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## Similes and other likenesses

In the last thirty years a great deal of sophisticated work has been done on the notion of metaphor: linguists, philosophers, scientists and archaeologists, amongst others, have all joined in the debate.<sup>1</sup> At the centre of the discussion has been the ‘location’ of metaphor: is it a distortion of ordinary (= ‘degree zero’) language, or is it, on the contrary, at the very centre of linguistic usage? Far less attention, however, has been devoted to the closely related linguistic-rhetorical figure of the simile. In the recently published *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, for instance, the entry on ‘simile’ receives 30 lines, as against 258 for ‘metaphor’.<sup>2</sup> Yet there are certain forms of literature in which similes forge well ahead of metaphors as regards the insistence of their claims upon readers’ attention. A prime example of such a form is Homeric epic.

Before approaching Homer directly, however, I want to ask a preliminary and very basic question. Is there anything to be gained, in spite of all the theoretical elaborations in recent criticism,<sup>3</sup> by retaining an elementary, formal, linguistically based distinction between metaphor and simile, according to which a metaphor is a comparison which does *not* contain a word signifying ‘like’ or ‘as’, whereas a simile is a comparison which – however short or long – *does* contain such a term? To describe the ocean as ‘like an unfingered harp’ will be, on that formal definition, to use a simile; whereas to observe, with Stephen Spender, that ‘afternoon burns upon the wires of the sea’, will be to employ a metaphor.<sup>4</sup> Put more formally, the distinction may be expressed like this (the words are those of Stephen Ullmann): ‘In the final analysis . . . metaphor is an abridged simile. Rather than explicitly spelling

<sup>1</sup> For orientation one may consult Ortony (1993). See also Black (1962), Hawkes (1972), Ricoeur (1975), Mooij (1976), Tilley (1999). Some splendid remarks in Nowotny (1962) esp. chs. 3 and 4.

<sup>2</sup> Sloane (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Few treatments have been more theoretical, or more elaborate, than that in Derrida (1972).

<sup>4</sup> See the fine analysis of Spender in Nowotny (1962) 58–60.

out analogies, one compresses them into an image that has the air of an identification.<sup>5</sup> Such a distinction<sup>6</sup> has been attacked on the grounds that it seems to imply that the resemblances expressed by similes are psychologically prior to those expressed by metaphors, whereas in fact metaphors tend (it is argued) to *create* resemblances rather than just compressing already perceived ones.<sup>7</sup> If we set aside the fruitless question about which of the two, metaphor or simile, can claim priority, we may more profitably note that there are *some* circumstances where the ‘simple’ metaphor/simile contrast can indisputably be made to serve a very useful heuristic purpose.<sup>8</sup> A good instance of such circumstances arises when we are trying to distinguish between different kinds of poetic language, and different kinds of poet.

I would like to illustrate this point by contrasting the poetic strategy of Homer with that of Aeschylus. About halfway through Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, the chorus of old Argive men recalls the fateful arrival, long ago, of Helen at the city of Troy. Seduced and then abducted by Paris, Helen brought in her wake destruction for the city which took her in, and ruin for its people. The chorus often turns its mind to those ruinous consequences, but at line 737 the elders briefly muse upon another side of Helen: her heart-stopping beauty, the stillness at the eye of the hurricane:

πάραυτα δ’ ἔλθειν ἐς Ἴλιου πόλιν  
λέγοιμ’ ἂν φρόνημα μὲν  
νηνέμου γαλάνας,  
ἀκασκαῖον <δ’> ἄγαλμα πλούτου,  
μαλθακὸν ὀμμάτων βέλος,  
δηξίθυμον ἔρωτος ἄνθος.

At first, I would say, there came to the city of Ilion a temper of windless calm  
and a gentle delight of wealth, a soft arrow of the eyes, a heart-stinging flower  
of desire. [trans. E. Fraenkel]

This is language at its most allusive, intense, compressed. Helen is, or perhaps produces, a temper of windless calm; a soft but piercing glance; a flower. So much for Aeschylus’ evocation of Helen’s arrival. What of Homer’s?

ὡς δ’ ὄτ’ ἐν οὐρανῶι ἄστρα φαεινὴν ἀμφὶ σελήνην  
φαίνεται ἄριππεπέα, ὅτε τ’ ἔπλετο νήνεμος αἰθήρ·

<sup>5</sup> Ullmann (1975) 277.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sloane (2001) 716, s.v. ‘simile’: ‘metaphor, which is often defined as a simile in an elliptical form’.

<sup>7</sup> Black (1962) 37. Ricoeur (1975) 152–3 attacks the ‘psychologising semantics’ which, in his opinion, underlies the ‘metaphor-as-condensed-simile’ view.

<sup>8</sup> So, rightly, Silk (1974) 14 n. 4.

## Similes and other likenesses

ἐκ τ᾽ ἔφανεν πᾶσαι σκοπιαὶ καὶ πρόωνες ἄκροι  
καὶ νάπαι· οὐρανόθεν δ' ἄρ' ὑπερράγη ἄσπετος αἰθήρ,  
πάντα δὲ εἶδεται ἄστρα, γέγηθε δὲ τε φρένα ποιμήν·  
ὡς θυμῷ γήθησεν Ἀλέξανδρος θεοειδής  
Ἀργεῖην Ἑλένην προτὶ Ἴλιον ἠνεμόεσσαν  
νηυσὶν ἐνὶ γλαφυρῆσιν ἄγων· αἰνῶς δ' ἀπέλαμπεν  
κάλλος ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν Ἑλένης. κείνη δ' ἄρ' ἔμελλεν  
ὠκυμόροις Τρώεσσι γόον, καλή περ εὐῶσα,  
θησέμεναι . . .

