in the third section (383–513), there is only one long simile at 493: Artemis flees like a dove that escapes a falcon; this scene eliminates killing while stressing the continual competition among species of animals. When two gods discuss men, they evaluate them as leaves on trees that come and go in their seasonal cycle (464).

In contrast, in the last section (514–611), where Agenor is made to confront Achilles, the similes portray the hazards and destruction involved when two humans take warfare seriously. At 522 Achilles continues his rampage of death, causing grief to men just as though their city was being destroyed, and Agenor meets him as a fearless leopard that confronts hunters and will not stop fighting until he is slain (573). It is, however, explicitly stated that this is a carefully managed battle that can have no result:

[Apollo] thrust courage in his heart, and the god himself stood beside him so that he might keep off the heavy hands of death

This divine devil’s game is the appropriate ending for a book in which continuing warfare, slaughter, destruction, terror, and grief only produce victories that are trivial or meaningless when seen from the gods’ perspective. This theme, the insignificance and futility of men’s pursuit of war, is developed in the carefully orchestrated series of four sections until the final absurd action where one man risks his life to fight a phantom and the other is whisked away in a cloud of smoke. In each section the poet chooses similes that underline the opposite ways in which men and gods perceive war. Because the book is designed to contrast these two attitudes, most similes are drawn from the extreme options within the similemes. Those that describe men’s fighting present war as overwhelming and total in its destruction; those that describe the gods’ actions and attitudes are drawn from simple coun-
try scenes where risk and danger are minimized and there is even room for quiet humor.

The transition between books 21 and 22 is so smooth that it is difficult to identify either closure or opening. Achilles continues to pursue the image of Agenor, the geographical setting does not change significantly but only moves closer to the city, and the action does not turn immediately or directly to Hector; thus the challenge to the worth of men’s heroism continues as the major theme. Yet the beginning of a new section of narrative, different from the four-part structure of book 21 and designed to express its own individual theme, brings Hector into sharper focus. Book 22 is arguably the most complex section of the Iliad, since the major threads of the preceding narrative are finally joined in the battle between Achilles and Hector—a confrontation anticipated from the beginning of the epic, openly stated as a desired goal in book 9, and pursued with total dedication by Achilles after the death of Patroclus. Each warrior is driven by the urgent values that he carries into this contest—and yet this contrast of values injects confusion and ambiguity into the very act that should mark a clear and final triumph for Achilles. Even though he kills his enemy, he cannot rest with this victory and must finally renounce its results. Hector, though defeated, gains sympathy as a tragic victim who in his noble and brave acceptance of death earns respect. Never has it been made so clear in the course of the Iliad that the act emblemizing the heroic code, the slaying and plundering of the weaker by the stronger, is an act which is equivocal, even bewildering, to the humans who pursue that code.

Although Hector’s parents beg him to return within the walls, he succumbs to heroic urges seeking to avoid the reproach of his fellow citizens, especially of Polydamas. Yet at line 136 Hector feels the full weight of this decision and, seized with trembling, he runs. Even the heroic code, with all its powerful sanctions, cannot overwhelm the human and reasoning side of Hector; he has known both victory and defeat, and he may sense the hopelessness of confronting a warrior who wears immortal armor. Zeus cannot save Hector from death; when he raises the golden scales, Hector’s fate sinks. Yet his fear and hesitancy are the very qualities that allow him to be an exemplar of an appealing type of heroism. He must fight for two purposes that are contradictory or—at best—held in an uncomfortable tension: Hector yearns for glory, but at the same time he must defend his family, his friends, and his city. He alone in the Iliad understands the dilemma of the hero who must balance...
every decision against the necessity of protecting what he regards as dear. Even as he debates engaging Achilles, his instincts move toward conciliation. He is consistent in this humane attitude throughout the book, and appropriately the similes describing the actions of Hector reflect the complex tensions that he brings to this contest.

In contrast, Achilles is unrepentantly the grand and assertive hero. When he views the miraculous armor brought by his mother from Hephaestus, he sees only fire; though encouraged to take food, his lust for vengeance is so intense that he himself will not eat and even attempts to forbid food to his men. Achilles remains uncompromising and stiff-necked, hard and cruel to a degree that will make him an inhuman monster, a war machine created as the perfected product of a perverse code. For Achilles war is a game in which men are mere counters. He twice refuses Hector’s proposal for the victor to return the stripped corpse of his enemy to his countrymen in exchange for compensation. Although there have been previous single combats presented in the *Iliad* where terms satisfactory to each of the participants have been worked out as part of the code of the battlefield, Achilles, having already stated that he would devour Hector’s flesh raw, refuses all accommodation and ties Hector to his chariot to drag him back to his tent. The shamefulness of this act is stated directly by the poet (22.395), lacks parallels in the *Iliad*, and is powerfully dramatized in the reaction of Andromache, who first faints but when revived describes the death of Hector as the end of civilized life for herself and her child (22.487–507). Yet since there is such a discrepancy between Achilles’ self-definition as a warrior who seeks maximum honor and the poet’s judgment of his actions, the similes designed to accompany the hero’s words and actions often convey this irony.

In book 22 similes occur frequently to lend tone or color to the quality of action and the words of the warriors — but only up to the point where Achilles kills Hector. Afterward the poet uses more direct techniques: speeches, significant actions, and gestures (like the fainting of Andromache). Before the two heroes meet (up to line 135) there are separate similes describing each. Hector is compared to a snake swelling with wrath waiting for a man to come by his lair (93), an appropriately warlike simile, although comparable passages about snakes are too few to construct a simileme; in contrast, Homer describes the other Trojans huddling in the town like fawns — a customary simile of frailty and timorousness (1). Hector himself adopts a gentler tone when he considers dealing with Achilles, but he immediately realizes that
the kind of dialogue held between a young man and a girl could never occur between them (127). Such a simile reveals a world of tenderness and trust that evaporates when exposed to the harsher realities of combat; it is Hector’s presence that brings the possibility of a more civilized tone into the narrative.

