Problem Books

There remain several books of the *Iliad* where major difficulties in interpretation persist—especially in regard to structure. Among these are books 13, 16, and 17—long narratives suited to this study because they are rich in similes. Book 13 is a famous frustration; it has so many diverse scenes and different characters that its action seems to drift. It is easy to say that book 17 presents the fight over Patroclus’ body, in which Achilles’ armor passes to Hector, yet it seems to be composed of many scenes that do not appear to be tightly organized. Book 16 is one of the most important books in the development of the larger narrative because here Achilles tries to save both his honor and his humanity; only later does he find that one must be sacrificed, although he cannot accept the loss of either. While critics have a relatively easy time of defining Achilles’ dilemma, there must be more on the poet’s mind in extending the narration of Patroclus’ fighting and death to such a length.

I will argue in this chapter that the close relationship between narrative and similes found elsewhere in Homeric epic offers significant clues to the structuring and interpretation of these problematic books. It remains the guiding principle of this study that similes support narrative strategies; they do not create the design. But if there is a perceptible pattern in the placement, the choice of subject matter, and the extension of the similes, then it is probable that this plan reflects elements in the narrative that are crucial to each book’s theme.

*ILIAD, BOOK 13:*

**THE ORDERING OF CONSCIOUS CHAOS**

In his introduction to book 13 Leaf concisely presents the kind of criticism that is typical of this part of the *Iliad*:

With this book begins a great retardation in the story of the *Iliad* in its present form. From the beginning of 13 till we come again to the story of the
Menis near the end of 15, the action does not advance; every step gained by either side is exactly counterbalanced by a corresponding success of the other, so that things are brought back just to the point at which we start. From time to time the story becomes confused, and then again flows on clearly for a while. In order to disentangle the original elements we must be guided by these passages of clear narrative, regarding the intervals of confusion as the joints by which they have been patched together.

The most devoted Unitarian must admit that Leaf has identified some distressing features about the composition of book 13. Yet even he cannot ignore the larger structure: this book is part of a unit that begins in book 13 and does not conclude until the end of book 15. The double themes that run through these three books, the divine deception of Zeus and the successful fighting of the Greeks, are woven together to create a meaningful narrative; some critics, however, contend that this weaving is not well handled, especially in this introductory book.

In determining the structure of book 13 the assumption that the three books (13–15) have been planned as a unit is of prime importance. At the end of book 12 the Trojans crossed over the wall, poured through the open gates, and drove the Greeks back to their ships. Poseidon enters at the beginning of book 13, once Zeus has turned his eyes away from the battle, and encourages the Greeks to strengthen their resistance. The situation of the Greek warriors is sufficiently fragile that several wounded Greek leaders, concerned for their men, come out to the battle lines at the beginning of book 14. As Hera enlists other gods to aid in distracting Zeus, the Greeks press their attack, even wounding Hector. They then consolidate their resurgence to the point where Homer presents a list of Trojan warriors despoiled by Greek heroes as the final unit of book 14. In book 15, when Zeus awakens to find his plan gone awry, he sets about repairing the reversals inflicted on the Trojans. This book concludes when events are returned to the situation at the end of book 12, where the Trojans were driving the Greeks back to their ships. In this way it is possible to find a basic internal direction in books 13–15 that is bracketed by the unchanged narrative situation.

Book 13 begins with the arming of Poseidon and his journey to Troy, a scene that emphasizes his strength and his dominance over the creatures of the deep and the sea itself; yet as this powerful god begins to manage the battle, all sense of order is lost, and the narrative rapidly degenerates into a series
of vignettes involving a medley of characters. These scenes are largely constructed on the basis of repeated typological descriptions of a warrior’s slaying; as a result there is a diverse mix of styles and variations. Yet few of these units cause or even affect ensuing events, there is little predictable development in the narrative, and the battle has no decisive momentum. This lack of organization is so striking that it is worthwhile to consider at the outset whether it might be purposeful—in other words, whether the chaos so evident to the audience can also be found among the characters.

There are, in fact, numerous signs that the very theme of book 13 is cross-purposes, disappointed expectations, frustration, and confusion. At the opening of the book Zeus is confident that no other divinity will offer aid to the warriors on the battlefield, although his plan has been repeatedly violated since his threatening “Golden Chain” speech at the beginning of book 8. In that book Hera and Aphrodite attempted to enter the battle but were forcibly stopped by Zeus’ threats. Critics have usually concluded that this show of force presents Zeus enforcing his plan; but it is equally true that the immediate violation of his command by two powerful goddesses reveals a deep-seated, incorrigible resistance in the other gods. In book 10 (if that book is part of the Iliad) Athena appears to help the Greeks; but in books 11 and 12 the gods completely abstain from participating in the battle. Once again their absence is testimony to the power of Zeus, yet it is also easy to believe that sufficient pressure has been building among the normally independent and ubiquitous gods that the audience is not surprised when Poseidon appears at the first sign of relaxed vigilance.

When book 13 opens with the clear assertion that Zeus believed none of the immortals would descend to Troy, the groundwork has been laid for the major theme of the resulting three-book interlude—the contest of wills between Zeus and the other gods. This theme culminates in the resentful speech of Poseidon against Zeus in book 15:

[Zeus], though great, speaks arrogantly
if he seeks to hold me by force when I am unwilling and he is an equal.
For we were born three brothers from Cronus and Rhea—
Zeus, and I, and third was Hades, who rules over the dead.
The universe has been divided in three ways—each of us took a share.
When the lots were cast, I received the gray sea
to live in forever; Hades received the misty darkness;
Zeus received the broad heaven among the upper air and the clouds. Earth and the peaks of Olympus were common among all of us. Therefore I will not at all walk in accordance with the will of Zeus—strong though he is let him sit calmly in his third share. . . .

(15.185–95)

From the conscious and obvious undermining of Zeus’ plan by Poseidon arises a series of confusions and reversals throughout book 13, of which the most serious is Hector’s failure to control the battle. He appears only at the start of the book, leading the Trojans toward the Greek ships and later confronting Teucer, Amphimachus, and Ajax (39–42 and 169–205). In addition to these brief appearances, Hector is mentioned by Poseidon and several of the Greeks as the leader of the opposition. Otherwise he is absent from the actual fighting until the final scenes, where it is made clear that he is unaware how badly the battle has been going for the Trojans; the confusion so characteristic of this book has infected even the Trojan leader himself:

Hector, dear to Zeus, had not heard nor had he known at all that his people were being slain by the Greeks on the left side of the camp. Soon there would have been victory for the Greeks, so greatly was the Holder and Shaker of the earth urging on the Greeks and himself aiding them from his own strength.

(13.674–78)

In book 14 the Greeks remain uncertain about the direction of events until Hector is struck, and they begin to despoil a large number of slain Trojan warriors.

Book 13 seems to lack direction. Yet on the assumption that such confusion is the beginning of a purposeful design, it is possible to divide the book into two large sections:

1. Lines 1–360: This part of the book is dominated by the conflicting plans of Zeus and Poseidon. The narrative opens with this opposition stated directly, and this section concludes with a summary scene of balanced divine conflict ending with the image of the cord: “The two pulled tight the rope of violent strife and equal war, a cord which could not be broken nor undone, a thing which loosed the knees of many men” (358–60). Poseidon has strongly influenced the battlefield situation by persuading several Greek warriors to renew their fighting; the long speeches of mutual encouragement between

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Idomeneus and Meriones serve as a precursor of the second, less divinely motivated section.

2. Lines 361–837: After the presentation of opposed divine purposes Poseidon abruptly disappears from the narrative, and there is scant mention of his influence at any point. Battles seem to be won appropriately by the Greeks, and thus there appears to be little need for his intervention as long as Zeus directs his attention elsewhere. The strength of the opposing warriors becomes the dominant force guiding the battle.

Within this basic two-part division it is possible to identify discrete units that further define the structure of the book:7

**SECTION 1**

1. 1–135: Poseidon encourages the Greeks
2. 136–55: The Trojans and Hector fight around the ships
3. 156–68: The introduction of Meriones and Deiphobus
4. 169–205: Battle vignette where the Greeks win
5. 206–344: Idomeneus and Meriones encourage each other and enter battle
6. 345–60: Recapitulation of conflicting divine purposes

**SECTION 2**

7. 361–539: The “aristeia” of Idomeneus
8. 540–672: Random battles, with successes on both sides
9. 673–837: Consolidation of positions, focusing on Hector and Ajax

This scheme does not precisely identify episodes that are being developed within a tightly structured narrative; rather, this list is composed of several passages linked by conscious foreshadowing and recall. Meriones and Deiphobus are briefly introduced in unit 3 in a small vignette that seems inconsequential but leads causally to the later scene (unit 5) where Meriones, while fetching another spear, meets Idomeneus—who then has a major role in unit 7. Deiphobus appears often in the second half of the book. In the same disjointed way, Poseidon paralyzes Alcathous and guards Antilochus (434–36 and 554–55). Since these are the only references to the god in the second part and both are without later consequence, they seem to exist only to bind this section to the first part of the book, where Poseidon played the dominant role. Thus even though the two halves differ in their emphasis on divine and human protagonists, the poet makes a specific effort to link them in order to
parallel the direction in which men move in the second half of the book to that established by the god in the first half.\textsuperscript{8}

There are twenty-five similes in book 13, distributed evenly between the two major sections. But none occur in the two smaller units: the brief encounter between Meriones and Deiphobus in unit 3 (156–68) and the short recapitulation of the divine purposes in unit 6 (345–60).

Four similes are placed in the first unit, which recounts Poseidon’s encouragement of the Greeks (1–135). These similes emphasize the relative strength of the two opposing forces. The Trojans fight like a fire or a wind; immediately after this Poseidon describes Hector fighting like a fire (39 and 53).\textsuperscript{9} Later, as the god encourages Teucer and his comrades, he uses a negative simile: the Trojans are no longer like panic-driven does before jackals, leopards, and wolves (101). Traditional similemes lie behind each of these passages: fire, wind, and wolves are familiar subjects in descriptions of strong warriors and thus provide a highly favorable assessment of the Trojans at the opening of the book;\textsuperscript{10} the use of does elsewhere to depict ineffectual warriors is equally traditional.\textsuperscript{11} The Greeks, who are hard pressed, receive no similes, and as the sole source of Greek resistance at this point, Poseidon is given a simile that is customarily reserved for a victorious warrior: he is like a hawk chasing a smaller bird (62).\textsuperscript{12} At the opening of book 13, similes support the ongoing narrative under the guidance of Zeus’ plan: the Trojans are fighting well, and they are given comparisons used for other successful warriors; the Greeks, who depend on the support of Poseidon to regain their standing, receive no similes.