As when in the heavens the stars shine brilliantly around the shining moon, when the air is a windless calm; and all the hill-tops and sharp headlands and glens spring clear into sight, and from the sky brightness bursts down infinite; and every star is visible, and the shepherd's heart is glad; just so was the heart of godlike Paris glad, as he brought Argive Helen to windy Troy in his hollow ships; and beauty shone out terribly from the eyes of Helen. That woman, lovely though she was, would put woe upon the Trojans, who were soon to die . . .

This is not a hitherto unknown piece of Homeric epic: I composed these lines myself.<sup>9</sup> But they suggest the kind of approach which would, I believe, have been adopted in the Homeric poems: not an intensive strategy, but an extensive one. Whereas Aeschylus fuses imagery into a single amalgam, Homer holds the terms of the comparison side-by-side.

I do not apologise for inventing 'Homeric' verses. It has become a commonplace of reception-oriented criticism that every generation re-invents Homer; and I might mischievously add that it is of the nature of poetry with a strongly oral dimension to its composition that there should be a fundamental doubt about which verses can be called authentic. But it is time to abandon my impoverished fantasy and to turn instead to the text which tradition has canonised as Homeric.

Modern scholars have approached Homeric similes from diverse angles. For some, the interest has been *rhetorical-thematic*: what is the function of a given simile within its immediate context, and then within the poem as a whole?<sup>10</sup> One insistent concern within this approach – a concern already exemplified by certain comments of ancient scholiasts and their medieval successors – has been to ask whether a given simile relates to the narrative

<sup>9</sup> For the record, the first five lines are lifted verbatim from *Il.* 8.555–9; the rest I wrote in (more or less) the style of Homer. The translation of the first five lines is adapted from the version by Martin Hammond.

<sup>10</sup> See Coffey (1957), Porter (1972–3), Moulton (1977). The articles by Coffey and Porter, and an extract from the work by Moulton, can be found in de Jong (1999).

at just one point or at several.<sup>11</sup> This somewhat *pointilliste* perspective has been balanced by those, above all H. Fränkel, who have sought to classify and analyse the kinds of subject-matter evoked in the similes.<sup>12</sup> Another approach has been that of critics seeking to *date* the similes. It has been suggested that certain linguistic features found in the similes mark them out as ‘late’ compared to the rest of Homer’s text; one way of interpreting this has been to identify the similes closely with the ‘contemporary’ world of the Homeric composer.<sup>13</sup> Against this, it has been persuasively argued that there is no reason to deny the quality of traditionality to epic similes.<sup>14</sup> Others, again, have focused on *performance*, highlighting, for instance, the role of similes in prolonging ‘the pleasure of a selected narrative moment . . . for its listening audience’.<sup>15</sup> It has also been maintained that the similes occur at moments of significant transition (‘performance shifts’), and that their language may reflect the incorporation into epic of material from other, non-epic modes of song.<sup>16</sup> My own approach will be closest to the rhetorical–thematic perspective, and I too shall make generalisations about the kinds of activity which go on in the ‘world’ of the similes; but in particular I shall be drawing attention to the relationship between similes and other Homeric strategies for highlighting *likenesses*. I shall hope to demonstrate that what is at stake is much more than a question of ‘technique’; rather, the issue goes to the heart of poetic meaning.

We need to establish at the outset some sense of what we are to understand by ‘Homeric simile’, a notion which is not always so easy to isolate as my discussion so far might have suggested. Two different types of passage will exemplify some definitional edges which are potentially fuzzy.

There is, first, a group of passages in both epics in which the Homeric narrator presents gods in the form of – or, alternatively, as simply ‘like’ – birds. Athena and Apollo, ‘assuming the likenesses of birds, of vultures’, settle high in a great oak tree (7.58–61); Sleep sits in a pine tree ‘in the likeness of a singing bird’ (14.290); Apollo comes down from Mt Ida ‘like a swift hawk, dove-killer, fastest of all winged creatures’ (15.237–8); Hermes speeds over the waves ‘in the likeness of a sheerwater’ (v. 51); the sea goddess Leucothea slips into the heaving sea ‘in the likeness of a gannet’ (v. 353); Athena, in the

<sup>11</sup> See Edwards (1991) 30–4. For one example of a medieval commentator who makes observations about a simile’s single or multiple anchoring in the main narrative, see Eustathius on 24.480 (cf. p. 153 below). For a lucid, general discussion of the attitudes of scholiasts towards the similes, see Snipes (1988).

<sup>12</sup> Fränkel (1921).