However, as soon as Hector begins to run, acknowledging both his doubts of defending Troy and Achilles’ tremendous power, his role in the similes becomes that of a vulnerable competitor, often the weaker and lesser victim in a threatening situation. The two champions are described in a series of similes with two actors: at 162 they are like racehorses contending for a prize in funeral games; at 189 Hector is like a deer fleeing a hunting dog; and at 262 he is cast as a man or a lamb opposed by a lion or a wolf. The only simile in which Hector is presented as an equal is that of the two men in a dream in 199: the pursuer cannot catch his victim and the victim cannot get away — but, in fact, this equality is only a dream.

The simile at 308 in which Hector is compared to the eagle against the tender lamb seems a telling exception:

[Hector] . . . swooped as a high-flying eagle
which dives to the plain through black clouds
to seize either a tender lamb or a cowering rabbit.88

This simile, however, immediately follows Hector’s decision to face Achilles and die. To support this final show of courage Homer does include the simile stressing as much as possible the strength of this warrior89 — yet the next lines present Achilles’ overwhelming counterattack with a description of Hephaistos’ armor. At this point Achilles receives the balancing simile of the finest star in the heavens, and immediately kills Hector. The eagle simile allows the complex figure of Hector to be presented as a powerful warrior at the end, but only for an instant.

In choosing simile topics for Hector, Homer used some similemes that are traditional (the deer, the racehorse, and the lamb), yet he also selected others that have no parallel in other similes — the dream figure and the boy and girl, all of which are unwarlike creatures and suggest small, helpless beings. The subjects describing Hector parallel the other devices — his actions, the active presence of his family, the scales of Zeus — that stress his exposed humanity as opposed to the unconquerable, divinely shielded force of Achilles.

The presentation of Achilles offers Homer a more complex challenge. In the course of book 22 he has chosen some of the most traditional subjects in
his repertoire to describe Achilles: Ares, the helmeted god of war at 132; a fire or a sun at 134; a bird of prey at 139; a hunting dog at 189; and a lion or a wolf at 262. These topics—especially the lion, the fire, the god, and the bird—are the most frequently used similemes in Homeric poetry, and they usually describe warriors. Each simileme is appropriately developed to present not only the quality of Achilles’ fighting but also his obsessively driven soul: he is devoted to pursuing the traditional role of the heroic warrior to its fullest.

Yet, in addition, there are several similes from the world of more peaceful nature. At line 22 Achilles is compared to a racehorse lightly galloping across the plain; all tone of warfare is deleted from this simile. This peacefulness is underlined later, when the subject is continued at 162 to include two horses rounding a turning post on a racetrack. Star similes occur at 26 and 317. At line 26 Achilles is compared to the dog star, which shines the brightest of all other stars in the sky and yet is a sign of coming evil. Such a description provides a complex parallel for Achilles, since it involves the coldness and remoteness, the purity and beauty of a distant shining star but also portends evil for men. The second star simile falls at the moment when Achilles is about to kill Hector (317): the gleam from his spear point shines as the fairest star in all the heavens. In this case a lyrical scene of nature’s beauty describes the most warlike of the heroes at the moment when he kills the most human of the defenders. This discrepancy between peaceful simile and warlike narrative echoes the simile of the two men running in the dream at 199. Again, most of these similes describing heroic fighting are taken from traditional similemes (the horse and the star), while only one seems new (the man in the dream), but the shaping of each expresses a tone calling for an audience reaction that is more than usually complex.

This peaceful perspective injects into the tale of depraved war-lust a reminder of a more permanent and unthreatening world inhabited by civilized men. This world surrounds Hector daily in his home and his city; Achilles, although now blinded by his heroic myopia and pursuing a single-minded vendetta, was earlier aware of its existence. As Achilles sinks to an ugly level of inhumanity in his conduct of battle, scenes of nature at peace add a poetic background that forces the audience to measure his actions against the more normal day-to-day world. The final simile in book 22, the second star simile describing the gleam from the spear point that will pierce Hector’s throat, is jarringly—but appropriately—one of the most peaceful similes in the whole Iliad:
As a star comes from among the stars in the darkness of the night, the evening star that is the most beautiful star in the heavens, so shone the point of the sharp spear which Achilles poised in his right hand thinking evil thoughts against Hector.

(317–20)

The similes of book 22 are among the most complex and subtle in the Homeric poems because this narrative, which presents the culminating confrontation of two heroes different in character, in situation, and in their pursuit of the heroic code, has several layers of meaning. First, Homer presents Achilles, the maniacally committed warrior, in such a way that the audience cannot avoid evaluating his actions. Hector, who must temper his heroic reflexes, is constantly described as a humane warrior and tragic victim of the heroic code. When Achilles kills him, the civilized world is diminished by this crude assertion of raw brutality. Hector’s body is treated insultingly by the Myrmidons and Achilles, he is lamented movingly by his parents, his wife foresees and enacts the fall of the city, and her prediction of their innocent child’s ruined future closes the book. The audience not only hears this tale of the two heroes’ conflict as a major moment in the development of the narrative but also sees the results of the opposed values represented by each. Achilles is the purest of the warriors created by the heroic code; Hector is the first archaic man who constantly sees within himself an individuality that must be a crucial part of any decision. Their confrontation is introduced by the powerful questioning of humans’ attempts to pursue consistent values and guiding purposes in book 21. The death of Hector and the insults to his body lead directly to the eventual reconciliation of Achilles with his fellow men in book 23 and 24.