The short unit that follows (136–55) highlights Hector as the leader of the successful Trojans. The only simile in this passage compares Hector in his impressive attack to a boulder driven by a rampaging river that rolls down a hill, devastating trees in its course until it stops on the plain (137). Yet even at this early point in the book there is a weakening in the force of Hector: once likened to a river in full spate (5.597), Hector is now a rock driven by Zeus’ rain.\textsuperscript{13}

In unit 4 (169–205) the Greeks first show the effect of Poseidon’s encouragement. This unit is organized around a complex vignette that shows only a slight connection to the surrounding narrative. Teucer kills Imbrius; Hector aims at Teucer but instead strikes a lesser Greek, Amphimachus. As Hector goes to despoil Amphimachus, he is stopped by Ajax. The Greeks then pick up both corpses; they strip the armor from the fallen Trojan and mutilate his

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body. Since the previous scene between Meriones and Deiphobus contains no act or character to motivate this vignette, it is appropriately introduced by a formula of general fighting: “The others fought on and an inextinguishable cry arose” (169). The scene is indirectly linked to the following unit, since Poseidon’s anger at the death of his grandson, Amphimachus, impels him to encourage Idomeneus; yet the importance of this connection is minimal. Idomeneus does not need this extra motivation; he and Meriones would have had the same spirited conversation without Poseidon.

This independent passage, though based upon a typical scene, is placed to emphasize the initial resistance of the Greeks. Appropriately, the similes underline this point: Imbrius falls like a tree that is cut down and spreads its young leaves to the ground (178). The Greeks need a notable kill to begin their resurgence, and Imbrius is ideal—he is young, has married Priam’s daughter, and dwells in the palace as though he were the king’s own son. The simile does not specify who does the cutting or what the instrument is, other than bronze. The extended description identifies the tree as ash (implying mortality and destruction); it places the tree on the summit of a high mountain, thus visible from all sides (appropriate because the victim is a son of Priam and this killing is notable as the beginning of the Greek counterattack), and it conveys the sense of waste or loss by means of the tender leafage strewn on the ground (suitable for the death of a young warrior). These extending components have been selected from the tree simileme (tree type, location, usage) and arranged to emphasize the significance of the action for both sides. Imbrius as a member of Priam’s family is given sufficient weight by the simile to cause Hector’s anger.

But Hector, who materializes out of nowhere to avenge this killing and claim the body, is disappointed in both desires. He fails to kill Teucer and is unable to retrieve either the body of Imbrius or that of the Greek whom he does slay, even though Hector has been presented as powerful both in the narrative and in similes earlier in the book (53 and 137). As he is repulsed, a simile compares the Trojans to hounds from whom a goat is snatched by two lions (198). A confrontation between lions and hounds often occurs in the simile world, but usually there is a contest. Here there is none; the hounds lose the meat, and the lions have no trouble carrying it off. The Greeks are even able to decapitate Imbrius and further insult the Trojans by rolling his head before Hector’s feet “like a ball” (204). Thus the details of the type scene that are insulting to Hector—the killing of the first Trojan in the book,
the snatching of both corpses, and the stripping and dishonoring of the fallen Trojan— are strongly reinforced by similes.

In the fifth unit, where Idomeneus and Meriones encourage each other (206–344), the narrative continues to provide an upbeat tone for the Greeks. This section begins with Poseidon in the guise of Thoas challenging Idomeneus to make good on all the Greek threats and boasts of the past. Idomeneus arms and then meets Meriones as he fetches another spear to replace the one he lost in unit 3. They encourage one another in a set of responding speeches; then they return to the battlefield, and general conflict is joined.

The similes reinforce the theme of directionlessness in the clash of forces; in effect, the similes remain one of the strongest uniting threads in the book, a strong clue that the poet did have a constant purpose in forming this collection of seemingly independent units. As Idomeneus emerges fully armed, he gleams like lightning brandished by Zeus from Olympus (242). This lightning is specifically stated to be a sign to mortals—and, indeed, the whole first section of book 13 is a sign that strength is returning to the Greeks, slowly but perceptibly. Though Poseidon has not produced a miracle by his sudden appearance on the battlefield, he has worked effectively in disguise as a motivator. When Idomeneus finishes describing the cowardly warrior, he urges Meriones to battle by telling him that they should not continue to prattle like children but should hasten to join the fighting—a negative comparison to be corrected in the following lines (292). When the two warriors do enter the battle, they are compared to Ares and Phobos, gods who turn the enemy to flight when they give glory to one side (298). The comparison of warriors to gods is traditional, but the naming of these specific gods and the poet’s choices in extending the simile demonstrate Poseidon’s effectiveness. When Idomeneus appears, the Trojans see him like a flame (330), the same phrase that was used twice at the beginning of the book to describe the Trojans and Hector (39 and 53). Since fire is a traditional subject for a powerful warrior, the occurrence of this short comparison implies the presence of fresh strength in the Greeks, but of greater significance is the transfer of this subject from the Trojans to the newly roused Greeks.

When the two armies, both presented as vigorous and strong, begin to battle in the last scene in unit 5, the collision should be violent. The poet chooses a simileme that has traditionally described such clashes—wind: gusts of shrill winds blow over the roads, raising up a large cloud of dust (334). This subject may be traditional, but its extension is not. Though the men on both
sides are showing predictable power and are not controlled by divine force, the poet weakens this simile to indicate that the results of the fighting are momentary. Often the winds blow over waves, raising a destructive surf, or rush through forests, shattering the limbs of trees. Here there is only dust; tomorrow there will be no sign that anything unusual has happened. Up to this point similes have been traditional in subject matter and placement and have been extended by elements that are appropriate in content and tone to the surrounding narrative. In this final simile of book 13’s first half, located just before the concluding passage on divine purposes, the poet has chosen to stress the lack of achievement. In book 8 Zeus took charge of the battle, and he will reassert his power when he awakens in book 15, but the battle that is joined at this moment in book 13 is a deviation from that surrounding context. Zeus has turned his attention away from the battlefield, and Poseidon has been effectively rallying the Greeks. The similes so far in the book have reflected the competitors’ natural strengths, but the final simile of gusting winds emphasizes the transitory nature of any advance.

The next unit (345–60) closes the first of the two major sections and from its opening words is clearly a recapitulation of the activity on the battlefield from the divine perspective:

Two powerful sons of Cronus, hearts divided against each other, were bringing bitter agonies on the fighting warriors. Zeus willed the victory for the Trojans and Hector, glorifying swift-footed Achilles, yet not utterly did he wish the Achaean people to be destroyed before Ilion.

Therefore Poseidon avoided giving aid openly, and secretly did he encourage them throughout the army, in the likeness of a man.

(13.345–49 and 356–57)

The specific reference to Zeus’ plan to honor Achilles relates the action in this book directly to his promise to Thetis in book 1, his commands to the Olympians in book 8, and his pledge to Hector in book 11. Though Poseidon’s actions are outside this plan, the threats of Zeus in his “Golden Chain” speech (8.5–25) are not unknown to him, for he is careful to move only when he can escape notice and generally in disguise. There are only two brief mentions of Poseidon’s activity in the remaining scenes of book 13—yet the
continuing divine drama in the deception of Zeus in book 14 and his angry awakening in book 15 reveal the covert forces that are opposing him. Thus this recapitulation combines the two sides of the divine activity that has been developing over several books and that remains active in the present situation.24

Now the second half of the book begins (361). The focus shifts almost totally to the actions of men. Appropriately, the initial motivating force for unit 7, the parallel to Poseidon in the opening unit, is Idomeneus, who encourages the Greeks as he rushes against the enemy; the book ends with an exchange of challenges between Hector and Ajax, corresponding to the statement of conflicting divine purposes. Yet even in this last scene an eagle appears, an omen interpreted as favorable by the Greeks (821–23); thus the divine element never completely disappears, even though the narrative is focused on the actions and responses of men.

Unit 7 (361–539) is a sprawling construction that does not seem to be designed as a typical aristeia but contains enough elements of the form that it is impossible to deny it the title.25 The spotlight does indisputably fall on Idomeneus for a series of killings. In addition, there is growing strength in Idomeneus’ achievements: he first kills a Trojan, then so threatens Deiphobus that he must seek Aeneas, and finally becomes the new center of the battle. Within the action Idomeneus is described by a series of similes that are traditional and appropriate for an aristeia.

Other elements, however, seem to be missing or replaced by substitutes. First, there is no proper introduction of the hero, but it is possible to see his introduction split from the immediate context and included in Poseidon’s earlier encouragement, the hero’s previous arming with a simile, and his speech to Meriones about the brave and cowardly warrior—all in unit 5 (206–94). But, of greater significance, Idomeneus is not the carrier of the action; the narrative is constructed from the individual actions of many heroes: in order of appearance, Idomeneus, Antilochos, Deiphobus, Aeneas, Meriones, Menelaus, Paris, Hector, Polydamas, and again Hector. Finally, this aristeia has no conclusion; the hero reaches his point of maximum achievement and cannot sustain the role. He fades away and is never mentioned again. It seems probable that in this book of purposeful confusion the poet has brought together many elements of the aristeia form and then consciously diffused them, thus raising questions as to what is happening for an audience familiar with traditional forms.
Similes provide important clues to the poet’s larger design. The first grouping of events in this unit describes two killings by Idomeneus and one by Antilochus, with a response by the Trojan Deiphobus (361–423).26 Idomeneus opens his aristeia by killing Othryoneus and boasting about the promise that the young Trojan made to Priam when he married his daughter. Asios comes to avenge his fallen comrade but is also slain by Idomeneus; he falls like a tree cut by shipwrights to be a ship’s timber (389). This is the second tree simile of the book, and it reflects the earlier scene from the first half where Teucer brought the first Trojan down like a solitary tree on a mountaintop (178). In that simile the tree’s location and its destruction were important to the scene; here different elements are chosen from the simileme to emphasize those who cut down the tree and their purpose. Since Idomeneus is the hero of the aristeia, it is appropriate to emphasize that understandable human intentions are motivating the scene. He is also momentarily the parallel figure to Poseidon in section 1, the active instigator of the greater design, whereas Teucer in the first unit is only the initiator of a battle that was principally carried on through the direct planning and participation of Poseidon.27 The repetition of subject in a parallel location responds to the development from the first section as men now take direction of events.28

The remainder of this section contains the killing of Asios’ charioteer and the taking of his horses, followed by Deiphobus’ vain effort to kill Idomeneus. Deiphobus strikes down Hypsenor and boasts over his body as Idomeneus did over the body of Othryoneus, but the parallel ends when the Greeks carry off their comrade. The two scenes are shaped to enhance the victory of the Greek hero.

The second vignette (424–67) again pits Idomeneus against Deiphobus. This passage is introduced as an independent event in the aristeia, not directly caused by the previous action and only in the most superficial way triggering the next scene, where Deiphobus sends Aeneas to take his place. Idomeneus kills Alcathous and gloats over him in answer to the preceding boast of Deiphobus. Briefly, divine purpose and human motivation are specifically united in the language of the narrative when the poet reports that Poseidon had cast a spell over the eyes of Alcathous, paralyzing his limbs. The simile describing the fallen warrior is a double simile of a stele29 or a tree (437), a conscious echo emphasizing the continuing strength of Idomeneus (cf. 389); in addition, Deiphobus refuses the direct challenge and chooses to seek the aid of Aeneas. These two vignettes (361–423 and 424–67) are a doublet,
closely linked by theme, responses of characters, and simile topic even though the actions described are typological and not joined as cause and effect.30

In the third vignette (468–95) the quality of the challengers is elevated — a usual development in an aristeia. The opposing hero now is Aeneas. Homer gives Idomeneus two juxtaposed complementary similes: he is not a pampered child, but a boar confronting dogs and men (470 and 471);31 still, however, he calls to his friends asking for aid because he recognizes the Trojan’s prowess. Aeneas summons his companions to join him, a scene that the poet describes with a simile of sheep following after the ram — a view that delights the shepherd (492).32 The contrast is between the boar and the ram (or the shepherd).33 The boar is described in full fury, his back bristling and his eyes filled with fire — one of the strongest examples taken from the lion/boar simileme.34 The ram leads the flock to water and the shepherd rejoices — a scene of day-to-day country life with little danger, threat, or extraordinary achievement. In this third segment, similes build Idomeneus’ strength.