<sup>13</sup> Shipp (1972) 208–22; Hainsworth (1989) 22; cf. Rutherford (1996) 103 n. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Muellner (1990) esp. 97–8. <sup>15</sup> Minchin (2001) 160. <sup>16</sup> Martin (1997).

midst of the battle against the suitors, ‘shot up high aloft and perched on a beam of the smoky palace, likening herself to a swallow in their sight’ (XXII. 239–40). Scholars have disagreed as to whether what is at issue in these passages is the *metamorphosis* of a deity into a bird, or the *comparison* of a deity to a bird.<sup>17</sup> Often the argument has been linguistic – whether there might be significant distinctions between the various words for ‘in the likeness of’ (e.g. εἰδόμενος, ἐναλίγκιος, ἴκελος); such arguments have been inconclusive. Alternatively, commentators have invoked arguments about what it is plausible or appropriate to find depicted in Homer (Heyne considered it ‘ridiculous’ if Athena and Apollo are turned into vultures).<sup>18</sup> In my view the most persuasive solution is that in some of these cases what is implied is metamorphosis, in others comparison, while in yet others the text leaves the matter in doubt; after all, since one of the attributes of a Greek divinity can be mystery, why should a poet not register that mystery by means of textual ambiguity? The case of Hermes at v. 50–4 is a perfect example, since there is no internal audience to witness his descent from Olympus to visit Calypso – an audience whose reaction might have clarified whether or not we are to imagine a ‘real’ transformation; this is quite unlike, say, I.319–24 and III.371–9, where Athena’s instantaneous departures in the likeness of a bird cause wonder and amazement amongst onlookers. In terms of a general enquiry into the religio-poetic aspects of Homer, these passages are part of a larger pattern: the possibility of change-of-form is, above all in the *Odyssey*, but in the *Iliad* too, a fundamental dimension of the poems.<sup>19</sup> For our present purpose, however, the relevant point is that the edges of the definition of ‘the Homeric simile’ must be imprecise. Mere ‘linguistic’ comparisons fall within, and merge into, a wider set of likenesses, some of which the gods alone have power to effect.

A second example of potential definitional imprecision concerns comparisons which, though meeting the formal requirement of incorporating a Greek word for ‘like’ or ‘as’, nevertheless approximate very closely to the status of metaphor by virtue of their brevity or concentration or intensiveness. (Ancient scholiasts did not regard such comparisons as *parabolai*, a term which they reserved for longer or elaborated comparisons.<sup>20</sup>) A wonderful

<sup>17</sup> Dirlmeier (1967), Bannert (1978), Erbse (1980). Dirlmeier tries to deny that any of these is a depiction of metamorphosis; Bannert and Erbse disagree with him. De Jong (1987) 134–5 attempts to distinguish between metamorphosis and ‘resemblance’.

<sup>18</sup> Heyne (1802) n. on 7.59; cf. Dirlmeier (1967) 5.

<sup>19</sup> I propose to explore these issues in much more detail in the context of a book-length study, whose provisional title is *Greek Metamorphoses: Myth, Religion and Belief*.

<sup>20</sup> See Snipes (1988) 205–8.

example is to be found in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, when Hector has temporarily left the battlefield in search of his wife Andromache and their baby son.

[Andromache] came to him there, and beside her went an attendant carrying  
the boy in the fold of her bosom, a little child, only a baby,  
Hector's son, the adored, like a lovely star,  
whom Hector called Scamandrius, but all of the others  
Astyanax ['lord of the city']; since Hector alone protected Ilion.<sup>21</sup>  
(6.399–403)

So dense and unelaborated is the comparison of the baby boy to 'a lovely star' that its meaning is left wide open. Is the child 'radiant' (in some sense), as a star can be radiant? This is by no means the only possible interpretation. A quite different – or additional – implication has been detected by some critics. A few lines earlier (293–5) there occurred another comparison to a star; this time, what is said to shine like a star is the robe which Hector's mother Hecuba offered to Athena. But that offering was made in connection with a prayer, which Athena rejected (311); does a 'negative charge' therefore adhere to the comparison with a star, a negative charge which, by implication, portends disaster for the baby boy?<sup>22</sup> However we answer that question, what I want to emphasise is the considerable degree of Aeschylean metaphoricity of what is, in formal terms, unambiguously a simile.<sup>23</sup> Nor is Astyanax-as-star the only Homeric instance of the phenomenon: when angry Apollo descends on the Greeks 'like night' (1.47), or when Hector goes on his way 'like a snowy mountain' (13.754), we are not far from the Aeschylean linguistic world in which Helen 'is' a windless calm.

The preceding discussion of two types of definitional fuzzy edges illustrates the care needed in generalising about Homeric similes. However, neither of the two sorts of likeness which we have just discussed has quite the characteristics which have been regarded since antiquity as typical of the fully fledged Homeric simile. For a first example of the kind of elaborated and extensive comparison which does meet those requirements, I cite the following extract (which does, this time, come from the transmitted Homeric text):

They found Odysseus beloved of Zeus, and around him  
the Trojans crowded, as bloody scavengers in the mountains

<sup>21</sup> Here I have adapted the translation from Richmond Lattimore's magnificent version. Elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, I again reproduce (or adapt) Lattimore.

<sup>22</sup> Moulton (1977) 25–6; cf. Kirk (1990) on 6.400–1, who regards the negative charge as 'just possible'.