A listing of similemes in book 22 seems to jump randomly from one topic to another, but when joined with the structure of the narrative, the individual similes support the design of the story effectively. First, the heroes are apart—Achilles rushing toward the city and Hector near the wall pondering single combat (1–134). Then the two men are in contact, Hector running and Achilles pursuing (135–246); finally, they directly confront one another (247–363). In the first part of the book, up to line 134, Hector and Achilles each receive individual similes. After 134 the poet chooses similes that include two elements—one representing Achilles and the other, Hector: Achilles is the falcon while Hector is the dove; Achilles is the hunting dog while Hector...
is the deer; Achilles is the lion while Hector is the man or the lamb.98 The point of contact with the narrative is specifically made double by using a plural or dual (162), by making Achilles the point of origin for the simile but rejoining the narrative with Hector (189), or by using a coordinated two-part sentence to reenter the narrative (136 and 199). In each case a traditional simile subject suggesting overpowering force meets an object that is customarily associated with vulnerability, hesitancy, or helplessness. In addition, Achilles is even drawn into Hector’s area of weaker forces: two racehorses are used in one simile, and two men run in the dream. This alternation of similes that describe Achilles—at one time the most warlike subject, at another a peaceful scene—is only superficially disordered; within the design of the narrative it is a strong device for expressing the ambiguity of Achilles’ own position as seen by the poet—and as it will be seen by Achilles himself by the end of the epic. Opposed to this alternation is the consistency with which Hector is compared to the weaker creatures in each simile.

It is pointless to discuss junctures where Homer chose not to use a simile, because the battle section of this book contains one of the densest collections of similes in the Homeric poems. At almost every opportunity similes reinforce the scene, which is in every way the essential statement of the epic’s theme—the unavoidable, inevitable battle between Achilles and Hector, the perfected hero versus the humane hero.

Books 21 and 22 together support this theme, although each is composed differently. The juxtaposition of their differing content and style is echoed by Homer’s conscious design of the similes to reinforce and supplement the narrative units. The books are joined closely when the narrative moves directly from book 21 to book 22 as Achilles continues his pursuit of Apollo/Agenor. Yet the game Apollo plays with Achilles is the appropriate conclusion to book 21, since it is the most cynical misleading of man by god in the Iliad, thus exemplifying the insignificance of mortals’ pursuits of honor in a final brief episode. Similarly, the exposure of this ruse is the proper introduction for the major confrontation of the poem, for in being tricked, Achilles is shamed; he feels “robbed of great glory” and wishes that he could seek vengeance against the god (22.18f.). This enhanced need to seek maximum honor even at the cost of exceeding normal human limits is the appropriate beginning for the contrasting characterizations in book 22.

As the books have different themes, so also the narrative is structured in different ways. Book 21 is composed of a series of four discrete incidents:
Lycaon, the battle with the river, the general battle among the gods, and Apollo’s deception of Achilles. Throughout these scenes the heroes’ thoughts and plans decrease in importance from the moment when one mortal warrior offers another the chance to choose humanity on the battlefield to the final scene in which one warrior is effortlessly duped by the overwhelming power of a god. The causal linkage between scenes is sufficiently slight that Homer appears more interested in juxtaposing a series of individual units than in structuring a unified, linear narrative. For example, after Hephaestus has overcome the river, there is virtually no transition:

But when the fury of the river Xanthus was overcome,  
the two stopped, for Hera — though she remained angry — checked them.  
But among the other gods there fell a heavy strife...

(21.383–85)

Similarly, Apollo proposes to withdraw from the fighting at 466ff. and then does disappear from the narrative with no response to his sister’s angry outburst; yet within thirty lines he is entering the city of Troy, and soon he is back on the battlefield deceiving Achilles in order to save the Trojans. Appropriately, the similes throughout this book are designed to emphasize the radically different views and behaviors of gods and men in the four juxtaposed episodes.

Book 22, however, develops a carefully motivated linear structure within a balanced framework. The spotlight shifts between the two champions as they move closer to one another and then focuses on the final combat. The final scene of lamentation by Priam and Hecuba repeats the configuration at the beginning of the book where they both appeal to Hector (33–89 and 408–35); and Hector’s monologue on the possibility of confronting Achilles and saving the city is balanced by Andromache’s lament for his death, with its heavy implication of the city’s downfall (99–130 and 460–515). Even in the last sections of lamentation, divided areas of activity are carefully joined; Andromache looks out over the battlefield to see the body of Hector disappearing in the distance toward the Greek ships. The scene within the wall and outside shows simultaneous action in the two areas. To a large degree it is the similes in this book that provide the sense of a narrowing chase; as a result the moments focusing on the main characters can be devoted to the development of personal motivations and contrasting purposes.

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The placement and development of the similes in these two books corroborate their individualized themes, structures, and designs. There are, of course, obvious connections between similes when the poet repeats a subject late in the book that he has used earlier or continues to choose the same subject several times. But rather than hearing each simile solely as an addition to its own passage shaped to match the surrounding scene, the audience, drawing on its knowledge of the diverse similemes, can interpret them broadly as integral components of the book’s design.

**ILIAD, BOOK 11:**
**SIMILES TO MARK A SHIFTING SCENE**

Homer made similes an important element in the design of book 11. Not only does this book contain the largest number of similes in the Homeric poems, but several are among the most forceful descriptions in the simile repertoire. There is a plan in their distribution: they are concentrated in the battlefield section of the book and almost totally suppressed in the scene between Nestor and Patroclus. In addition, simile subjects are often repeated, suggesting that Homer sought to create cross-references and to invite comparisons within his narrative. Four times similes are juxtaposed to intensify their effect. As a result, an exploration of the dense array of similes in this book can lead to further definition of their role in Homeric narrative—especially in regard to placement, choice of subjects, and extension.