As the battle re-forms over the body of Alcathous, Idomeneus and Aeneas are spotlighted for a fourth vignette (496–539):

Two men, warriors above all,
Aeneas and Idomeneus, the equals of Ares,
yearned to cut each other’s flesh with the cruel bronze.

(499–501)

Despite this specific pairing of the two heroes, the episode is constructed in two parts focusing again on Idomeneus and Deiphobus as contrasting warriors. Aeneas does cast his spear at Idomeneus, who avoids it — and that is Aeneas’ last appearance in this scene. Idomeneus kills Oenomaus but is unable to despoil him. Deiphobus tries to wound Idomeneus but hits Ascalaphus, whose helmet he takes before he is wounded by Meriones and carried from the field. This is the end of the aristeia of Idomeneus, who receives no further mention in this book; almost imperceptibly the impetus in the battle passes to his comrade Meriones. The curt postponement of Aeneas’ appearance is calculated. He is held aside only for the moment in order to begin the next series of random battles.

Once Idomeneus has disappeared, Meriones inherits his role as opponent to Deiphobus. This shift is marked when Meriones receives the only simile in this vignette, a comparison to a vulture (531). This is a short simile, yet traditional for a fighting warrior; in addition, it recalls the earlier simile of
a predatory hawk, used of Poseidon when he was the Greeks’ only force of resistance (62). The god’s driving power has now passed from the hero of a quasi-aristeia to one of his comrades—a second shift reinforcing the effectiveness of Poseidon in transferring his desires to the Greek army.

The eighth unit (540–672) presents confusion at its height, a series of mutual wounding with a slight edge gained by the Greeks. Although Hector had assumed that the successes of the previous book were continuing, at the end of this unit the poet states openly that he has little knowledge of the course of the battle and that the Trojan attack has been blunted by a fairly broad group of Greek warriors. The change from the first lines of the book is remarkable. The plan of Zeus has been neutralized; in the next book it will be decisively reversed. With the passing of the immediate danger there is a less desperate quality to the Greeks’ fighting; the similes follow this movement. Now they do not occur in wounding scenes emphasizing the victorious fighting of one warrior or accompanying major shifts in the strength of one side or another; rather, in this unit the similes fall at places unrelated to the direction of the war, and their subjects cast a more peaceful tone over the battlefield. Poseidon renders the spear cast by Adamas harmless, and the simile at 564 stresses the action of a god in human affairs rather than the killing of a warrior. The subject of this simile is unusual: the spear is like a charred stake. Perhaps in the background is the fire simileme, with its description of a massive fire, a subject that often accompanies the fighting of warriors; here the fire is over. This effect is continued a few lines later, when the death agony of this same warrior is described by a normal scene of country life; he is compared to a bull bound and dragged by herdsmen (571). When Helenus shoots an arrow at Menelaus, it jumps off his breastplate:

as when black beans or chickpeas jump
from a broad winnowing fan on the wide threshing floor
when the wind is shrill and the winnower is strong

(588–90)

An equally incongruous subject occurs in the wounding of Harpalion, who stretches out on the ground like a worm (654). In this unit there is an abrupt change from earlier simile subjects. Rather than stressing the predominance of the Greeks, the similes now focus on moments like the intervention of the god in a battle or the arrow that is turned aside; even when the similes describe the death of a Trojan, the tone is soft-
ened as both sides now fight a more normal and balanced series of contests in which there is no overwhelming victory for either.

This same tone continues into the final unit (673–837), which is both an extension of the narrative development in unit 8 and a conclusion to the second half of book 13—thus a parallel to the summary of opposed divine purposes at the end of section 1 (345–60). Finally, the situation on the battlefield becomes clear to the competing armies and their leaders, Hector and Ajax. After the series of confusing individual and independent vignettes, the opposing leaders appraise their present positions. This unit begins with a general line describing the armies fighting like fire (673), thus repeating the simile used to describe the fighting of the Trojans in the first simile of the book (39); now, however, the two sides are equally matched. The reference to the beginning of the book is reinforced when the next simile repeats the second comparison in the book, where Poseidon describes Hector fighting like a fire (688, cf. 53); now this simile occurs in a passage where the poet has made it clear that Hector confronts a changed situation because of the resurgence of the Greeks.

But as the desperation of the Greeks fades, a simile provides a cooler and more peaceful tone as an introduction to the evaluation of stabilized positions: the Ajaxes are presented as two yoked oxen toiling to plow a field (703). Likewise, when Hector goes to reconnoiter, he receives the simile of the “snowy mountain”—scarcely typical for a warrior (754).

Hector now learns from Paris about the losses that have occurred in the course of book 13, gathers the survivors, and leads them to reestablish his lines. Again the battle grows fierce as the Trojans try to recoup their losses—and appropriately, the similes turn warlike again. The Trojans are compared to storm winds that join with the thunder of Zeus to whip up the sea, and Hector is compared to man-slaughtering Ares (795 and 802). The final moment of this book is the shouting match of challenges between Ajax and Hector. Ajax steadies the Greeks and assures Hector that it will not be long before he will be praying to his patron Zeus for help. He even inserts a familiar simile, telling Hector that he will soon yearn for horses swifter than falcons to carry him back to the safety of his city (819). This last simile of the book ironically echoes the simile used in the first unit to describe Poseidon:

he rose like a swift-winged hawk
which soars above a steep and lofty crag
and rushes to chase another bird across the plain;
thus did Poseidon, the shaker of the earth, race away from them. . . .

(62–65)

As the reappearance of Hector at 674 injects a reference to the plan of Zeus into the final scene (diiphilos), so also this simile brings a memory of the opposing plan of Poseidon. These reminders of the two contending gods are reinforced by the sudden appearance of an eagle (821ff.), and in the final line of the book the sound of both sides rises high up to the clear light of Zeus.

Book 13 begins with a moment of clarity as the Trojans seem about to overwhelm the Greek ships; it also ends on a note of clarity as the Greeks and the Trojans join in battle on an equal footing. Between these two points, much is confusion. The plan of Zeus is reversed. The Greeks score victories on the field here and there. One Greek hero has a quasi-aristeia, and the leader of the Trojans loses track of what is happening to his troops. Because this book is the introduction to the larger narrative of books 13 through 15, it presents a gradual improvement in Greek fortunes, even though this movement is often so imperceptible that it is difficult to see how and where it is happening. There are guideposts in the book revealing the developing theme to the audience, but even the participants are little aware of an orderly direction.

A strong sign of this purposeful design is the conscious repetition of the same simileme in contrasting narrative units. The clearest example is the balance of battle in the book’s first and last units. Echoing similemes pinpoint the contrasting features precisely in order to give the audience no chance to be unaware of the increasing success of the Greek army. In the final unit the need for Hector as the Trojan leader is emphasized when the fire simile is repeated from the first unit (688, cf. 39 and 53); the Trojans’ attempt to regain their position in the battle is supported by a wind simile (795), which is echoed from the earlier simile at line 39. Hector’s role as inspirer of the Trojans against the efforts of Poseidon is accentuated by the simile comparing him to Ares (802)—a simile borrowed from the earlier description of Meriones at 298 in order to emphasize the current equality of the Trojans and Greeks. Then the final simile of the book, that of hawks, recalls the movement of Poseidon in the first unit (819, cf. 62).

Even though the subject matter of the similes throughout the book is bewilderingly varied, their placement is often seen as merely typical, and one longer simile is repeated from another book. Nonetheless, the poet’s
active choice of the scenes to emphasize with similes, of the narrative patterns to highlight with similes, of extended similes and those left short, and his selection from among alternatives as he extends certain similes are all part of a larger plan providing a firm foundation for the strong Greek attack in the coming book.

**ILIAD, BOOK 17: SIMILES AS GUIDES THROUGH A SERIES OF TYPE SCENES**

In book 17 there are clear signs that Hector’s promised day of glory is about to end; he has performed his role in the plan of Zeus, and his effectiveness begins to fade as the Greeks rally. The book introduces this change by centering its theme on the human responses to Patroclus’ death. The absence of Achilles, the need to inform him, and the necessity of adapting to the new situation are major undercurrents throughout the narrative. The most important Greek warriors must fight doggedly to protect Patroclus’ body and its armor, since Hector threatens to gain control of both. The narrative shifts focus between the opposing forces as they contend for the prize. The Greeks lose control of the body long enough for Hector to take the armor of Achilles; yet by the end of the book they have organized their defense and are able to pull the body free and carry it toward the Greek camp. The Trojans experience the opposite fortune; they start out victoriously:

> When Hector had stripped Patroclus of his glorious armor,  
> he sought to drag him away to cut his head from his shoulders with  
> a sharp sword,  
> and haul away the corpse to give to Trojan dogs.

(125–27)

This is Hector’s most triumphant moment in the book. From this point he loses power until the body finally slips from his control and the Greeks begin to carry it to Achilles.

Book 17 contains a large number of similes (twenty-six)—indeed, some of the most striking in the Homeric poems. In addition, since only two are short, the poet seems to have chosen to develop similes as meaningful support for the narrative. This book is not much admired; many critics are scornful of its endless battles as dilatory and meandering. The deeper problem is that few agree on its theme. Once again it is important to place this book
within a larger structure: with the death of Patroclus and the awful burden of responsibility that descends on Achilles, the *Iliad* turns to his death-centered rededication. Only such total blindness to human suffering can permit him to rise to his final magnanimous act in allowing the funeral of Hector.

The book is divided into six units, five of which are organized around a repeated basic scene: defense by the Greek(s), rebuke of the Trojan, and the frustration of the Trojan advance.\(^4^6\) Crucial to the Greek defense, which solidifies at the end of each of the first five units, is Telamonic Ajax or the Ajaxes.