<sup>23</sup> When Achilles' helmet shines like a star (19.381–2), this is in a context in which there is already an association between Achilles' armour and light/fire; there is none of the enigmaticness of the Astyanax-as-star image.

crowd on a horned stag who is stricken, one whom a hunter  
 shot with an arrow from the string, and the stag has escaped him, running  
 with his feet, while the blood stayed warm, and his knees were springing  
 beneath him.

But when the pain of the flying arrow has beaten him, then  
 the rending scavengers begin to feast on him in the mountains  
 and the shaded glen. But some spirit leads that way a dangerous  
 lion, and the scavengers run in terror, and the lion eats it;  
 so about wise much-devising Odysseus the Trojans  
 crowded now, valiant and numerous, but the hero  
 with rapid play of his spear beat off the pitiless death-day.

(II.473–84)

There are many dozens of other examples, from both poems, of similes which draw their comparisons from the world of living nature: as well as lions and stags we find wolves, dogs, boars, flies, donkeys, mules, bulls, cicadas, wasps, locusts, swarms of clustering bees, an octopus, a dolphin, eagles, hawks, vultures, snakes, goats, and oxen, not to mention poplars, immovable mountain oaks, and a solitary poppy.<sup>24</sup> Occasionally one part of the natural world is used to illustrate another: Eumelus' mares are 'swift-moving like birds' (2.764); Hector will, mocks Ajax, soon be praying that his horses 'might be swifter than hawks are' (13.819). More usually the natural world is invoked to illustrate the human.<sup>25</sup>

A second common source of comparison is the landscape, usually in vigorous or violent motion:

As when a swollen river hurls its water, big with rain,  
 down the mountains to the flat land following rain from the sky god,  
 and sweeps down with it numbers of dry oaks and of pine trees,  
 until it hurls its huge driftwood into the salt sea;  
 so now glittering Ajax swept over the plain as he chased them . . .

(II.492–6)

Alongside rivers in spate there are snowstorms, ferocious gales, tempestuous seas, forest fires, as well as occasional moments of ethereal, Mediterranean stillness:

As when in the sky the stars about the moon's shining  
 are seen in all their glory, when the air has fallen to stillness,  
 and all the high places of the hills are clear, and the shoulders out-jutting,  
 and the deep ravines, as endless bright air spills from the heavens

<sup>24</sup> For animals see Schnapp-Gourbeillon (1981) and Lonsdale (1990). One may also with profit go back to Fränkel (1921).

<sup>25</sup> On which theme see, for example, Mason (1972) 61–112.

and all the stars are seen, to make glad the heart of the shepherd;  
 such in their numbers blazed the watchfires the Trojans were burning . . .<sup>26</sup>  
 (8.555–61)

A third major source of comparison derives from the ordinary, productive activities of humans when not involved in warfare. Here is part of the evocation of the furious battle over Patroclus' corpse:

As when a man gives the hide of a great ox, a bullock,  
 drenched first deep in fat, to all his people to stretch out;  
 the people take it from him and stand in a circle about it  
 and pull, and presently the moisture goes and the fat sinks  
 in, with so many pulling, and the bull's hide is stretched out level;  
 so the men of both sides in a cramped space tugged at the body  
 in both directions . . .

(17.389–95)

To this we may add a long and varied list, including the Maeonian or Carian woman who stains ivory with purple to make a cheek-piece for a horse (4.141–7); two lines of reapers (11.67–71); beans and chickpeas bouncing on a threshing floor (13.588–92); a shipwright boring a ship's timber (19.384–8); the smith who tempers an axe (19.391–4).

What is remarkable is the sheer diversity of these similes. Rarely is there any repetition;<sup>27</sup> even in the numerous comparisons in which heroes are likened to lions, there are countless tiny variations (contrast, for instance, the two lion-similes at 11.113–21 and 172–8). Nor are our three main categories of simile by any means exhaustive: we could add the mother brushing a fly away from her slumbering child (4.130–1), the little boy making sandcastles and knocking them down again (15.361–6), and many others. Purely in terms of the number of lines dedicated to these comparisons, it is clear that they make a major contribution towards shaping the epics' meaning. But how do we evaluate that contribution?

Elaborated, extensive similes are four times more frequent in the *Iliad* than in the *Odyssey*. Different scholars go about the counting differently, depending on how they define 'simile', and on how they discriminate between 'long' and 'short' similes. One method is to count as 'long' (or 'full' or 'elaborated') those comparisons which contain a verb ('as when a man gives the hide of a great ox . . .'), and as 'short' those which do not ('like a lovely

<sup>26</sup> The reader will recall these lines from my earlier 'composition' (this time the translation is Lattimore's); as can be seen, in its Homeric context the simile is used to illustrate the number of the watchfires.

<sup>27</sup> A few exceptions are noted by Edwards (1991) 24 n. 29.

star . . .'). On that basis, one scholar finds 197 'long' similes in the *Iliad*, as against 45 in the *Odyssey*; as for 'short' similes, he finds 153 as against 87.<sup>28</sup> In themselves these statistics might not be decisive; but in fact the disparity points to fundamental differences between the two epics. We must therefore take the two works separately.