The complexities of book 11 are rooted in its role as a pivotal book in the Iliad. Schadewaldt has compellingly demonstrated how many of the elements of the evolving epic converge in this book: the decisions of individual warriors, the consequences of their actions, and the importance of Zeus’ plan in shifting momentum to the Trojans—all bring pressure on Achilles to reevaluate his strategy. The narrative begins with the dawning of a new day as the Greeks are freshly inspired for war (1–2 and 50); but it ends with the despairing words of the wounded Greek warrior, Eurypylus:

> No more, godborn Patroclus, will there be a defense for the Greeks, but they will fall back against the black ships. For all those who before were our champions lie near the ships struck and wounded at the hands of the Trojans. Their strength grows greater.

(11.823–27)
More broadly, the book is structured to show the increasingly urgent situation of the Greeks caused by Zeus’ vigorous pursuit of his plan (begun in book 8) and the results of their failed appeal to Achilles in book 9. Whether the Doloneia precedes book 11 is a problem external to this discussion. If it is genuine, then it provides the success that motivates the reinvigorated attitude of the Greeks; the transition to the beginning of book 11 is smoother. Yet without book 10 the Greeks can equally well grow eager for battle in response to the cry of Eris (10–12) and to the rousing challenge of Diomedes at the end of book 9.

Book 11’s narrative is organized around three major characters: Agamemnon, Hector, and Patroclus. The book opens with the reinvigoration of the Greeks, Agamemnon’s highly elaborate arming scene, and his initially successful aristeia. The audience, however, remains aware of Zeus’ promise to Thetis in book 1, the ominous external pressure that has begun to steer the battle and is responsible for Agamemnon’s withdrawal. The agent for Zeus’ plan is Hector, who in the course of book 11 emerges to be an effective leader for the Trojans as they force a series of Greek heroes to retreat. His success on the battlefield, though artificially enhanced, heightens his role as the commander of the Trojans in the service of Zeus. Finally Patroclus, the most crucial secondary figure in the epic, is brought into the narrative to report the dangers pressing on the Greeks—the very result that Achilles prayed for and Zeus promised to support. Patroclus’ emotions run deep, and the number of wounded Greeks arouses his compassion, thus motivating angry and frustrated tears when he delivers his message to Achilles at the beginning of book 16.

Not all commentators elevate Hector to the level that I have suggested. The majority of modern critics agree that the structure of book 11 is based on a series of Greek woundings and reverses—Agamemnon, Diomedes, Odysseus, and Ajax—all of which lead to the bleak situation that brings Patroclus to Nestor’s tent; only in book 12 does Hector emerge to lead his troops relentlessly forward until they break through the Greek wall. But I would argue that Homer has organized book 11 to support the development of the narrative from book 8 through 18.242, Hector’s promised day of pre-eminence. Agamemnon is clearly portrayed as the center of attention in the first section of book 11 (1–283), but Hector is given an equal introduction even in that section, and in various ways the narrative foreshadows his importance when he becomes the agent of Zeus’ plan. In the next unit (284–596)
Hector reenters the battle with the introduction of a hero entering his aristeia and is a constant presence as the Trojans gain strength. That strength is illustrated by the sequential wounding of the Greek heroes, whose combined suffering at the hands of the Trojans shows the clear emergence of the plan of Zeus. Hector as leader is the only proper carrier of that theme even though he does not accomplish all the killings; he is mentioned thirteen times after he enters the battle under Zeus’ promise, while the focus shifts between the three Greek warriors. In addition, the motivation for the meeting between Nestor and Patroclus is the general fear of a Trojan success. Achilles says on sending Patroclus to Nestor:

Noble son of Menoitius, dear to my heart,
now I think that the Achaeans will stand around my knees begging; for a need has come which is no longer endurable.  
(11.608–10)

Surely the need he sees is not caused solely by the removal of Machaon from battle, which is the subject of the following lines. Even though Patroclus at 648–54 cites Machaon as his only interest, Nestor seems to realize that Achilles has larger concerns on his mind and easily expands those concerns to include the more widespread weakness of the Greeks in his speech at 655ff.

Homer often uses single heroes to present the prevailing direction on the battlefield. Between such individualized scenes he will insert general lines summarizing the status of the battle, but the situation of the armies is derived from the results of previous encounters. In this case the role of Hector presents the beginning of the relative weakening of the Greek army through a series of individual woundings by various Trojan heroes; the more normal battle scene would focus on the dominating hero rather than the threatened enemy.

The main structural sections of book 11 are clearly marked by the sequential entrances of the three major characters—Agamemnon, Hector, and Patroclus—each as the dominant figure in his part of the narrative. Consistent with the enhanced role for Hector, the second section contains divisions that are centered on a principal Greek hero:

1. 1–283: the aristeia of Agamemnon  
2. 284–596: the entrance of Hector  
   a. 310–400: the wounding of Diomedes

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Two points of significance for the development of Homer’s theme stand out in this outline. First, in Agamemnon’s aristeia the spotlight follows him as the single active agent moving from victory to victory. In contrast, Hector appears only sporadically as the leader of the Trojan effort. The spotlight does not follow him; rather, the focus shifts from one Greek hero to another. Since he is explicitly supported, instructed, and guarded by Zeus, this form of presentation is highly expressive; to present him as an independent hero scoring a series of personal victories would be false.110

Second, in the final section of the book Patroclus becomes entangled in a series of events that leads inevitably to his death. Homer marks the moment:

Immediately he [Achilles] spoke to his comrade Patroclus, calling from the ship. And when he heard, he came from the hut like Ares — and this was the beginning of evil for him.

At this point there are major changes in content and style: the scene shifts from the battlefield to a more intimate setting in a removed camp, the plot is developed more through speeches than actions, and similes disappear as complements to the narrative.