1. 1–131: Menelaus protects Patroclus’ body; Apollo rebukes Hector; Hector drives Menelaus away from the body; Ajax drives Hector back.
2. 132–318: Ajax protects Patroclus’ body; Glaucus rebukes Hector; the Trojan advance drives Ajax to seek aid; Ajax firms up the Greek lines and strips two Trojan bodies of their armor.
3. 319–65: Greeks threaten; Apollo rebukes Aeneas; Aeneas attacks; Ajax stops the Trojan advance.
4. 366–542: The battle is balanced; Achilles’ horses are given strength by Zeus; Hector encourages Aeneas to take the horses; the Ajaxes advance and the Trojans retreat as Automedon strips the body of his enemy.\(^4^7\)
5. 543–714: Menelaus slays a Trojan encouraged by Athena; Apollo rebukes Hector;\(^4^8\) the Trojans attack and have success with the aid of Zeus; the Ajaxes and Meriones guard the body of Patroclus while Menelaus withdraws to give news to Achilles and then returns.
6. 715–61: The corpse is taken away by the Greeks.\(^4^9\)

The book is structured as a series of initiatives by Hector/Aeneas that are blocked each time by the opposition of Ajax, who finally manages to pull the body free from the Trojans. Within this repeated structure a series of Greek heroes draws the spotlight, each for a brief moment while the design of the similes emphasizes the temporary effectiveness of these characters in their individual scenes. Even more importantly, these similes reinforce the clear indications in the narrative that the Greeks are gaining power through the course of book 17 while Hector loses both strength and divine favor. This shift in force from the Zeus-supported Trojans to the Greeks, driven by thoughts of their obligation to Achilles, provides an effective introduction to the final books of the *Iliad*, the aristeia of Achilles.
In the first unit (1–131) Menelaus stands alone over the body but is able to withstand Hector only when Ajax arrives to support him. This unit contains seven similes, two of which are short. Menelaus stands over Patroclus’ body like a mother cow over her calf (4); he is by no means a weak warrior, but throughout book 17 his performance emblemizes the Greeks’ inability to gain possession of the body on their own. Here he attracts one of the strangest similes accompanying a warrior in the *Iliad*, yet the unwarlike tone of this simile is echoed throughout the first unit:

He protected him as a mother cow bawling over her calf—
hers first born, for she has not before experienced birth

(17.4–5)

The second line stresses the inexperience of the cow; perhaps Menelaus is chosen as the initial defender of the body because of his relative ineffectiveness as a warrior. Even though he fights well and is appropriately described in the other similes by topics customary for a warrior, the opponents in these similes are chosen to present uneven battles among adversaries of different strengths. Menelaus calls Euphorbus unequal to a leopard, a lion, or a boar (20), thus denying him the most traditional and heroic comparisons for warriors. Homer continues the description of ill-matched forces in the next simile, where Menelaus is likened to a whirlwind that lays low an olive sapling (53). The whirlwind is the proper description for a strong warrior, but in other wind similes the opposing force is a whole forest or a giant, firmly rooted tree; here the wind wins a meager victory over a young, weak plant. This effect is immediately reinforced when Menelaus is described as a mountain-reared lion who devours an undefended heifer and scares off men and hounds (61). At 109, when Menelaus confronts Hector, these dogs and men reappear to drive the lion off. In other words, in these early similes Homer has undercut Menelaus’ warlike acts by choosing such weak opponents that these similes fall short of being strong examples within their families. As a result, the narrative presents the Greeks as comparatively weak so that they can be made to grow stronger during the course of the book. There are only two other similes: Hector and Ajax, the two rival champions of the book, receive traditional short similes that introduce them as stronger central figures for the more serious battle in the next unit (88 and 128).

The second section (132–318) is a variation of the first; its participants and the terms of the battle are raised to a higher level. The defeat of the Trojans
is more decisive, and the Greeks capture and despoil the two fallen bodies. Initially Hector is able to strip the armor of Patroclus, but he cannot gain control of his body. Glaucus’ rebuke is harsher than Apollo’s in unit 1, suggesting Hector’s cowardice and adding a threat to withdraw the Lycians as allies. As Hector puts on Achilles’ armor, Zeus appears in this book for the first time, criticizing his arrogance in stripping the armor from Patroclus and underlining the temporary quality of his previous success.

The contrast between the two sections is initially signaled in the opening lines in a simile (132ff.): in the first unit Menelaus stood over the body of Patroclus like a mother cow over her calf (4); here Ajax takes the same position and is compared to a mother animal over its young, but this time the subject is a strong lion glorying in his strength.55 Both the quality of the warrior and the strengthening of the simile are reinforced when Ajax rallies the Greeks like a boar who scatters opposing hounds and hunters (281);56 earlier Menelaus was like a lion who retreated before hounds and men (109). There are only two other similes in this unit. Meriones is compared to man-slaughtering Ares as he comes to help the Greeks (259). This introduction is short, but strong, since it uses the god who exemplifies war; this provides a proper introduction for Meriones, who will stand with the Ajaxes when they are finally able to snatch away Patroclus’ body.57 The second describes the shouting of the Trojans, who advance noisily like a wave (263).58 This is a customary simile subject for an advancing army, but there are more potent elements available in the simileme; here the wave only makes noise. This section is clearly based on the same type scene as the first, and modifications to the similes demonstrate the conscious parallelism.

The third unit (319–65) combines the previously developed motifs into an unadorned, direct presentation of narrative action. It is quite short and contains no similes. Apollo encourages Aeneas, as he did Hector in the first unit. Then there is a short battle sequence: Trojan wounds Greek; Greek wounds Trojan; Trojan tries to wound Greek but is stopped when Ajax encourages the Greeks to stand firm. The first lines of this section summarize the situation:

Then the Trojans would again have retreated to Ilion overwhelmed by their cowardice before the Achaeans, beloved of Ares, and the Argives would have taken honor even above Zeus’ allotment for their power and strength. . . .

(319–22)
The weakness brought into the earlier narrative by Menelaus is simply no longer present, even though Zeus still helps the Trojans. The last time the Greeks showed such strength was in books 13–15, when Zeus’ aid to the Trojans disappeared and Poseidon assisted the Greeks.

At this point it is clear how tightly the first three units are constructed around a repeated series of typological actions. In the first two units the similes underline the increasing success of the Greeks. The scene with Menelaus could well have contained both the despoiling of Patroclus’ armor and the dragging of his body, but when Ajax—a stronger warrior—appeared, the poet repeated the first action with heightened intensity; Greek warriors more powerful than Menelaus beat Hector at his own game, stripping the armor from Trojan victims. In the third unit the strength of the Greeks is confirmed in a scene centering on Ajax and Aeneas, Hector’s surrogate.

In the fourth unit (366–542) Hector not only fails to take the horses of Achilles but also loses one of his men, whose body is stripped by Automedon. The Ajaxes are again the protectors of the Greeks; significantly, though, Zeus aids Achilles’ horses in escaping capture—a further sign of the impending limitation of Hector’s power. The key elements in this scene are the full establishment of balanced battle after the introductory section, the active involvement of Zeus on the side of the Greeks, and finally the victory of a Greek from the camp of Achilles. These three moments receive similes.

The evenness of the battle is presented in the first two similes. The first is short and traditional: like a fire (366). This simile occurs often in descriptions of real warfare, and there is no doubt that both sides are eager to gain control of Patroclus’ body—so eager that a darkness shrouds their area of the battlefield.

The Achilles theme is sounded when the poet states that neither Thrasymedes nor Antilochus knew that Patroclus had been killed; at the end of the book Antilochus will be approached by Menelaus to carry news of Patroclus’ death to Achilles. Once again the poet stresses the evenness of the battle in a strikingly peaceful simile (389) that in tone is reminiscent of the countryside scene opening book 17, where Menelaus is compared to a mother cow (4). Such a reflection signals that this unit of balanced battle opens a new phase in the book’s action. The simile describes men stretching a bull’s hide to cure it as an image of the equal striving on both sides. The combination of the Achilles theme and the balance of battle is underlined once again by the immediate mention of Achilles’ continuing ignorance of his comrade’s death,
as well as the balanced speeches of both Greeks and Trojans to their fellow soldiers (412–22). This sense of arrested motion is reinforced by the image of the charioteer whipping horses who refuse to move; a simile describes them as standing fixed like a pillar over the tomb of a dead man or woman (434). Of course, it is appropriate to book 17’s position as the introduction to the final quarter of the Iliad that the horses of Achilles are stricken with sorrow for the fallen Patroclus.

At this point the irreversible movement toward the death of Hector in book 22 begins. Zeus, pitying the horses, tells them that Hector will never drive their chariot and that he will have glory for only this one day. Automedon, Achilles’ charioteer, is now presented as a Greek champion, driving the horses through the Trojans like a vulture swooping on geese (460). When he finds Alcimedon to share the chariot, he immediately attracts Hector’s attention. Automedon prays to Zeus, is filled with strength, and slays Aretus, a lesser Trojan, just as a man kills an ox (520). When the Ajaxes bring aid to Automedon, he is able to despoil the body and climb into his chariot like a lion that has devoured a bull (542)

Although Homer had been careful to reestablish a balance in the fighting at the beginning of unit 4, this battle now goes badly for the Trojans, a trend reinforced by the similes. Zeus sides with the Greeks, especially those who are directly associated with Achilles, and the section ends when Automedon kills and strips the body of a Trojan in the very presence of Hector. The increasing effectiveness of the Greeks is emphasized by the scaled intensity of the similes. At the start there is the countryside scene of men stretching the bull’s hide, but then in each of the final three similes the Greek is identified with the dominant force: a vulture over geese, a man killing an ox, and a lion devouring a bull. In the last simile the Trojans are not even given the honor of being included as one of the customary worthy opponents of the lion, nor are there the familiar men and dogs. The lion simply devours the bull and all mention of opposition is deleted. On this note the unit ends.

The movement toward Achilles continues in the repeated structure in the fifth unit (543–714), the final struggle for Patroclus’ body. The scene begins as usual with a statement that the battle was drawn taut over his corpse. Almost immediately Athena appears to aid the Greeks, described in a half-simile/half-description as a rainbow that Zeus has placed in heaven to be the harbinger of a dire event for men (547). Thus the poet stresses not only the harshness of battle for both Greeks and Trojans but also the continuing involvement of
divine forces as Hector fruitlessly exhausts the remaining time left in his day of prominence. Athena gives strength to Menelaus, the warrior with whom the book began. As if to recall his earlier stand over Patroclus’ body, Homer uses another strangely unwarlike simile: a fly keeps bothering a man (570). Yet in spite of this unpromising beginning Menelaus will be the hero in this unit, and his similes increase in strength as he retreats like a lion giving way slowly before dogs and men — and then looks for Antilochus with the eyes of an eagle seeking and killing his victim (657 and 674). He tells Antilochus morosely that the battle is being won by the Trojans and that a god is rolling destruction upon the Greeks; then he informs him that Patroclus is dead, that Hector has taken his armor, and that they are in need of Achilles to save the body.

In unit 6 (715–61) the battle is renewed, with strong fighting on either side. In both units 5 and 6 speakers are discouraged, and yet each is so involved in his own scene that he appears unaware of the irresistible direction in events, and mixed signals are sent at the end of the book. Because Menelaus fears that Achilles will not enter the battle even now, he urges Ajax to take Patroclus’ body and to organize a retreat, but both words and actions presage the reentrance of Achilles. Hector’s last charge is the most spirited and successful in book 17; yet the opposing power of the Ajaxes is great, a messenger is on his way to Achilles, and the Greeks are able to gain possession of the body. In support of these narrative elements Homer provides a cluster of similes. The Trojans are likened to a destructive fire and to hawks bearing death to smaller birds (737 and 755). The Greeks, in contrast, are described with weakened forms of each simile; the Ajaxes are like a wounded boar that manages to defend himself although he is unable to attack and also like a wooded ridge that holds back a river (725 and 747). In both comparisons the item describing the Greeks is solid but nonaggressive: the boar and the dam stand firm, and the object parallel to the Trojans keeps attacking. Even those who are dragging the body are described as mules that struggle steadily to pull a large timber down a rugged path (742). The very ending lines of the book point to the hard battle to come:

Beneath the press of Aeneas and Hector the youths of Achaea,
shrieking cries of doom, fled and forgot their fighting.
Many beautiful weapons fell around and about the trench
as the Greeks fled. There was no rest from war.

