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Homeric Similes

The *Iliad* is saturated with similes that are so distinctive as to have earned the title “Homeric similes.” More than a simple comparison, a Homeric simile is an extended analogy, what Samuel E. Bassett described a century ago as “a poetic picture which grows out of a comparison.”

Similes may serve multiple potential functions within the narrative:

- They can locate moments and/or actions that may feel abstract or distant within concrete, possibly relatable, phenomena, in the process inviting emotional identification;
- They can aestheticize moments/actions that may otherwise be brutal, in the process offering beauty as a counterpoint to the horror of war;
- They can be reference points with recognizable (for the poem’s historical listeners) symbolic and spiritual significances;
- They can suspend time, drawing attention to especially significant moments/actions, in the process subordinating action (plot) to meaning (ideas and their value).

Homeric similes fall into three general categories:

Animal similes:

“When Menelaus, dear to Ares, caught sight of Alexander advancing with great strides in front of the soldiery, just as a lion exults when it lights upon a great corpse, discovering an antlered stag or a wild goat—the lion is starving, and devours it quickly, in case swift hounds and strong young men are on its trail—so Menelaus exulted when his eyes fell on Alexander, handsome as a god, and, thinking to avenge himself on the wrongdoer, he quickly leapt fully armed from his chariot to the ground.” (3.23-29)

“[Hector], as before, was fighting in the likeness of a whirlwind; as when a boar or a lion is surrounded by hounds and huntsmen and twists about, exulting in its strength, while they form themselves into a close-knit wall and confront it, and hurl their spears thick and fast from their hands; but its superb heart is not daunted or driven away in fear, and it is its courage that kills it; again and again it wheels about, testing the ranks of men, and wherever it charges the ranks of men retreat. So Hector went wheeling about among the soldiery, urging his companions to cross the ditch.” (12.40-50)

Nature similes:

“Great-spirited son of Tydeus, why do you ask about my family? As is the family of leaves, so it is also with men: the wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the forest breaks

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into bud and makes more when the spring season comes round.
So with the family of men, one generation grows and another ceases.” (6.145-149)

“And Idomeneus, as soon as he reached his well-built hut,
put his fine armour on about his body, picked up two spears,
and set off, looking like the lightning that the son of Cronus
takes in his hand and hurls from bright Olympus, to
show mortals a sign; and its flash is seen far and wide.
Just so the bronze flashed about Idomeneus’ breast as he ran.” (13.240-245)

“Asius toppled as an oak topples, or a poplar, or a soaring
pine that woodsmen have cut down on a mountain
with their newly whetted axes, to become ship-timber;
so Asius lay sprawled in front of his chariot and horses,
roaring, and scrabbling at the blood-soaked dust.” (13.389-393)

Domestic life similes:

“But, Menelaus, the blessed immortal gods had not forgotten you,
and the first to your aid was Zeus’ daughter who gathers the spoils.
She stood before you and fended off the sharp-pointed arrow,
turning it away from your flesh jut like a mother brushing
a fly from her child who is lying in sweet sleep, and with
her own hand she guided it instead to where its gold buckles
held his belt together and overlapped the double corset.” (4.127-133)

“Over this the Trojans poured in massed order, and in front
Apollo held out the precious aegis; and with great ease
he broke down the Achaean wall, just as a boy builds
sandcastles on the seashore, in the way that children have, and
then delights in knocking them over again with hands and feet.
So you, lord Apollo, shattered the immense toil and labour
of the Achaeans, and provoked them to panic-stricken flight.” (15.360-366)

Layered Similes:

“The assembly was stirred **like the tall waves of the sea**,
the open sea by Icaria, when the East and South Winds
churn it up, swooping down from the clouds of father Zeus.
As when the West Wind moves over a deep cornfield and stirs it,
and the ears of corn bend before its violent onset,
so the whole assembly was stirred, and the men rushed
shouting towards the ships, and underneath their feet the dust
rose and hung suspended in the air.” (2.144-151)

“ **As when devastating fire** blazes through an enormous forest
on a mountain peak and its glare is seen from afar,
so as they marched the glitter from the stupendous mass of bronze
flashed all around through the upper air and reached the high sky.

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As the numerous companies of winged birds, geese or cranes or swans with their long necks, gather on the Asian water-meadow, by the streams of Cayster, and soar this way and that, exulting in their wings, and settle with a clamor, and the meadow resounds of their cries, so the army's numerous companies poured out from ships and huts on to the plain of Scamander; and the ground under the feet of men and horses gave back a terrifying sound. They took their stand on the flower plain of Scamander, numberless as the leaves and flowers that appear in spring.

As many as the numerous companies of swarming flies that swarm about the sheepfold of a herdsman in the season of spring, when pails brim with milk, so many were the flowing-haired Achaeans facing the Trojans and taking their stand on the plain, raging to break them utterly.

And **just as goatherds** easily separate their far-wandering flocks of goats, when they have become mixed up in the pasture, so the commanders mustered their men on this side and on that, ready for the conflict; and in their midst was lord Agamemnon, his gaze and head like Zeus who delights in the thunderbolt, in girth like Ares, and with the chest of Poseidon.

Just like an ox which far surpasses all the rest of a herd, a bull, which stands out among the cattle gathered round it, even so Zeus made the son of Atreus on that day, conspicuous in the soldiery, pre-eminent among the heroes." (2.455-483)

Discussion topics for Homeric similes

1. Highlight similes associated with central characters. What does the simile contribute to the characterization of that figure?
2. What kinds of similes are used for gods and goddesses? What do they contribute to understanding the immortals? To what extent are they the same/different from similes used to describe heroes? What do they contribute to understanding the relationship between immortals and mortals?
3. Research the symbolic meaning in ancient Greece of various types of birds mentioned in the similes.
4. Find three examples of each type of simile (animal, natural world, domestic). In what scenarios is each type of simile most often used? What do these uses suggest about the value system within the poem's world?
5. Pick a favorite simile from each category. Look up how it has been translated in at least two other translations from different centuries. Compare/contrast what remains consistent and what changes.