Since this book presents a turning point in the battle, it appropriately puts many heroes in the foreground — mainly Agamemnon and Hector, but also Diomedes, Odysseus, Menelaus, Ajax, Achilles, Patroclus, Nestor, and others. In contrast, book 2 focuses on Agamemnon and book 22 opposes the responses of Achilles and Hector to the heroic code’s demands. The major problem of book 11 is maintaining a clear direction in a narrative that threatens to break apart. There are almost too many characters in book 11, and they seem to get in each other’s way. Agamemnon is so powerful a warrior that Hector must be removed for his own safety, but once Agamemnon is gone Hector is offered a clear path to the Greek ships. However, this turn in the battle disturbs Achilles sufficiently that he seeks information — thus involving Patroclus. In essence, all these characters are called upon to play the role of preeminent warrior that only Achilles can perform, but he is unwilling, and they lack his ability and focus.
As a result, the theme of book 11 does not depend on one or two individual warriors but, rather, concerns the complex interconnections of these characters with each other under the plan of Zeus. The book has scarcely begun with the arming of Agamemnon when Homer abruptly postpones the Greek advance to present Hector amid the Trojans. Later Zeus removes Hector from the battle as the Greek leader presses on after him (163ff.). But when Agamemnon is forced to withdraw, Hector is given an entrance equivalent to Agamemnon’s—an appropriate opening to the second section: Hector shouts a rallying cry to the Trojans boasting that Zeus has promised glory to him, he receives four honorific similes, and the poet lists a catalogue of his victims (283ff.).

Dominating the two contrasting sections (1–283 and 294–596) is Zeus’ constant presence. He makes his plan obvious to all when he sends Iris to speak his will to Hector:

As long as [Hector] sees Agamemnon, the shepherd of the people, raging among the front fighters and killing rank after rank of men, let him withdraw and order his troops to fight with the enemy in the strong conflict. But when struck by a spear or hit by an arrow Agamemnon leaps behind his horses, then shall I grant Hector power to kill until he comes to the well-benched ships, and the sun goes down and sacred darkness appears.

(11.187–94)

Later at the beginning of book 13 Zeus will relax for a moment, but at this point his presence is pervasive. In line 3 he authorizes Eris to rouse the Greeks to battle. The breastplate of Agamemnon is described as being adorned with dark blue serpents, “like rainbows, which the son of Cronos has placed in the clouds to be a portent for mortals” (27–28). Hector’s bronze armor flashes like the lightning of Zeus (66). As the battle is about to begin, Zeus sprinkles the ground with bloody drops of dew, and later he is reported to be sitting apart from the other gods watching the battle around Troy (52–55 and 80–83). At 163 Hector is taken off to a safe position by Zeus and then warned to avoid battle while Agamemnon is still fighting. At 336 Zeus, as he continues to watch the conflict from Mount Ida, makes the opposing lines even. Ajax fights like a torrent driven by the rains of Zeus as he enters this carefully managed battle (489–97). Only in the third section, when the scene switches to the Greek

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camp near the ships, does Zeus fade as an active force, but by this point he has so organized the battlefield that men will carry his intentions forward.

In the first two sections similes constantly reinforce the narrative. At the book’s opening it is important to celebrate Agamemnon, who strives to be a leader and hero in order to reinvigorate a situation that has been disintegrating since the end of the previous day (book 8); his fighting is successful enough to overcome recollection of his despairing words at the beginning of book 9. The morning battle is described as fierce and balanced. Similes enhance the fluid situation: Agamemnon’s breastplate is decorated with serpents that gleam like ominous rainbows (27), while Hector appears as a baneful star and his armor shines like lightning (62 and 66). The first battle of the two armies is described in opposed similes of peace and war that reflect the ambiguous conditions on the battlefield: the warriors are like workmen in a wheat field, but simultaneously they rage like wolves (67 and 72).

The description of the weary woodsman closes the morning’s battle and initiates the presentation of a contrasting atmosphere of raised expectations and resolute fighting (84–93). Agamemnon begins to dominate as he pursues the cruelest and most bloodthirsty mode of combat in the Iliad: warriors who vainly beg to be taken alive are ruthlessly slain, even though they were formerly freed for ransom by Achilles; the wounding are physical and gory; Agamemnon decapitates and mutilates the enemy; when he strips men, they are left to be carrion for vultures; his pursuit is ceaseless, and even Hector must be pulled to safety.

The similes reinforce this powerful style of fighting. Agamemnon’s initial series of killings concludes this way:

as a lion easily crushes the gentle young
of a swift deer, snatching them with his strong teeth,
once he has entered into their lair, and he devours their tender hearts;
and even if the mother happens to be near,
she cannot give them aid, for a severe trembling comes over her.
Swiftly she darts through the thick brush and woods,
rushing and sweating beneath the attack of the powerful beast

Agamemnon is described three more times as a lion (129, 172, 239) and once as a raging forest fire (155). In both of the extended lion similes the description presents the helplessness of the victims before the lion’s power.
with special emphasis on his killing the young, breaking up families, and doing physical damage (113 and 172). These are all extreme elements from the lion simile.\textsuperscript{119}

The fire simile at 155 emphasizes the completeness of the destruction; the audience would know similarly extreme passages derived from the fire simile. When Agamemnon strikes off the head of Hippolochus and sends it rolling on the ground, there is a simile to call attention to the vicious oddity of his death (147).

After this series, the simile that describes the wounding of Agamemnon, sufficiently painful to cause him to withdraw from battle, is perhaps the most ironic in the Homeric poems: the manslayer is compared to a woman in childbirth (269). In contrast to the preceding similes, the destroyer of young deer, thickets, and cattle suddenly becomes a mother figure.\textsuperscript{120} The distance between this simile and the brutal descriptions of Agamemnon’s killings emphasizes the absurd abruptness of the change on the battlefield—thus highlighting the artificiality of a war scene controlled by Zeus.