(758–61)
Yet despite of the appearance of a closely balanced battle, the narrative has begun to move forcefully in a single direction; the second line of book 18 reports Antilochus’ arrival at the tent of Achilles. From this point on there is no release for Hector, who continues to fight bravely even though he is facing an invincible enemy.

Book 17 has presented the Achaeans growing stronger, and Hector still strong but unable to break their line; the similes have been carefully crafted to reinforce this impression, and they carry significant weight in organizing the series of repeated typological actions from which this book is built. In units 1, 2, 4, and 5 the similes serve to highlight the dominant hero: in order, Menelaus, Ajax, Automedon, and Menelaus. Although Ajax is the protective agent who continually holds the Trojans away from the body, the action in each unit centers on a single hero, and the similes mark that hero as the central character. In addition, in these units the hero who has been introduced with weak similes for a warrior is likened to a lion or a boar at the end of the scene; in this way the poet constructs a repeated pattern of traditional simile subjects that emphasizes the growing strength of the Greeks and the developing weakness of the Trojans. Throughout the Greeks are often described in similes where they are paralleled to forces that so drastically outweigh the strength of their opponents that there is virtually no contest: a whirlwind against an olive shoot, lions against heifers and bulls, a man against an ox, vultures against geese, and eagles against hares. There are only three similes for Trojans prior to unit 6 (versus thirteen for the Greeks), and they are by comparison less focused on battle ability, in one case stressing the noise that the Trojans make rather than their strength.

There also seems to be careful coordination in the use of similes in order to invite comparison to earlier scenes. For example, Menelaus is weaker than Ajax and incapable of fending off Hector’s attack by himself. When he stands over Patroclus’ body, he is described as a cow over her calf (4), but Ajax in the same posture is described as a lioness over her young (133). Similarly, at the ends of these two units Menelaus retreats like a lion before dogs and men, while Ajax in the parallel position advances like a boar scattering dogs and men (109 versus 281). When Menelaus kills his opponent in the first unit, the Greeks are beginning to show strength and he is described by a simile of a lion who has killed a heifer (61); Automedon has the power of Zeus behind him and is far enough along in the development of Greek power in the fourth unit that Homer presents him as a lion having killed a bull (542).
Only in the final unit does the poet change this pattern. When the Greeks acknowledge that they must fight hard to protect Menelaus and Meriones as they carry the body away, equivalent numbers of similes appear for Greeks and Trojans, and their subjects become suitable in topic and extension for warriors. As was shown in regard to the cluster of similes preceding the Catalogue in book 2, the full series of closing similes in this book carefully reflects the developments in the narrative. Together the four similes of destructive nature (725, 737, 747, and 755) focus on the clash of opposing forces and tend to give a momentary and fragile advantage to the Trojans; the one simile of nature at peace describes Menelaus and Meriones. Through such consistency the cluster of five similes in forty-six lines provides an impressive poetic background drawn from a wide variety of similemes to summarize memorably the situation prior to Achilles’ reentrance into battle.

Several of the topics seem to evolve through the book or at least are incorporated into the sixth unit, where subjects that have described the Greeks are applied to the Trojans. These similes momentarily prop up the Trojans, though they are really on the verge of destroying themselves by arousing Achilles. Automedon is a vulture swooping on geese (460), and Menelaus, an eagle killing a hare (674). The Trojans receive an equally strong simile when they close the book: they are compared to hawks bringing death to starlings and daws (755). The same direction is clear in lion similes: Menelaus and Ajax are both described as successful lions (61, 133, and 281), but at the end of the book Menelaus is like a lion who is driven away by dogs and men (657, cf. 61) and the twin Ajaxes are like a wounded boar (728). Thus, striking sets of parallels throughout the book show that later similes are orchestrated to produce responsive variations on earlier comparisons. With such an intense clustering of similes the poet expects his audience to recall this moment when he returns to it in book 18.

There this design continues the scene that closed book 17. The similes are drawn from the same families: Hector is like a fire, just as the Trojans were earlier (18.154; cf. 17.736); at 18.161 Hector has become a lion, the constant simile of the Greeks in book 17, but he is now a lion who fights so strongly that he cannot be driven off by shepherds. But as soon as Achilles lends his support to the rescue of Patroclus, he attracts the fire image—indeed, the strongest fire simile in books 17 and 18: a gleam rises from his head as it would from a fire which rages through a city that summons its allies for help (18.207; cf. 17.737). Not only has this subject rallied the Greek
forces throughout book 17, but the simile in book 18 prefigures the downfall of Troy.  

The final test of the care with which Homer has placed and developed his similes in book 17 is the identification of places where the tradition would have suggested a simile yet Homer has chosen alternatives. The most obvious location for similes in the book would be as marks for the entrance of a warrior. This main warrior in the series of scenes that make up book 17 is Ajax, who shores up the Greek lines in each of the six units of the book. The narrative, however, is not about Ajax but about the series of Greek successes that ensure the capture and protection of Patroclus’ body. As a result, while Ajax does receive some similes, they are constructed to emphasize his role within the individual scene. When he first enters the narrative to stop Hector from mutilating the body of Patroclus, he is introduced with a short simile. Menelaus, however, is the principal figure in the first unit, and his actions of defense and retreat appropriately receive four of the seven similes, all extended. When Ajax becomes the main character in the second unit, he receives a long simile to describe his position over the body; this simile also emphasizes the parallel to the earlier actions of Menelaus. As Ajax strengthens the lines and motivates a successful resistance, he is also described by a long simile. Yet, though he benefits the Greek cause throughout the rest of the book, no simile calls attention to him until the final unit, where both Ajaxes are described as part of the retreat. Clearly book 17 is not designed to be the aristeia of Ajax; it is the introduction to the coming aristeia of Achilles, and all individual scenes in this book lead to this missing hero who is about to return to lead the Greeks against Troy.

Hector keeps entering the battle, at first victorious, but increasingly unsuccessful. His diminishing strength might be expected to attract similes, but Homer has not chosen this method of highlighting Hector—a lack that may be especially noticeable when Hector puts on the armor of Patroclus. However, similes are at best only an indirect means of drawing attention to the single event. Hector’s increasing weakness is brought forcefully into focus by his repeated setbacks as well as the ominous words of Zeus on seeing Hector in Achilles’ armor, his promise to the horses that he will never let Hector capture them, his change of heart when he sends Athena to encourage the Greeks, and his lifting of the darkness over the battle scene in response to Ajax’s prayer. Hector receives only two of the large number of similes in this book even though his declining fortune is one of the book’s major themes.
When he first enters, he is described by a short, traditional simile; when he is last seen fighting the Ajaxes for the control of the body, he and Aeneas share a simile (88 and 755). But that is all. It seems to have been important to Homer that Hector’s performance and limitations be portrayed directly rather than by comparisons—probably to prepare for the rapidly approaching confrontation of two very different champions in book 22.

And, of course, many other heroes enter the battle for their brief moment in this book. Because each of these warriors is prominent in his small unit of the poem, each individual could have received a simile on entering or even similes for variation within the repeated basic type scene, but the poet remains firmly focused on the development of the greater themes and ignores these smaller opportunities in order to concentrate on the series of Greek victories.

There are a number of divine entrances to the battlefield. Three times Apollo tries to aid the Trojans by adopting a mortal disguise, but this intervention never receives a simile. Only the mission of Athena is described with an extended simile (547)—appropriately, because the narrative states directly that the mind of Zeus shifts toward the Greeks at this moment.

Numerous other customary opportunities for similes are passed over. There is much emotion in this book, especially Menelaus wondering whether he should stand against the advancing Hector, Glaucus rebuking Hector, Hector boasting to the Trojans and promising them half of the spoils if they will take the body of Patroclus, a series of encouragers trying to rouse the troops on both sides, Automedon in frustration lashing the horses who refuse to move, and Antilochus reacting to the news that Patroclus has been slain. Yet these are only minor elements in the development of the major two-sided, mutually reinforcing theme that provides the dominant design of the narrative in book 17: the increasing power of the Greeks and the corresponding weakness of the Trojans. Both narrative and similes focus steadily on this design.

**ILIAD, BOOK 16: SIMILES FOR COMPLEXITY**

Book 16 of the *Iliad* is best described as a house of mirrors: actions often have a double image, but one image is the reverse of the other; nothing is quite what it appears, and characters discover the truth only when it is too late. Each main character proposes a solution to the critical problems on the battlefield, only to discover that his scheme was impossible from the beginning.
Patroclus enters battle with the intent of saving the Greeks, but that goal is unreachable; Achilles prays for Patroclus’ success and safety but is instantly denied; Achilles wants to make the Trojans think that he has returned to the battle, but they are not fooled. Although Sarpedon is slain by Patroclus and the Greeks strip him of his armor, he receives a triumphant, miraculous burial; as the Trojans retreat, Patroclus hopes to take the city of Troy but is killed. The poet is telling a story filled with illusions.

The action of the book is built upon the misconceived stratagem of Achilles. Since book 11 he has observed the battlefield with concern and careful attention. Although he removed himself from the army awaiting rewards from Agamemnon, he is unable to ignore the Greek defeat. At this point the ominous theme of the misguided plan is heard for the first time. Achilles, seeing a chariot go by carrying one of the wounded, calls to Patroclus:

Immediately he called to his comrade Patroclus,
summoning him from beside the ship. Hearing he came from the tent
like the god Ares, and this indeed was the beginning of evil for him.

(11.602–4)

Two conflicting forces begin to rend the soul of Achilles: his desire for uncompromised heroic glory stands firmly opposed to his need to aid comrades who are dying on the battlefield. Achilles, frustrated in his isolation, sends Patroclus to get information about the situation of the Greeks, an act that reveals the separation of his more humane Patroclean half from the Achillean part. Patroclus, though he realizes that he must support Achilles’ strategy for maximizing personal honor, hears Nestor’s gloomy list of Greek casualties and takes time to help the wounded Eurypylus. When he returns to the Myrmidon camp at the beginning of book 16, he is overwhelmed by his awareness of human suffering—a very different reaction from the strained and stoic insularity of Achilles. As a result, once Patroclus reinforces feelings that had already been awakened in Achilles, the hero is driven to satisfy his opposed yearnings through a stratagem. This scheme originates in Nestor’s suggestion that Patroclus enter the battle wearing Achilles’ armor.