The principal narrative of the *Odyssey* covers a vast and diverse geographical range – Ithaca, Sparta, the island of Circe, the home of the Cyclops, the kingdom of the Phaeacians, the land of the Dead – and a broad social sweep – from kings and princesses to beggars and swineherds. Built into this principal narrative are numerous features also found in 'typical' Homeric similes. From Polyphemus' favourite ram to the enchanted lions and wolves on Circe's island, to the ill-fated cattle of the Sun, to the dog Argos which at its last gasp recognises its returning master, animals figure repeatedly and prominently in the story of Odysseus' wanderings and return home. The same goes for plants and trees, from the eerie grove of Calypso, with its alder, black poplar and cypress, to the orchard of Laertes, not to mention the olive, whose centrality to Greek culture is repeatedly expressed in the poem. Storms and competing winds figure in the episode of Aeolus, and in the several scenes in which Poseidon vents his wrath on Odysseus' ships and raft. As for craftsmanship and productive labour, we meet everything from the herding by the Laestrygonians, by the Cyclops, and by the stalwart Eumaeus, to the clothes washed by Nausicaa, to the skill which enabled Odysseus to construct his bed from living (olive) wood.

Within this already complex and richly diversified world, what scope is there for the constructing of fresh likenesses, in order to extend still further a sense of the equivalence between the narrated phenomena? The answer is threefold.

One group of characters possesses the power to effect changes of physical likeness: the gods. The gods habitually make one thing seem like another. Proteus metamorphoses into a lion, a serpent, a leopard, a boar, water and a tree (IV.456–8). Circe can transform humans into beasts, and back again. Athena regularly changes Odysseus' form, whether from outcast beggar to near-divinity, or vice-versa. And of course, when they visit mortals, the gods transform themselves: a common pattern is for them to appear in the shape of a specific and 'persuasive' human, and later to leave as a bird. Within the world of the *Odyssey*, change-of-form is fundamental, central, pervasive.

A second agency for the multiplying of likenesses is human story-telling. In the mouth of, above all, Odysseus, human speech becomes a medium

<sup>28</sup> Lee (1964) 3–4. The statistics are reviewed by Edwards (1991) 24.

for the representation of possible worlds. After yet another in the series of Odysseus' self-concealments ('Deucalion had two sons, myself and the lord Idomeneus . . . My glorious name is Aethon . . .', XIX.181–4) the poet observes:

He knew how to say many false things that were like true sayings.

(XIX.203)

All the various, more or less convincing versions of the past told by Odysseus to Polyphemus and Eumaeus and Penelope and Laertes, create a kaleidoscopic surface of jostling plausibilities.

Third: the Homeric narrator himself intervenes in order to point out likenesses through the medium of similes. He does so, as we have said, less frequently than in the *Iliad*, but when they do occur the interventions are often brilliantly effective, in both a local and a broader context. One classic example of 'local' graphicness is the octopus simile:

As when an octopus is dragged away from its shelter  
the thickly-clustered pebbles stick in the cups of the tentacles,  
so in contact with the rock the skin from his bold hands  
was torn away . . .

(V.432–5)

Another is the description of the pitiless dispatching of the unfaithful maid-servants. Strung up in a line and hanged with a ship's cable, they resemble

thrushes, who spread their wings, or pigeons, who have  
flown into a snare set up for them in a thicket, trying  
to find a resting place, but the sleep given them was hateful . . .

(XXII.468–70)

Of broader significance are similes which explore the feelings of the poem's principal figures. When Telemachus embraces his father, the two of them cry like ospreys or vultures who have had their offspring taken from them (XVI.216–19) – a far-from-casual comparison which implies that the pain of prolonged separation cannot be easily assuaged. Equally evocative is the simile which likens Eumaeus' embracing of Telemachus to the emotions of a father for his only, long-absent son (XVI.17–21); the social divide between the two characters is effortlessly elided, through an image which, by implication, assimilates Eumaeus to Odysseus himself.

But even these two similes pale beside the most powerful comparison in the entire work. After Demodocus' song about the sacking of the city of Troy, the disguised and unrecognised Odysseus breaks down amongst his Phaeacian hosts.

So the famous singer sang his tale, but Odysseus melted,  
 and from under his eyes the tears ran down, drenching  
 his cheeks. As a woman weeps, lying over the body  
 of her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city and people  
 as he tried to beat off the pitiless day from city and children;  
 she sees him dying and gasping for breath, and winding her body  
 about him she cries high and shrill, while the men behind her,  
 hitting her with their spear butts on the back and the shoulders,  
 force her up and lead her away into slavery, to have  
 hard work and sorrow, and her cheeks are wracked with pitiful weeping.  
 Such were the pitiful tears Odysseus shed . . .

(VIII.521–31)

With a reciprocity of pathos worthy of the *Iliad* (and there can be no higher praise), this simile refuses to allow Odysseus any escape from his memory of the Trojan past; it locks him into an image in which, as one of the victors, he is obliged to relive the emotions of one of the humiliated vanquished. Not only that: the simile also depicts a widow grieving for her husband and oppressed by enemies – a situation both uncomfortably resembling and subtly different from Penelope’s own state, which is of course less catastrophic than that of the widow, but is, for all that, characterised by another sort of anguish, that of not knowing whether or not her husband is still alive. The power of this utterly ‘untypical’ simile derives from its shock value: for once, the usual, introductory ‘as’-word leads not into an image *parallel* to the main narrative, but into an image which stands in a relationship of complicatedly ironical *inversion* of that main narrative. Its only peer is to be found, as we shall shortly see, at the very climax of the *Iliad*.