The entrance of Hector is presented as a lesser event, even though Zeus has specifically promised him a moment of glory. To be sure, he enters the battle as a leader, accompanied by four honorific similes.\textsuperscript{121} He is compared to a hunter setting his dogs on a boar or lion,\textsuperscript{122} to Ares the war god, and twice to a tempestuous wind that whips up the sea (292, 295, 297, and 305):

\begin{quote}

as when a hunter drives his white-toothed dogs against a wild boar or a lion

\textsuperscript{11.292–93}

like a strongly blowing wind

which falling downward stirs the violet-hued sea

\textsuperscript{11.297–98}
\end{quote}

The hunting simile, however, lacks the detailed and gory descriptions of the strongest versions—for example, 20.164–73:\textsuperscript{123}

\begin{quote}

He rushed against him like a rapacious lion,

that men are eager to kill, the whole town,

once they have gathered. He ignores them

going on his way, but when one of the young men, swift in battle,

strikes him with a spear, then he crouches down with open mouth,

foam appears around his teeth, and his brave spirit groans in his heart,
\end{quote}
and he lashes his ribs and flanks with his tail
on both sides, urging himself to fight.
With glowing eyes he charges forcefully
to see if he will kill one of the men or himself be slain in the crowd

In the same way the power of the wind simile is diminished in comparison to
many others familiar to the audience; for example:

as a fast-moving wave
swollen by the wind from beneath the clouds
falls upon a swift ship; the whole ship is hidden by the foam,
the terrible blast of the wind roars in the sail,
and the sailors tremble in fear — for only barely do they escape death

(15.624)

13.795 also expresses nature's power, even though it does not specifically men-
tion the threat of sinking the ship or destroying the men:

like the blast of harsh winds
that rush over the plain driven by the thunder of father Zeus
and stir up the sea with a gigantic roar; many waves
of the loud-sounding sea boil up,
arching high and white — some before and some following after

In contrast, at 11.297 the simile's force is confined to the adjectives “strongly
blowing” and “violet-hued” rather than the series of action verbs in the cited
parallels. Because the wind and wave simile is used so frequently, the audi-
ence would recognize the relative weakness of the similes Homer has created
to accompany Hector’s fighting.124

Immediately the promise in Hector’s entrance is cut short as a series of
Greek heroes occupies the spotlight. The story now no longer presents a
series of effortless killings by a cold-blooded, efficient warrior; Hector has to
work to gain appropriate visibility in the battle scenes. In addition, the charac-
ters from Agamemnon’s similes spill over into those that describe the Greeks’
resistance. Hector’s introductory simile describes a hunter sending his dogs
against a lion (292);125 even though Agamemnon has departed from the bat-
tle, not only does the lion remain the opponent, but the principal character
of the simile, the Trojan, is a single human.126 He may win, but that is uncer-
tain, since the conflict is at best a battle between equals. When Odysseus and
Diomedes appear, the imbalance is repeated as they are compared to two boars that attack hunting dogs; later Diomedes even describes the Trojans as goats who tremble before a lion (324 and 383). When the Trojans approach the isolated Odysseus, they are again presented as hounds and young men around a boar who refuses to give way, and Ajax comes to aid Odysseus like a lion who scatters cowardly jackals (414 and 474). By the end of the second section the Trojan attack stalls as Ajax refuses to give way, and Hector avoids a confrontation. Appropriately, Ajax attracts a simile that is typical for a warrior: a rampaging river (492). This simile comes after a brief catalogue of the Trojans slain by Ajax—a customary marker of an aristeia—and also provides Ajax with the same type of introduction that Hector had earlier received at 299ff. Ajax’s effort does not develop into an aristeia, but Hector’s potential sweep is stopped. Ajax’s strength is described by three juxtaposed similes, each of which progressively focuses on his characteristics as a warrior: he is like a wild beast, a persistent lion, and a stubborn ass (546, 548, and 558).

In the simile concluding the second section the two armies fight like blazing fire (596), a shared image appropriately closing the two battle sections of book 11, since the fighting has been equally intense for both sides.

The two main characters in the first sections are carefully drawn. Agamemnon is a dominating warrior, bloodthirsty in his pursuit of victory; the similes support this characterization economically and effectively. The similes of section 2 picture Hector and the Trojans as weaker opponents, likening them to dogs, goats, a woman or a child, hounds and young men, jackals, oaks and pines, dogs and country folk, and small boys—subjects never used to describe impressive power in Homeric epic. Those subjects that traditionally represent the decisive might of a warrior are boars, lions, and rivers—precisely the topics used to describe the Greeks in a series of similes (324, 383, 414, 474, 491, and 548). Before Agamemnon is compelled to retreat and Zeus gives power to Hector, the Greek king receives similes in which the opponents are overwhelmed. After this point, each time another strong warrior appears in Hector’s area the similes delineate the equalized or even uncertain strengths of the Trojans, most precisely at 474:

The Trojans followed like bloody jackals around a horned stag that has been wounded in the mountains—a stag that a man has struck with an arrow from his bow. The stag escapes fleeing
as long as his blood flows warm and his limbs move.
But when the swift arrow wears him down,
the flesh-eating jackals devour him
in a shadowy mountain grove. And a divinity brings a hungry lion
upon them.
The jackals scatter and the lion feasts on the carcass.
In this way then around the wise and crafty Odysseus
did the Trojans crowd, many brave ones, but the warrior
darted forward to keep off the fatal day with his weapon.
Then Ajax came near bearing his shield like a tower
and stood near him. The Trojans all scattered in different directions.