The disguise is futile; the initial success of the plan seems due far more to Patroclus’ prowess as a warrior than to any deception. In addition, the device is flawed. It is difficult to see how Patroclus can win a meaningful respite for the Greeks when he is ordered to advance only to a vaguely specified limit and then to return to the ships. One must wonder why the Trojans will not
simply sweep back to regain the area they have been forced to abandon, in
which case there will have been no solution and the problem will return to
haunt Achilles the next day. If this plan does work, it is uncertain how Patro-
clus will manage to avoid attracting the glory of the exploit to himself, thus
lessening the honor of Achilles — even though Achilles has expressly crafted
the plan to protect his own honor. Thus there is a fatal uncertainty in deter-
mining that point on the battlefield at which Patroclus will have offered relief
to the Trojans but will not yet have begun to take honor from Achilles. Achil-
les is explicit about this in giving his friend orders:

Once you have driven them from the ships, come back again.
If the loud-thundering husband of Hera allows you to win glory,
do not seek to fight against the war-loving Trojans
without me. You will deprive me of honor.
And do not, exulting in war and slaughter
as you kill Trojans, lead on toward Troy.

(87–92)

The last sentence contains the major problem. In the heat of the battle, Patro-
clus — with the aid of Zeus — ignores this limit (16.684–91); one must ques-
tion whether any warrior in the confusion of battle could identify such an
imaginary point.

Given the misguided plan and conflicting motives, the main characters in
book 16 base their hopes, actions, and words on a construct that is at best
chancy, and at worst, unworkable. The poet uses numerous techniques to
keep his audience clearly informed of the forces operating in the narrative —
the intentions of Zeus are directly reported, characters often bluntly criti-
cize the projections of other characters, and normally effective items in the
narrative are found to have a limited usefulness.

The book falls into four units:

1. 1–256: The devising of Achilles’ plan and preparation for its execution
2. 257–418: The initial success of Patroclus
3. 419–683: The death of Sarpedon
4. 684–876: The death of Patroclus

In a book where foreshadowing is so crucial, it is not unexpected that these
units are not sharply discrete; rather, each leads easily to the next. Events that
seem to be moving toward a brilliant conclusion for Patroclus inexorably
guide him to death — as foretold in book 11. Achilles’ plan and its preparation lead directly to the success of Patroclus; his achievement is emblematized in the death of Sarpedon — but such victories lure Patroclus into overextending his aristeia. Similes play a major role in foreshadowing what is going to happen, despite the best hopes of the participants. In fact, several repeated simile subjects are woven into events in order to provide foreshadowing in a narrative that seems contradictory or confused.

The first unit (1–256) opens with a surprise: Patroclus returns to camp weeping so openly that Achilles seeks an explanation. The surprising quality of this opening scene is most strikingly conveyed through the similes. First, Patroclus sheds tears like a mountain spring pouring water down a cliff (3–4) and Achilles compares him to:

a little girl
who runs alongside her mother and asks to be picked up;
she clutches at her cloak and pulls her back even though she is in a rush, and the child weeping looks up at her until she is picked up.

(7–10)

The second simile is unusual for a warrior in any case, but even the first is strange for this setting because the break from the customary tone of the battlefield is so strong. The first line of the book is “The others were fighting around the well-benched ship . . . ” This is what Achilles has prayed for since book 9; the fighting has now surrounded the Greeks, his comrades are being slain, and the Trojans are about to set fire to the ships. Achilles expects to be vindicated by this bloody, highly public demonstration that the Greeks cannot succeed or even endure without him. Yet at this supposedly victorious moment, Patroclus returns to Achilles deeply distraught — a surprise emphasized by the unexpectedly peaceful pair of similes.

The dark-watering spring appeared before at the beginning of book 9, where the situation of the Greeks was sufficiently desperate for Agamemnon to send an embassy to Achilles. In book 16, when the situation of the Greeks is far worse, Homer repeats the simile to introduce a second moment when Achilles receives urgent appeals to save the Greek army, and then he immediately reinforces its peaceful tone in the simile of the little girl.

There is a truth contained in these two early nonviolent similes. Patroclus fights bravely but is not adequate for the role that Achilles has devised; Patroclus cannot lift the Pelian ash spear, he is limited when the mortal trace
horse Pedasus is harnessed to his team of divine horses, and — most notably — Zeus denies Achilles’ prayer for his safe return.

It is thus appropriate that Patroclus receives unwarlike similes at the beginning of the book. With equal accuracy the two other extended similes in this first unit describe the Myrmidons as warriors. They arm like ravenous wolves who have devoured a stag and now vomit up blood while lapping water from a spring (156), and they stand in close formation like a wall that a man builds to shield himself from the winds (212). Throughout the Iliad the Myrmidons are presented as a strong fighting force, and these similes reinforce that characterization.

The conscious contrast in tone between these sets of similes, peaceful versus warlike, is emphasized by the wolves’ befouling of the “dark spring” (160), recalling the first simile describing Patroclus (3).

The single short simile in the catalogue of Myrmidon leaders echoes the contrast between warriors and children (192), but there seems no intent to belittle the ability of Eudorus. Such a simile provides variation in several catalogues.

The second unit of book 16 (257–418) begins with the initial charge of Patroclus and the Myrmidons against the Trojans — an unqualified success for the Greeks and hopeful evidence that the device of Achilles is working. The narrative is shaped by progressive stages of the Trojan withdrawal. First, the Myrmidons advance and engage; when the Trojans see Patroclus, they are shaken and fall back. He kills Pyraichmes and puts out the fire on the Greek ships; this leads to a full-scale Trojan retreat. Then there is a list of killings by individual Myrmidons, testifying to Patroclus’ success in rallying the Greeks.

At the end of the unit (380–418) the focus narrows to the flight of Hector and the victories of Patroclus. Given that Hector has been viewed as the proper opponent for Achilles from the moment in book 1 when Achilles insisted that only his strength defended the Greeks (1.240–44), the immediate pairing with Hector raises Patroclus’ status. In addition, at the end of this section Hector flees as Patroclus seeks to trap the Trojans in a flanking action, penning many of them back against the ships; appropriately, the final lines list Trojans killed by Patroclus (415–18). The movement of the unit is carefully constructed: Patroclus emerges from the camp, kills a single Trojan, and extinguishes the fire on the ships; the Greeks advance; Patroclus pursues them and slaughters a series of enemy warriors. In this victorious charge Patroclus maintains both aims of Achilles’ self-contradictory plan: respite
for the Greeks and preservation of Hector as Achilles’ special adversary. Yet Patroclus yearns for battle, and Hector’s flight is a significant mark of Patroclus’ success — thus an unavoidably appealing temptation. Here the two warriors only cross paths, but the conclusion of the book, fatal for Patroclus and the cause of shattering remorse for Achilles, comes into view.

During the second unit, however, the audience is not encouraged to devote its attention to such deep strands in the narrative. The story focuses on the glorious advance of Patroclus and the Myrmidons, and the similes for the most part support this theme. Achilles’ troops stream forth from the ships like wrathful wasps defending their young against a traveler who unwillingly arouses them (259), and later they are likened to wolves setting upon defenseless lambs or kids scattered through the witlessness of their shepherd (352). The first simile is the strongest simile derived from the insect simileme: the wasps, incited prior to the arrival of their victim, are ready to defend their homes and families. The wolves in the second simile are murderous and ravening, and there is also an unavoidable allusion to the earlier simile from unit 1 (156), the strongest of its category. Both similes powerfully support Homer’s characterization of the Myrmidons as tough and able warriors. Yet at the same time the opponents are weak: the anonymous and unsuspecting traveler and helpless sheep and goats. In each simile their ignorance of danger emphasizes the Trojans’ resourcelessness before the fury of the Myrmidon attack.

Three other similes in this unit, however, are ambivalent; they not only emphasize the success of the Greek effort but also reveal the events of this book as inextricable parts of the plan of Zeus. At 297 the Greeks’ sense of relief is compared to the clearing of a stormy sky. Not only is their relief ample and welcome; it is also a complete and almost miraculous change from their previous situation. No wonder: the change is caused by Zeus, who controls the storm. Similarly, at 364 the Trojan withdrawal from the Greek ships sounds like the coming storm when Zeus sends a whirlwind. The most complicated of these weather similes describes the roar of Hector’s horses as they retreat (384): a storm pours down rain until rivers flood and torrents ruin the fields of men; Zeus has caused this storm because he is angry at men who give false judgments with no fear of the gods’ vengeance. False judgments could include: Patroclus pursuing Hector, Achilles’ proper enemy, thus entering upon the beginning stages of the confrontation which will destroy him; the folly of Achilles’ device; the futility of Achilles’ insistence on honor — but, most significantly, the unintended completion of Zeus’ plan.

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The final simile of this unit (406) solidifies the impression of Patroclus’ dominance. He kills two Trojans whose deaths are described individually and then massacres a list of opponents. The second individual killed is Thestor, who cowers in his chariot; Patroclus reaches over the chariot rim to spear him and lift him out of the chariot:

\[
\text{just as when a man sitting on a jutting rock draws a sacred fish from sea to shore with a line and gleaming bronze hook (406–8)}
\]

This simile makes the deed look easy. Given that fish similes have been used frequently enough in the Homeric poems to be regarded as derived from a separate simileme, they do have varied tones that can be established. Usually they picture the situation of helpless victims, the strongest of which shows a gluttonous dolphin pursuing smaller fish (21.22). Book 16 has the only fish simile that presents a lyrical scene; it is the gentlest of its family and the one least focused on the death of the fish. On the surface the simile does make Patroclus’ action seem effortless, just as the narrative does, with its unelaborated listing of the slain; but this is the only simile in unit 2 that is a small, peaceful country scene, not involved with large-scale weather events, swarms of angry insects, or vicious animals. In addition, it is the only simile in this unit that describes the fighting of Patroclus, thus the third simile in the book to describe Patroclus after the similes of the “dark-watering spring” and the little girl (3 and 7). These similes present Patroclus as less of a warrior than his comrades. Even though he slaughters many Trojans, his similes present the events as in a mirror where the images are major distortions of the crucial realities in the narrative. In this case, the audience realizes that the warrior receives a simile which could be honorific but which in its extension reflects both his inability to measure up to the Myrmidons and his limitations under Zeus’ plan. The illusory image adds to the threatening atmosphere gathering around the unwitting Patroclus.

In addition, each simile in unit 2 is placed to mark progressive stages of the narrative. Immediately at the beginning of the unit (259) the simile of the wasps underlines the Myrmidons’ ferocity and their effectiveness as a fighting force. In the next segment (268–305) the Greeks begin their attack by putting out the fire on the ships; the conclusion of the passage is marked by the simile of Zeus removing the dense cloud, accompanied by the statement that
the Trojans were not yet driven back. Then (306–67) after a list of successful killings by the Greeks Hector realizes that the battle has turned decisively. Prior to this report stands the simile of the wolves (352) and the statement that the Trojans began to think of flight. The simile of Zeus’ storm describing the noise of the Greeks attacking across the trench follows immediately (364). Thus this segment concludes with two similes: wolves for the Greeks and the gathering storm for the Trojans. The final part of this unit (367–418) narrows the focus to the two heroes: as Hector flees, his horses sound like the roar of a rushing river that destroys the works of men (384); Patroclus performs several easy killings, summed up in the simile of the peaceful fisherman (406) and a list of others killed. Both similes undercut the heroes’ motives and actions.