When all is said and done, and without denying any of the impact made by individual comparisons, we must concede that the Odyssean similes do not construct a dimension which the poem would otherwise lack. They *supplement* the main narrative’s virtuoso exploitation of variable possibility and equivalence and multiplicity of form, but do not carve out for themselves a truly central role in the constitution of the epic’s meaning. In this as in many other respects, the *Iliad* tells a different story.

The principal narrative of the *Iliad* is tightly concentrated. It is concentrated geographically: the action takes place in a small part of the Troad. It is concentrated socially: the human dimension of the plot concerns Achaean and Trojan nobles, the role of their social inferiors being relatively marginalised. And it is concentrated temporally: even though there are aspects of the plot (the duel between Paris and Menelaus; the Catalogue of Ships) which are appropriate to the opening of an epic on the theme of, quite simply, ‘The

Trojan War', the action is in fact narrowed into a few days of unblinking battle in the middle of the war. How is this relentless intensity made to yield meanings which reach far beyond one corner of the Troad, one group of heroes, a few days? There are many kinds of answer to this question, but the one which is relevant here concerns the way in which the poem exploits likenesses.

The first respect in which it does so relates (as with the *Odyssey*) to the gods. Occasionally – though far less commonly than in the *Odyssey* – divinities intervene to control *human* likenesses, as when Apollo, having whisked Aeneas away to safety in Troy, fabricates a simulacrum of the hero about which Greeks and Trojans then fight (5.449–53). But more often the gods change *their own* likenesses. We noted earlier some passages in which the Iliadic gods, when they are present among humans, metamorphose into birds. Another common motif is a god's shape-shifting into the likeness of a particular human: Athena as a herald or as the Trojan Laodocus (2.279–80, 4.86–7), Iris as a son of Priam or as Helen's sister-in-law (2.791, 3.121–4), Aphrodite as an aged Spartan wool-dresser (3.386–9), Hera as Stentor (5.784–6), Poseidon as Calchas or as Thoas (13.45, 216) – the examples can easily be multiplied. In a poem in which epithets so often cast heroes as 'like the gods' (within a few lines in Book 2, Euryalus is 'godlike' (565), Megeles is 'equal to Ares' (627), and Odysseus is 'equal to Zeus in counsel' (636)), and in which heroes can exceptionally venture, as Diomedes does in Book 5, to attack the gods themselves with impunity, the gods' power to change shapes is one of the qualities which actually does distinguish immortals from mortals.

To find the second respect in which the *Iliad* exploits likenesses we need to turn (again as we did with the *Odyssey*) to the speeches. Given that the broad context of the plot is a war, and that on each side there are powerful internal antagonisms (Agamemnon versus Achilles; Hector versus Paris, or Priam versus his sons), it is hardly surprising that many of the dialogues are verbal duels. The weapons used are, as often as not, insults, which is where the likenesses come in – not, usually, as similes, but as metaphors. To Achilles, Agamemnon has a dog's eyes and a deer's heart (1.225); Menelaus calls the Trojans 'wretched dogs' (13.623); to Achilles, Hector too is a 'dog' (20.449). The characteristics which these and other insults inferentially attribute to this or that animal have their counterparts in some of the vignettes developed in the similes; but the likenesses of insult tend to privilege aggressive directness over elaboration of detail.

Finally we come to the similes, whose poetic significance greatly outweighs that of the second and even the first of our other two types of likeness. By far the commonest Iliadic location for similes is in what have been described

as the ‘battle-scenes’: in the *Iliad*, roughly 164 in such scenes as against 38 elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> On the basis of these imbalances, one critical voice expresses an opinion which many have echoed, even if not necessarily in such bald terms: ‘[the similes] are needed to relieve the monotony’,<sup>30</sup> a statement which is, in effect, simply giving a negative spin to the comment of an ancient scholiast on 15.362–4 (the boy making sandcastles): ‘the similes provide relief from the suffering/struggle [of warfare]’.<sup>31</sup> Let us see whether a more nuanced attitude can pay dividends.

In a work where such overriding emphasis is placed on the interpretation of death, the poet goes to enormous lengths to individualise the fates of even the most minor of heroes. One way in which he does so is to make their death-wounds unique: Hippothous’ brains run out of his head (17.297–8); Harpalion is pierced through the bladder (13.651–2); the variations are virtually endless. The other principal way of conferring uniqueness is through a simile. The effect varies: sometimes we might be tempted to talk of grotesqueness, sometimes of sheer beauty and pathos, sometimes of something in between. When Agamemnon has killed Hippolochus, he lops his victim’s arms off at the shoulder, sending his body ‘spinning like a log’ (11.147). Patroclus’ slaying of Thestor – he spears him and drags him out of his chariot – is likened to the action of a fisherman hooking a fish (16.406–10). Harpalion collapses ‘like a worm extended along the ground’ (13.654–5). Having speared Harpalion through the eyeball, Peneus decapitates him and holds up the head, which remains impaled on the spear ‘like the head of a poppy’ (14.499). When Cebriones, his skull smashed, vaults to earth ‘like a diver’ (16.742–3), strictly speaking this is not, in terms of the simile used, a *unique* death – because the death of Epicles too, a few books earlier, had been described in the same words (12.385–6); but it *becomes* unique when Patroclus mockingly elaborates the simile by invoking the image of a somersaulting acrobat (16.745–50). The death of Imbrius demonstrates how it is sometimes impossible to separate the beautiful-pathetic from the grotesque: he falls like an ash tree on a mountain (13.178–81), yet (202–5) Ajax the son of Oileus decapitates him and sends the head spinning along through the dust, till it rolls to a halt at the feet of Hector. Sometimes there is no other word but ‘beautiful’ to describe the evocation of the death of an otherwise insignificant warrior. Euphorbus, slain by Menelaus, is like a slender young olive tree: isolated, trembling, laid low by a tempest (17.53–60). Gorgythion’s death is even more poignant:

<sup>29</sup> This time the figures come from Wace and Stubbings (1962) 70.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> δαναπαύουσι δὲ τὸν πόνον αἱ παραβολαί (Erbse, *Scholias Graeca in Homeri Iliadem, ad loc.*)

He bent drooping his head to one side, as a garden poppy  
 bends beneath the weight of its yield and the rains of springtime;  
 so his head bent slack to one side beneath the helm's weight.

(8.306–8)

Simoeisus, for his part, drops like a felled black poplar,

which in the land low-lying about a great marsh grows  
 smooth trimmed yet with branches growing at the uttermost tree-top;  
 one whom a man, a maker of chariots, fells with the shining  
 iron, to bend it into a wheel for a fine-wrought chariot,  
 and the tree lies hardening by the banks of a river.

Such was Anthemion's son Simoeisus, whom illustrious Ajax killed.

(4.483–9)

The magic of the comparison is to make it seem as if this young man's death achieves something absolutely worthwhile – the construction of a fine and useful object. Even here, though, there is irony: the chariot-maker's skill has enabled many a warrior to reach this very battlefield with speed and efficiency, never to return home again. I can think of only one analogy for the virtuosity with which Homer evokes the uniqueness of each one of these deaths through an individually crafted simile. That analogy is with Dante's seemingly inexhaustible ability to find, in the manifold and idiosyncratic fates undergone by the souls of the dead in *Inferno*, equivalents for the characteristics which each of those individual men and women had in life.

As if all this were not enough, the Iliadic similes have a more fundamental role within the poem: that of locating the action within the wider rhythms of nature, of the weather and landscape, of production and craftsmanship. In the course of this chapter we have seen many examples; more need not be added here. What needs to be emphasised, rather, is the cumulative effect of these comparisons, which is to build up a picture of a world outside, a world alongside, a world which will exist when all the bloodied dust has settled, all the lamentations have ceased, and all the booty has been distributed. Unlike the world of the main narrative – a world whose economics are those of 'consumption and exchange but not of productivity'<sup>32</sup> – the parallel world of the similes is not entropic: its rhythms are there to stay. It is not an *ideal* world: it has its own violence and its own disputes, as when a hard-fought military encounter is likened to a bitter altercation between two men with measuring rods at the boundary between two plots of land (12.421–4) – very much as the Shield of Achilles (Book 18), which is in many ways a simile writ large, figures disputation and even warfare amongst its imagery. It has even

<sup>32</sup> Redfield (1975) 186.

been argued that the majority of Iliadic similes contain ‘recurrent subject-matter depicting mankind *in a losing struggle with nature*’.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, it remains true that the parallel world of the similes offers alternatives, a set of possibilities on which to gaze if the traumas of the battlefield become overwhelming.

And yet, even this is not quite the end of the story. The greater the distance between main narrative and simile, the more sense it makes to talk of a parallel world established by the poet to frame and act as a foil for the main action. But conversely, the more closely a simile approximates to the main action – for example, by departing from natural regularities and social rhythms in order to evoke the *unusual*, especially the unusual within the sphere of human action – the more the world of the simile and that of the action threaten to collapse into one another. We saw a memorable example in *Odyssey* Book VIII. In the final Iliadic simile which I wish to consider, a simile which occurs at the very climax of the emotional intensity of the epic, we find an identical example of this kind of threatened collapse.

We are in Book 24. Thanks to Hermes, Priam has managed to reach Achilles’ tent unseen by the Greek army; but now Priam is alone.

Tall Priam

came in unseen by the other men and stood close beside him  
and caught the knees of Achilles in his arms, and kissed the hands  
that were dangerous and manslaughtering and had killed so many  
of his sons. *As when dense ruin seizes a man who in [his] fatherland,  
having killed a man, has come to the country of others,  
to a rich man’s dwelling, and wonder seizes on those who behold,  
so Achilles wondered as he looked on Priam, a godlike  
man, and the rest of them wondered also, and looked at each other.*  
(24.477–84)

That the complex power of this simile resides in its embodiment of the notion of *reversal* has often been noticed; the point was made already in the commentary on 24.480 by the twelfth-century bishop of Thessalonica, Eustathius, who observed that in the main narrative, unlike in the simile, it is the supplicated rather than the suppliant who is the murderer.<sup>34</sup> A more subtle aspect of reversal relates to the circumstance, recalled by the dead Patroclus at 23.85–90, that it was through an act of involuntary murder that he had first come to the home of Achilles’ father Peleus, a home in which

<sup>33</sup> Edwards (1991) 35 (my italics). Against this, cf. Porter (1972–3), who stresses the stark juxtapositions – peaceful vs. warlike, gentle vs. violent – characteristic of many Iliadic comparisons.