(11.474–86)

Throughout the first two sections of book 11, similes respond to the strategy of the narrative in their placement, the choice of subject for each simile, and the design of the extensions. In addition, all similes in book 11 occur in places where the tradition would have suggested the use of a simile and suitable similemes among the alternative ways of continuing the narrative. Homer chooses to use similes when they enhance the presentation of his theme, and he extends them to fortify this strategy. In the first section similes are drawn from the traditional families that accompany warriors in battle, but in addition, each consistently contains the most physical and bloodthirsty alternatives from its simileme. In the second section the Greeks are not made weaker; they are presented as being forced to retreat when confronted by opponents who have the force of Zeus behind their attack. The poet uses his similes to show the undiminished power of the Greek warriors, who thus retain sufficient strength to reverse the direction of the battle in books 13–15.

This imbalance in strength should not seem unusual. Throughout the Iliad Hector is regarded as a warrior whose bravery will be fatal. In the earlier meeting between Hector and Andromache she tells him that his power (menos) will kill him (6.407) — a prediction that is fulfilled at 22.96, where the same menos compels Hector to confront the charging Achilles. She develops this idea further when she becomes aware that Hector is already dead:

[Achilles] has made him cease from the painful courage
that was his alone since he never did remain with the mass of men,
but always rushed forward yielding to no man in his power

(22.457–59)

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Not only does Zeus aid him to gain victories in contests that he would not necessarily win on his own; Hector is willingly complicit in seeking greater risk. Even the simile for Hector at 12.41 describes a lion whose “courage kills him.”

Book 11 contains more similes than any other book in the Homeric poems, and they are densely packed; on average there is a simile every nineteen lines throughout the first two sections of the book. Even this statistic is misleading, since multiple similes often cluster around a single event, thus intensifying their effect. Agamemnon is introduced with a direct comment on his heroic status by the lengthy arming scene; this arming scene is balanced by the immediate introduction of Hector through two similes and a catalogue of his fellow Trojans (55–63). Even in this small way the relative merits of the opposed warriors are made clear: Agamemnon is given an honorific introduction through his actions and the quality of his armor, but Hector is described only indirectly by similes and a listing of his associates. At the beginning of the second section Hector enters the battle with four juxtaposed similes and a list of those he kills; but this lavish introduction collapses as Homer fails to develop a formal and glorious aristeia. In fact, the next set of juxtaposed similes accompanies Ajax, who steadfastly protects the faltering Greek cause and opens the way for a series of quieter scenes where men consider their responses to the pressures that have blunted the Greek attack (474–95 and 497–542).

It is difficult to specify other incidents in this book that might have received a simile. The structure of the book is relatively simple, and the details in the narrative all seem to support that structure. Similes are so common that the addition of yet more comparisons seems unnecessary; the problem is not to find places where further similes might have occurred, but rather to judge whether this book, with its high number of colorful and vigorous similes, could allow any more.

The final section of the book describes the response of Achilles to the Zeus-driven results of the battle: he sends Patroclus to Nestor’s tent. The report of his mission is of a totally different nature from the two battle sections and highly important to the book’s major contribution to the Iliad’s design. As the narrative shifts to Nestor’s quiet tent, Homer invites his audience to witness the private meeting of the two Greek warriors. There is no reason to order or rank the battle skills of various kings or to define the momentary shifts in the directions within the ongoing battle. Similes fall away completely — with two
exceptions: Nestor’s servant is “like the goddesses” (638), and he describes his own fighting with a familiar simile, “like a black whirlwind” (747). Perhaps Homer uses these similes to hint at the rough-and-tumble world outside this quiet inner scene; if so, the short similes reaffirm the calm discussion of the two men as they try to bring order to the inconstant world of battle that the earlier sections of the book have portrayed. 131

In a variety of ways it is clear that this is a carefully crafted book—central to many of the themes in the *Iliad* and containing incidents that will later prove of enormous significance. Not only does this book have the largest number of similes in the Homeric poems, but several are among the most forceful descriptions in the simile repertoire. Book 11’s similes play a major role in emphasizing and organizing shifts in the balance and complexity of the hard-fought battle. As a result they are closely coordinated with the narrative themes:

1. The ever-dominant power of Zeus in aiding the Trojans.
2. The clear demonstration that the Trojans are forcing the Greeks back to the ships, but only with the divine force temporarily given to them by Zeus. The Greeks are not being portrayed as weak even though they retreat.

Although all similes in book 11 occur in places where the tradition would have suggested them, it remains Homer’s choice to use these similes because they enhance the presentation of his themes, and he consistently extends them to fortify this strategy.

CONCLUSION

The broad traditional background of the Homeric poems allows plot and character to have separate lives. They can function independently because each is based on discrete areas of the traditional storytelling material. The plot of book 1 of the *Iliad* presents two characters who argue with increasing fervor and bitterness until they seem to reach an impasse. The plot calls for a summary position of both sides, but both characters are so hot-headed and intense that they are not likely to pause to sum up their case; therefore the plot needs a third party to come forward to slow the action in order to let characters and audience take a breath before those final statements. But the plot does not dictate the character to play the role of intermediary. Depending on
the direction Homer wants for his narrative, he has a large cast of characters who are well known to the audience. He chooses Nestor. But it is important to remember that Nestor existed as a character who could cool down a scene before book 1 was formed — and the same could be said for the various other types of warriors that make up the traditional storyteller’s collection.

Most probably Homer’s creative process allowed him to develop the plot and choose the appropriate characters in an instant. But he did have a reliably typical quarrel scene between leaders and “insubordinates” that would fulfill his narrative needs: Hector/Polydamas, Zeus/Hera, Hector/Achilles, Odysseus/individual suitors, Telemachus/Antinoos. Each scene occupies a position in an ongoing narrative that calls for a certain tone and argumentative style. The tradition also supplied Homer with a series of characters that provided varied styles and coloration.