Unit 3 (419–683) continues the mirror design: the more the battle centers on Patroclus’ success, the more the similes emphasize the role of Zeus. Homer intensifies the focus on Patroclus by highlighting Sarpedon as an equally matched opponent. As the two close in, they are compared to vultures screaming and clawing at each other (428); this simile’s subject and placement are traditional for warriors entering battle. The emphasis on the two warriors is immediately reinforced as the narrative moves to Olympus for a dialogue between Zeus and Hera; though Zeus knows that it is fated for Sarpedon to be killed by Patroclus, he considers saving his life. Hera counsels him to consider the potential chaos that would erupt if all gods were to favor their offspring in this way, and Zeus limits himself to the provision of an honorable burial, shedding raindrops of blood on the ground to mark this honor. Sarpedon is thus targeted as Patroclus’ assigned victim, and the two heroes join in a vignette built directly on the now closely linked themes of the book: the self-destructive triumph of Patroclus and the dominance of the plan of Zeus.

The battle between the two is briefly told. As Sarpedon falls he receives two similes: he is likened to a tree that men in the mountains fell to be a ship’s timber and to a bull who is killed by a lion in the midst of the herd (482 and 487). The clear decline in Sarpedon’s prospects is marked by the shift from the two evenly matched vultures to the fallen tree and the easily overpowered bull. The first simile is a scene from daily life in which loss and destruction are combined with a sense of men’s progress and purposefulness. Patroclus parallels the shipbuilders who cut down a tree for a determined purpose; the simile provides other means of felling trees that emphasize destruction and confusion such as wild windstorms or fire, but these are suppressed. The
choice of this alternative adds a note of thoughtful planning that is appropriate to the calculations of Achilles and the controlling plan of Zeus. In contrast, the second simile, the lion, presents a scene of brutality in nature. The bull is in the midst of the herd; the elements of the protecting shepherd, men, dogs, and sheltering farmstead from the full simile are passed over. Every item in this simile emphasizes the lion as the disrupter of a peaceful and ordered herd, an animal who uses sheer force to destroy his enemy; there is even an added note of bloodiness when the bull dies caught in the jaws of the lion. This simile stresses raw instinct, not calculation; such natural enthusiasm will cause Patroclus to cross Achilles’ invisible barrier on the battlefield and attack the walls of Troy.

Though Patroclus’ attack results from a variety of motivations, several of which seem to run at cross-purposes, there is also a single fate driving him into the deadly position from which he will be unable to retreat. All of the naturalness and generosity, the tragic greatness, and the futile excesses of Achilles and Patroclus are intertwined in the small vignette centered on the battle with Sarpedon; the three similes (vultures, tree cutters, and lion) accompanying this scene focus directly on the warriors and reveal through resonances from the tradition the wide spectrum of counterforces active in the narrative.

In the remainder of unit 3 the killing of Sarpedon could lead directly to the anticipated confrontation between Patroclus and Hector. Patroclus is described by a simile appropriate to a warrior, a hawk pursuing daws and starlings (582). Hector withdraws before his charge with a simile describing the length of a javelin throw and identifying it as an activity suited to either peace or war (589). It might seem that the battle between Patroclus and Hector is imminent, but this expectation is rapidly dissipated by fights among other heroes with vaunts and boasts, slayings of minor warriors, and futilely cast weapons.

The scene ends in a general battle over Sarpedon’s body, which cannot be recognized because of the weapons, blood, and dust covering it from head to toe (638–40). This confused battle is described by a second simile of woodcutters that injects another note of lyrical nature into a scene of brutal and gory fighting (633). This time the following simile does not provide a contrast. It is common for warriors to be compared to insects—in more warlike contexts, bees or wasps. Here the insects are flies, and this basic subject is extended by a series of details that make this scene the most peaceful and nonthreatening image drawn from the insect simile: these flies only buzz as they circle...
a milk pail; the season is spring, when the milk is plentiful (641).\footnote{110} The simile presents a scene of nature at its day-to-day and most humdrum pace; there is no attack or destruction, no threat, no disruption of order. All is peace.

The development of the similes in unit 3 shows a clear pattern. Three similes (two of which are violent and warlike in tone) are placed at the beginning of the unit to characterize the two warriors as they confront each other (428, 482, and 487). Then in the middle there are two juxtaposed similes (one warlike, the other ambiguous) that focus on the actions of Hector and the Achilles-substitute (582 and 589). In the final lines there are two more similes that seem wildly incongruent with the bloody actions they are describing (633 and 641); but this tone is proper for a scene in which the human actions and motivations are increasingly undercut and rendered unnatural by the controlling plan of Zeus.

Patroclus strips Sarpedon of his armor—customarily the sign of one hero’s domination over another and the mark of supreme honor, but once again the view is twofold. The divinely ordered, honorific burial of Sarpedon demonstrates the ineffectuality of Patroclus’ wishes. He has earned honor in the battle, but Sarpedon is carried away for anointing and burial by two divinities. As this burial in his homeland among family and friends is awarded to the defeated Sarpedon, the self-infatuated Patroclus enters unit 4 undaunted on his mad course toward death. Achilles specifically ordered Patroclus not to attack Troy’s walls because he feared that a god would confront him. Patroclus, however, has all the natural motivations of a warrior, and in addition, this unit (684–867) opens with an explicit statement that Zeus dominates the mind of Patroclus—driving him toward Troy:

> Patroclus shouting an order to his horses and to Automedon pursued the Trojans and the Lycians, and was blinded, a fool—if he had kept the word of the son of Peleus, he surely would have fled the evil fate of black death.

But always the mind of Zeus is more powerful than that of men: it terrifies the brave man and easily takes away his victory whenever he is roused to fight.

\footnote{111} (16.684–91)

The irony is deep when the first simile in this section equates Patroclus to a god (705); he is incited by Zeus and opposed by Apollo. He will need every bit of that godlike equivalency to save his life.
Of the seven similes in this final unit, three are short. This is striking in itself because throughout the first three units of book 16 Homer chooses extended similes solely to offer varied perspectives on the developing narrative—with one exception. Similes still retain an important function in the final unit, but their role diminishes as facts limit characters from holding different views of the same action. The device of Achilles fails, the hope of Patroclus to be a light of salvation to the suffering Greeks is lost, and Hector’s boasts are misguided. The death of Patroclus removes all ambiguity; clarity and direct expression replace the complexity of the previous units.

When Apollo rouses Hector to confront Patroclus, the audience should expect that the battle between the two champions is near—but, as usual in this book, expectations are stimulated only to be disappointed. Hector encourages his charioteer, Cebriones, to drive him toward Patroclus, but Patroclus cuts the attack short by striking the charioteer with a stone. He falls “like a diver” (742), and Patroclus boasts over his body. The simile is short but does recall the simile of the fisherman at 406, where the deadly action, the slaying of a charioteer, is made to seem simple and uncomplicated—even fun. Patroclus immediately picks up this tone by developing the subject of the simile in his boasting words:

Behold! The man is nimble—see how easily he dives.
If he were anywhere on the teeming sea,
he would satisfy many by diving after oysters,
leaping from his ship even if the sea were stormy—
so easily now does he dive to the plain from behind his horses.
Indeed there are divers among the Trojans.

(745–49)

The mocking tone about another’s death as well as the recall of the earlier simile seems inappropriate at the moment when Patroclus should most remember the warning of Achilles, the signs of his limited ability, and the danger to which he is exposing himself. But boasting is the prerogative of a warrior, and Patroclus is now one and will soon play the full role to its end. In many ways Homer has structured the narrative to show that Patroclus grows to be a worthy opponent for Hector, not least of all in the next similes, where Patroclus is compared to a lion or boar risking its life.

The twenty-seven-line scene over the body of Cebriones contains three long similes that underline the complexities in the final contest. Patroclus
rushes toward the body like a wounded lion whose strength has brought him to death (752).\textsuperscript{116} The topic is traditional for the attacking warrior, but seldom is it extended to show the wounded lion destroying himself by his own lust for conflict.\textsuperscript{117} Patroclus and Hector then join in battle like evenly matched lions contending over a slain stag; both lions hunger for the prize and are driven by thoughts of victory (756).\textsuperscript{118} Again the items to be compared are carefully delineated. The fallen charioteer is a minor warrior—thus, a stag, not a match for the lions’ strength. In this simile there is no foreshadowing as in the previous simile of the lion whose desire for battle will destroy it. Here the fight is between equal opponents—equal in the sense that both are deluded in their dreams of the eventual outcome. At this point the combat between the two champions is again avoided as the battle becomes general. The heroes and armies attack each other fiercely like two winds clashing in a mountain forest; this is a violent, noisy storm with rushing winds and shattering branches (765).\textsuperscript{119} In fact, throughout this book the similes describing the activities of the armies—principally the Myrmidons but also the Trojans—present the strongest versions of their similemes: the Myrmidons are likened to wolves, a tightly built wall, wasps, and a storm sent by Zeus; the Trojan army shouts as loudly as the sound of a huge storm.

These three extended similes (752, 756, and 765) emphasize the fatally crippled nature of Patroclus’ campaign, even though on the surface he appears irresistible; Hector and Patroclus are equally vulnerable—both pawns in the dominant plan of Zeus and in the uncompromising nature of the battle to which they have exposed themselves. There is little illusion in these similes. No longer are there comparisons to fishermen or divers; by the end of the book one of these champions will die, and the similes state the seriousness of the situation clearly even though the heroes remain oblivious to danger.

The death of Patroclus is meant to be an amazing event. Three agents are involved: first Apollo so dazes him that Euphorbus, a minor warrior, is able to spear him from behind. At the start of this passage Patroclus is portrayed as continuing on his victorious course by a repetition of the short formulaic simile “like a god” (786; cf. 707); this simile occurs at the moment when Patroclus attacks Troy’s walls—ironically, the moment when Apollo strikes him. The irony is marked in the text:

But when he rushed forward for the fourth time like a god, then did the end of life appear for you, Patroclus.

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For Phoebus confronted you in the strong conflict, 
a terrifying god. But Patroclus did not see him approaching through the 
turmoil. 

(16.786–89)

Hector then wounds Patroclus, who is compared to a boar overwhelmed by 
a lion as the two fight alone on a mountain peak (823). Again, these two ani-
mals are close to being equal in strength and are common alternatives in the 
simileme, but lions generally dominate other animals.120 Boasting over the 
dying warrior, Hector imagines Achilles’ original command: 

Do not return to the hollow ships, Patroclus master of the horses, 
until you have split the cloak of Hector, the slayer of men, 
about his chest and made it red with his blood. 

(839–41)

Again, delusion. Achilles specifically prohibited Patroclus to act as his replace-
ment; in addition, it shows that Hector believes Patroclus to be equal to that 
role.121 Both are untrue. 

Only Patroclus in his final moments states the truth: Hector was not 
the person who slew him, nor could twenty Hectors have done it; Fate and 
Apollo among divine forces and Euphorbus were responsible for his death, 
with Hector as a poor third. Patroclus through his own desires and actions 
has caused his own death by overextending himself and not heeding the com-
mands of Achilles; he was not qualified to take the city of Troy, and the gods 
themselves stood in his way. But then all of book 16 is filled with distorted 
views, and expectations have usually resulted in the reverse of projections. 
Thus the two heroes have fought as bold, valiant warriors; they have both 
shared in a simile of a lion fighting and finally overpowering a boar. But as 
closely matched combatants they are also parallel to one another in that both 
have been involved in a greater plan and have allowed themselves to be infatu-
ated by motivations that prove self-destructive. 