<sup>34</sup> See Richardson (1993) on 24.480–4.

he, Patroclus, had been offered care and protection; the simile thus forges an implicit link between Priam and Patroclus, in that both have been obliged to seek protection in a place where Achilles is at home.<sup>35</sup> But the point which I want to emphasise is slightly different. It concerns a seemingly small detail: the onlookers' reaction.

Since the linguistic texture, and in particular the order of the words, is vital for a proper appreciation of the effect, I cite the original Greek of the section italicised above:

ὥς δ' ὄτ' ἄν ἄνδρ' ἄτη πυκινὴ λάβηι, ὃς τ' ἐνὶ πάτρηι  
 φῶτα κατακτείνας ἄλλων ἐξίκετο δῆμον,  
 ἄνδρὸς ἐς ἀφνειοῦ, θάμβος δ' ἔχει εἰσορόωντας,  
 ὡς Ἀχιλεὺς θάμβησεν ἰδὼν Πρίαμον θεοειδέα·  
 θάμβησαν δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι, ἐς ἀλλήλους δὲ ἴδοντο.

*As when dense ruin seizes a man.* . . . [ὥς δ' ὄτ' ἄν ἄνδρ' ἄτη πυκινὴ λάβηι . . .] At this stage in the development of the simile, the image of a man seized by ruin must predominantly evoke Priam: bereft of his son, Priam has taken a 'ruinous' decision to expose himself to the likelihood of immediate death. And yet 'ruin' has seized Achilles too: having lost his dear friend, he has turned to an action (dragging the corpse of Hector) of an insensate recklessness. The simile continues: . . . *who in [his] fatherland* . . . [ὃς τ' ἐνὶ πάτρηι . . .] Who is the principal referent here? In a sense it is still Priam: the Troad, after all, is his own kingdom, his father's land. But this tent, lying as it does within the Greek camp, has for all the long years of the war been effectively *Greek* territory; in this tent it is Achilles, not Priam, who is at home. The simile proceeds: . . . *having killed a man* . . . [φῶτα κατακτείνας . . .] Achilles, there can be no doubt, is a killer. . . . *has come to the country of others* . . . [ἄλλων ἐξίκετο δῆμον . . .] This time, the reference is perfectly ambiguous: Achilles has come to a foreign land, for sure – to the land of Troy; but so, in this episode, has Priam – to a little piece of Greece. . . . *to a rich man's dwelling* . . . [ἄνδρὸς ἐς ἀφνειοῦ . . .] Who, Priam or Achilles, is (like) the rich man? Priam's Troy is a place of wealth; but Achilles is rich too – in booty, of course, but most of all symbolically. He has the one thing which Priam wants but does not have: Hector's body.

And then comes the amazement, *thambos*, repeated thrice in the text: the amazement of onlookers, of Achilles, of onlookers again. The effect of the extraordinary simile is to enact, through language, the alternation between

<sup>35</sup> See Moulton (1977) 115–16. The minor character Epeigeus too fled to Peleus after committing murder (16.570–6), cf. Fenik (1968) 206–7. But the relevance of this to 24.480–4 is surely distant.

the two principals, as the spotlight falls at one moment upon Achilles, at the next upon Priam, and consequently upon the likeness between the two. This last point is crucial to the meaning of, not just Book 24, but the whole *Iliad*. In the final analysis, in all the matters which the poem presents as important, Priam and Achilles resemble each other. As anger and pity struggle for supremacy in this climactic scene, a simile allows the reader/hearer, for once, no distance, no luxuriant pause, no parallel ‘other world’ from whose vantage-point the action can be viewed. Readers and hearers have no choice but to follow the example of the onlookers in Achilles’ tent, who turn their eyes now this way, now that way, and now, finally, look at each other: astonished.<sup>36</sup>

#### FURTHER READING

The encyclopaedia entries on ‘Metaphor’ and ‘Simile’ in Sloane (2001) provide basic orientation. Fränkel (1921) remains, in spite of its age, a thorough and very sensitive treatment, but it is accessible only to those who read German. A more recent general treatment is that of Moulton (1977); see also Coffey (1957) and Porter (1972–3), reprinted in de Jong (1999). Especially (but not exclusively) for those reading Homer in the original Greek, an excellent starting point for further research, particularly in relation to the *Iliad*, is Edwards (1991) 24–41, with helpful references to earlier scholarship.

One other, more specialised interpretative approach is worth highlighting. By insightfully contrasting Homer’s text with the august (and Augustan) ‘translation’ by Alexander Pope, Mason (1972) not only makes a strong case for the individuality of the Homeric perception of animal nature, but also exemplifies a revealing aspect of the ‘reception’ of the Homeric simile.

<sup>36</sup> A preliminary sketch of the Iliadic sections of this chapter appeared in French under the title ‘Deux mondes de l’*Iliade*’, in *Europe* 79, no. 865 (May 2001) 48–58; the comments of Bernard Mezzadri were extremely useful to me. For valuable advice on the present version I would like to thank James Diggle, Jasper Griffin, Antonis Rengakos, Martin West and the editor of this volume.