As a part of this creative process Homer also drew upon a series of traditional similemes, which through repeated use came with suggestions for choice of topics, placement in the narrative, and possible extensions. In book 2 Agamemnon’s plan actually weakens the Greek army that finds itself roaming the battlefield in confusion. Similes are used repeatedly to show a strong army brought to weak action by the misperceptions of their leader. In books 21 and 22 the plot structures are completely different. The similes support individual sections of book 21 in stressing the varied qualities of the fighting among different participants, but then in book 22 they programmatically follow the developing scene between the two champions until Hector is finally killed. In book 11 the narrative centers on Agamemnon and Hector — but also on Zeus. Both plot and characters are interwoven in the complexities of this book, but the similes are a reliable guide to the continuing reality beneath the narrative.

The important role that similes can play in such settings is best illustrated by contrasting parallel scenes. First there are two passages where the reaction of the army to a leader’s encouragement is obedience, but with a very different spirit. In book 2 Agamemnon concludes his first speech of instruction to the troops:

But come now, even as I say, let all be obedient.
Let us flee with our ships to our dear native land;
for no longer shall we capture Troy with its broad streets.
So he spoke, and he moved the hearts in their breasts
for all among the multitude, as many as had not heard his plan. The gathering was moved like the long waves of the deep, the Icarian Sea, which the East Wind and the South rouse rushing from the clouds of father Zeus, and just as the West Wind comes to a deep field of corn, blowing briskly, and sets the ears to bobbing; just so was the full gathering moved. They with shouting rushed to the ships, and the dust rose up high from beneath their feet; they urged one another to lay hold of their ships and to push them into the sacred sea, and they cleaned out the launching tracks. The shout rose to the heavens from the men eager to return home. And they removed the props from under the ships.

(2. 139–54)

In book 15 Ajax urges his men to take heart even though the Trojans are about to burn the Greek ships:

My friends, be men, and put shame in your hearts, have respect for one another in the strong fighting. When men have shame, more live than die; when men flee, neither glory nor valor is present. So he spoke, and they were eager to defend themselves; they took his word into their hearts, and they fenced off the ships with a wall of bronze.

(15. 560–67)

It is clear from this comparison that direct description is the strongest form of Homeric expression. There is no clearer mode of showing agreement than the speech-into-action pattern in book 15. And of course the audience is aware that the poet could add many elements that would provide a mood or imply resistance to direct action. The passage from book 2 shows how the injection of a simile between the command and the performance can be crucial. The wind and wave simile is not the most powerful or intense within the simileme; the movement is confused by the force of conflicting winds, and there is no destruction involved. The second simile of the bobbing ears of corn offers little purposeful activity. As a result, the army performs the actions
ordered by their commander only after images of disorganization and purposelessness introduce their responsive action through the similes.

Contrasting similes provide another revealing comparison of the powerful contribution that each can make. In book 14 Hector is disabled by a stone thrown by Ajax:

then great Ajax, son of Telamon, struck him as he withdrew with a stone, for many—as props for the swift ships—rolled at the feet of the warriors; hoisting one of these he hurled it at his chest above his shield just by his neck; striking him he twirled him around like a top, and he spun about wildly. Just as an oak falls beneath the blast of father Zeus, uprooted, and a dreadful smell of sulfur rises from it, and no man standing near sees this and keeps calm, for terrifying is the lightning of great Zeus; just so did the powerful Hector fall immediately to the ground in the dust.

He dropped his spear from his hand, and his shield and helmet were thrown from him, and his shiny bronze armor rang about him.

(14.409–20)

Notice the contrast when Agamemnon’s wound forces him to withdraw in book 11:

But when the wound grew dry and the blood stopped flowing, sharp pains overcame the might of Atreus’ son. Just as when a sharp pang seizes a woman in labor, stinging, the pain which the Eilithuiae send, the goddesses of childbirth, the daughters of Hera who supply bitter pains; just so did sharp pains overcome the might of Atreus’ son. He leaped into his chariot and ordered his charioteer to drive to the hollow ships; for his heart was pained.

(11.267–74)

Every element of the scene around Hector stresses the danger presented by his attacker and his weapon; the stone is a prop for ships, Ajax takes careful aim, the force of the blow spins Hector around and lays him to the ground, he drops his weapons and is left defenseless in the middle of the battlefield. The simile is a perfect complement to this tone; the oak is proverbially sturdy, the
power of the lighting bolt is stressed, and the observer is shaken at the sight. These descriptive elements leave no doubt that this is a serious wound to the Trojans’ leader.

When Agamemnon is wounded, all the elements are softened. Iphidamas fails to harm Agamemnon in his attack (12.234–37); Agamemnon still kills this opponent and strips away his armor. Coon, Iphidamas’ brother pushes a spear through Agamemnon’s arm, but Agamemnon continues to fight and kills him too. Then the wound begins to draw down his strength. The simile responds to this scene: there is no question of a moment of total destruction leaving a warrior defenseless. In fact, he is only momentarily weakened and needs to withdraw. There is deep irony in using the image of a woman in childbirth to describe the temporary affliction of the warrior who had been the bloodthirsty, unsparing killer of so many Trojans.

Wounding scenes vary widely in their effect, ranging from sheer misses to instant deaths. The similemes of lions and boars, winds, fish, and farm animals are often repeated topics for such scenes. In these two passages Homer has gone to extremes to contrast the most serious of wounds and an insignificant, healable wound. The completely opposed tones of the two passages show the degree to which similes can be developed to follow the needs of each narrative scene.

In these matched comparisons the use of similes to parallel the shifts in characters and plots demonstrates the flexibility available to the poet within the areas of topics, placements, and the various extensions possible — in addition to the choice to use a simile at all.

This chapter has largely treated Homer’s use of similes to reinforce his narrative. While not as directly involved in the decisions of plot and character, the co-creating audience had already learned, by hearing decades’ worth of tales, how to decode the poet’s choices in forming similes from similemes. In the books treated in the next two chapters this audience is increasingly vital in more interpretive areas of determining and organizing the themes, deriving significant meaning from typical actions, and finally using simile topics to comment on the broader action.