Hector offers proof of this self-imposed yet natural delusion in his final 
words: 

Patroclus, why do you prophesy sheer death for me? 
Who knows whether Achilles, the son of fair-haired Thetis, 
will not die first struck by my spear? 

(859–62)
Hector’s last act in the book is his futile pursuit of Automedon, who escapes because he is driving immortal horses; even when Hector undertakes a task inherently impossible for any mortal, he does not correctly assess his ability.

The design of the similes in book 16 is difficult to define because they arise in a variety of situations and contain a bewildering profusion of subjects. In addition, though the narrative focuses principally on one hero, the structure of this book is not easy to outline because of the relentless forward motion of the action; each event leads directly to the next even though the results usually differ from the participants’ expectations. There are no sharply discrete units within the book; rather, the action flows easily from unit to unit, expectations are created that are disappointed in both characters and audience, and no one is ever able to halt in mid-action to find a fresh starting point or to obtain a clear vision. The failure of Patroclus is, in fact, the result of the flawed plan of Achilles. The device with the exchanged armor does lead to the initial success of the Greeks and to the encouragement of Patroclus—both of which then convert his humanitarian motives for fighting into the pursuit of glory appropriate to a heroic warrior. Patroclus is never more himself than when he accepts the challenge offered by Sarpedon and later strips the fallen enemy’s armor as his trophy. In attacking the walls of Troy he moves quickly and competently, seeking ultimate triumph. It is all understandable—and, at the same time, fatal in view of his limitations. As each unit moves to the next, it is impossible for the human participants to appreciate that the action is leading in directions that they may not want—because they all feel that everything is going well. Given that the narrative is seamless in terms of mortal causation and perceptions, the similes—especially their extensions—are a major device that Homer employs to mark meaningful stages in its development for the audience.

The book is closely focused on one main problem; the inherent inability of Patroclus to play his assigned role in Achilles’ plan. Yet this is too simple a statement for a story that is so complex in its telling—and similes make their major contribution in providing significant enrichment. In general terms the characters in the book stake both their own lives and the lives of others on their judgments of events; yet the plan of Achilles collapses, Patroclus’ natural desires seduce and mislead him even to his death, and the constructions and boasts of Hector are hopelessly wrong. Each crucial act in the book has dark implications that are seldom known to the participants until death finally compels them to accept the truth.
Thus book 16 is built on discrepancies between the surface appearance of events and their deeper meanings. The audience is made aware of the disparity between appearance and reality in the first lines of the book, where Achilles fails to understand Patroclus’ tears. The principal means for indicating continuing misperceptions are the characters’ own ill-judged or misconceived words, the poet’s indication of the direction in which events are actually moving, scenes in which the will of Zeus becomes clear, direct comments on the wishes of characters, and similes.

Several further details show how carefully the poet has designed the similes of book 16 to support the major narrative themes, most notably the strongly contrasting tones between the individual similes. This book contains some of the most peaceful scenes of everyday life in the Homeric poems, along with several of the most violent images of nature as a destructive force. The similes centered on the little girl, the fisherman, and the flies around the milk pail are extended by lines that remove any note of threat and create a picture of normal, day-to-day life (7, 406, and 641). In the last two the similemes are sufficiently traditional that there are parallels against which the audience can measure the individual simile (fish and insects).

In addition, at least two themes developed within the similes show a unified conception at the base of the four units, thus enabling events from one unit to comment on parallel events. The “storm” theme is most notable because it is closely associated with the plan of Zeus. The Myrmidons initially close ranks as tightly as a wall intended to keep out the wind’s might; in the next unit Zeus drives away the clouds and clears the sky as the Greeks beat back the Trojan threat; then Zeus brings on a storm as the Trojans flee back over the trench; and finally, in the strongest simile of the group, Hector’s horses sound like a river swollen by the rains of Zeus as it destroys the works of men (212, 297, 364, and 384). As the strength of the storm and the detailing of its destructiveness are increased from the description of the shielding wall to the undermining of men’s efforts, so also the rout of the Trojans spreads.

Similarly, the topic of the attacking lion is developed throughout the book as Patroclus draws nearer to his death. When he kills Sarpedon, he is compared to a lion crushing a bull in his jaws; then, as the expected battle with Hector approaches, Patroclus charges the fallen Cebriones like a wounded lion attacking a farmstead where he will die, fights Hector like a lion vying with another lion over a carcass, and then loses to Hector like a boar over-
whelmed by a lion (487, 752, 756, and 823). The relative strength of simile opponents increases as the quality of the actual warriors becomes greater. In the case of Hector and Patroclus the close parity between them is not only in their strength; they both will meet death by being pulled into a contest that is beyond their abilities — and neither realizes it.

Further, there are cross-references through similes. The most precise is that of the dark spring describing the tears of Patroclus in the first simile of the book; it is immediately associated with the humane instinct he displays in proposing to enter the battle on behalf of the Greeks. Appropriately, the first simile describing the Myrmidons as they prepare for battle has the wolves belch forth blood and gore into a “dark spring” (160–62). Already the humane motivation of Patroclus is being sullied by the warlike motivations of the community. The final simile of the book describes a lion overmastering a boar, both of whom are fighting for a spring (823); at this point Patroclus finally loses all connection with the spring.

Similarly, soldiers fighting in the midst of the battlefield are described as insects, angry wasps; when they are involved in the battle over Sarpedon’s body, where Zeus has removed all opportunity of their success, they are also like flies buzzing harmlessly (259 and 641). Sarpedon is compared to a tree felled by shipwrights to be a ship’s timber; later these woodcutters appear, but Homer omits the purpose for their work; at this moment Zeus makes Patroclus forget the stratagem of Achilles and turn toward the battlements of Troy in an impossible quest for glory (482 and 633).

Finally, the ambiguity and confusion prominent in this book are enhanced by the use of sequential similes. As Patroclus kills Sarpedon, he is compared in two juxtaposed similes to shipwrights and a bloodthirsty lion (482 and 487); the qualities of both are involved in this one action, but while Patroclus has been instructed to craft an artfully designed respite for the Greeks, he will soon recognize that only the forces emphasized by the second simile will determine the emerging action. When Cebriones is struck from his chariot and falls like a diver, Patroclus develops the simile into an arrogant vaunt trivializing his death but then is immediately likened to the wounded lion who will die (742 and 752). Together each pair of similes points to the hopeless situation of a fatally limited man enthusiastically pursuing a path that will lead to his death. Once again human plans are foiled as reality reverses the expected result.
Conclusion

Books 13, 17, and 16 are largely battle books. The quality of the fighting in these books varies widely, and each presents a gradual transition in the general situation on the battlefield. For comparison, book 2 is simple and direct—as might be expected when the armies have not yet come into conflict. Books 11 and 12 seem more clearly structured; book 11, focusing on the wall, and book 12, constructed from three movements, were each centered on a different hero. In contrast books 13, 17, and 16 are more difficult to understand because they show less organization on the battlefield and less clarity in describing the situations of the armies. In addition, each is often interpreted as an independent unit, with little attempt to place it into the larger framework.

Each of these books, however, has a significant role to play in the broader development of the narrative. Books 13 and 17 are both introductory to major segments of the epic—books 13–15 contain the reversal of Zeus’ plan, and books 17–18 show the consequences of Achilles’ plan to send Patroclus. Interpreting any introductory statement as though it must stand completely on its own can only lead to frustration. The characterizations, the phrasing, the settings, and the actions may be far more complex and suggestive in introductory parts than they are in the concluding units, where the artist draws his themes together into their most focused presentation. Book 16 offers similar problems if it is not treated as a pivotal book in a larger structure. It is the conclusion of a series of themes that began in book 1 and have been developed through the mutually supportive activities of Achilles and Thetis, Zeus and the other Olympians, and the Greek and Trojan heroes and armies; but it also leads directly to Achilles’ forceful reentrance into battle, as well as his inevitable meeting with Hector. Thus each of these three books is designed as an important part of major structures within the epic.

Though the similes, as usual, play only a supportive role, they are numerous, they are crafted effectively and economically, and they are so closely coordinated with the narrative design in each book that they point clearly toward the larger structures to which they respond. Thus the proper understanding of the placement and design of the similes can offer clues to these structures. Their effectiveness in augmenting scenes that are important to the themes is especially clear when parallel passages include similes of a different quality in order to make a totally different contribution to the narrative.
The death of Sarpedon is a major moment in book 16. In this passage Patroclus performs as a warrior who seeks the honor that will come from slaying an important Trojan ally and at the same time advances his humane goals. Yet his expectations are fundamentally wrong. Sarpedon will obtain the major honor, and Patroclus’ goal fades from his view precisely because he is so excellently victorious. He immediately forgets the order to avoid preserving Achilles’ honor and moves blindly toward his death—all in the service of Zeus’ plan.

The scene over Sarpedon is a realistic battle, but the addition of an incongruous simile moves the whole passage to a level that shows the misperceptions of Patroclus:

> From their bronze and oxhide and strongly made leather a din rose from the earth with its broad ways as they struck one another with swords and double-edged spears. Nor would a man, not even a clear observer, recognize the divine Sarpedon, since he was covered from head to toe with weapons and blood and dust. And they thronged around his body just as when flies buzz in the farmyard around the filled milk pails in the springtime when milk overflows the buckets. So did they throng around the body

(16.635–44)

There are many comparisons of warriors fallen on the battlefield in the *Iliad*; as one among many, the scene surrounding the bloodthirsty killings of Agamemnon in book 11 will serve as a strong contrast:

> These he left behind, but he lunged in where the most warriors were being routed, as did the other well-greaved Achaeans. Foot soldiers killed foot soldiers who needed to flee, cavalry killed cavalry, from beneath them rose up from the plain the dust which the thundering hooves of the horses stirred up; they kept killing with their bronze weapons. And King Agamemnon, giving commands to the Argives, followed killing more. Just as when destructive fire falls on a dense forest, and the wind whirling carries it in every direction, and attacked by the force
of the fire down to their very roots thickets fall;
so at the hands of Agamemnon, son of Atreus,
did the heads of the fleeing Trojans fall, and many lofty-necked horses
drew rattling chariots along the bridges of war —
empty — without their blameless charioteers. For they were lying on
the ground
far dearer to the vultures than to their wives.

(11.148–62)

The surrounding scene of fallen and fighting men is similar in the two pas-
sages, but the addition of similes of opposed tone separates the meaning of
the deaths and thus reinforces the themes. The peaceful simile in book 16
powerfully increases the complexity of a battlefield setting and helps to em-
phasize the competing forces that are at work in such an intricately designed
book. The killings by Agamemnon are realistic in tone and effective in order
to emphasize the onset of Zeus’ plan when he is forced to leave the battle. In
each example, design is paramount — and similes are significant tools used by
the poet to construct a well-told tale.