

## The Similes of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*

Talk given at ICC convention, 1982

So far as I can recall, my mother never made a straight-forward statement in her life. She always spoke in similes. Nothing was good or pretty; it was as good as gold, or as pretty as a picture. With this conditioning, it is not surprising that for me the similes in Homer and Vergil have a special fascination. Therefore, when the college retired me and I no longer had to spend my time on class lectures and lesson plans, I decided to examine these similes. So, with my usual unscholarly approach, I took from my bookshelves what I considered a good, faithful translation of each of these works, and I began reading and making notes. Naturally, I ignored what anybody else had written on the subject, interested only in what I could discover on my own.

The further I investigated, the more skeptical I became about whether the same man had written the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The computer says yes. But judging solely by the similes in these two poems, one would be led to conclude that the *Odyssey* was written by a more elemental and less complex poet, or that it was written by the author of the *Iliad* before he reached his full powers, or that it was written by a disciple who had talent but who lacked the genius of the master, for the similes of the *Iliad* are more numerous, more varied, and more complex.

The number of similes in the *Iliad* is considerably more than double the number in the *Odyssey*. This can partially, but not wholly, be attributed to the fact that the *Odyssey* is only four fifths as long as the *Iliad*.

In addition to the far greater number, another bit of artistry in the *Iliad* is the variety in the similes, even when the same elements are used. The mountain lion is used more frequently for a simile than any other thing, animate or inanimate. But almost every simile, with the exception of that bland statement "like a lion," has its own peculiar characteristics, which make it as individual as a pup in a litter. One man is as happy as a hungry lion with the carcass of a stag or a goat. Agamemnon is like a lion in the lair of a doe with its unweaned fawns. Achilles seeks revenge after the death of Patroclus like a lion tracking down men who have taken its cubs. A disappointed Menelaus is like a lion retreating after a night of futilely trying to raid cow pens. All of these are lions, but quite different lions, or at least in distinctly different pictures.

The similes of the *Odyssey* are more repetitious. My Greek students were always pleased in reading the *Odyssey* when they came upon "when the early-born, rosy-fingered dawn appeared," when Odysseus' men "sat down at the rowing benches and beat the sea white with their oars," because they had seen these identical groupings of words before. In the same way, the *Odyssey* repeats similes. Twenty-seven times some person is described as godlike; and everything from wine to the Sirens' voices is honey-sweet.

In spite of the *Iliad*'s emphasis on the lion, it still uses almost twice as many other animals, birds, and insects as the *Odyssey* in similes, and more than three times as many as the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* does use bees in three similes, whereas the *Iliad* mentions bees only once, and the *Odyssey* does not mention them at all. This is understandable since Vergil had written a treatise on bees, and Homer had not. The only other insect that Vergil uses is the ant, which neither of the Greek poems mentions. In fact, the only insect that the *Odyssey* uses is the gadfly, that tormenting pest of domestic animals. The *Iliad*, however, uses flies, wasps, locusts,

bees, and even describes one dying warrior as wriggling on the ground like a worm -- not a beautiful, but certainly a vivid, comparison.

Since the ancients had so much respect for and fear of the of nature, it is not surprising that a great many similes in all three poems are drawn from this source. After all, the early supreme deities had been personifications of the heavens and the earth, and their children were the terrifying upheavals of the earth, the roaring sea, and the crashing thunder. Therefore, these awe-inspiring natural forces furnished all three poems with much material for similes. The things that grew on the earth came in for their share of attention also. Among trees, only the *Iliad* mentions the ubiquitous olive, but all three poems use the oak, the ash, and the pine tree.

Obviously, none of these poems was written by a florist. Although there are several vague mentions of blossoms in general, the *Iliad* uses the name of only one specific flower, the poppy; the *Odyssey* uses the violet and the hyacinth. Vergil has the greatest variety here, referring to the rose and the lily in addition to the violet and the hyacinth.

Homer's plant-life similes come more from daily life on the farm. Both the Greek poems refer to milk and honey. (The *Odyssey* uses honey in eight similes). But the only other farm produce that the *Odyssey* mentions is the onion and grain. Grain is the only garden product mentioned in the *Aeneid*. But the *Iliad* uses quite an array of farm produce. It mentions chick peas, beans, barley, and grapes; and three similes involve threshing or chaff.

In references to people, such as "like a frightened child running to its mother for protection," the *Iliad* again uses a greater variety than either of the other two poems. Women are referred to in the context of widows, mothers, nagging souls, or physically weak persons; children are used to indicate fright, playfulness, mischief, and foolishness. The *Odyssey* uses a child in only two similes, and the *Aeneid* not at all. I suspect that the bachelor Vergil was uncomfortable around children. Even his portrayal of Ascanius is rather vague and not very convincing. As for women, the *Odyssey* refers only once to a woman in a simile -- as grieving over her dying husband. The *Aeneid* makes no use at all of women in similes. It is, however, the only one of the three poems to use people's names in similes-- like Achilles, like Pentheus, like Orestes, like Paris.

In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the father-son relationship occurs several times; never in the *Aeneid*. In the *Iliad* we find that Achilles grieves over Patroclus "as a father weeps when his son dies on his wedding day"; and in the *Odyssey*, Nestor welcomes Telemachus "as a father might welcome a son." This same simile, incidentally, appears later in the same poem in another context. The *Odyssey* also refers to one being like a brother, a relationship not used in the other two poems. Another kind of simile in the *Odyssey*, which is not found in either of the other poems is that drawn from over-indulgence: like a drunken man, and swimming in tears as one heavy with wine. But people of specific types or occupations, such as a shepherd or a carpenter, appear in three times as many similes in the *Iliad* as in the *Odyssey*.

None of these poems uses deities to any extent in similes, except for such generalities as godlike. Each poem refers to only three deities by name in similes. Aphrodite or Venus, Artemis or Diana (according to whether the poet is Greek or Roman), Ares, Bacchus, and Apollo are the only gods named anywhere in all three poems.

Homer is versatile not only in his choice of images, but also in the techniques he uses to get into a simile. His most frequently used device, of course, is the old faithful word "like" -- a shield glistens like the sun. Sometimes he just fastens the word "like" to another word, as in godlike. In the *Iliad* this adjective is used to describe Nestor; it accounts for 27 of the 159 similes

I noted in the *Odyssey*. It is used to describe Odysseus seven times, but it is also applied to seventeen other people. And occasionally "like" is implied, as in the "wine dark sea."

Homer, in the *Iliad*, often backs into a simile, stating it negatively: "The battle line swayed no more than a plumb line used along a ship's timber to test it."

Also in the *Iliad* distance is often expressed in colorful comparisons: the distance a man can see through haze from a watchtower; or Menelaus was about a discus throw behind Antilochus in the chariot race; or as much as the width of a furrow that mules plow in one day. These are not precise measurements, but exactness must not have been important to them in such matters. Certainly the Roman measure of a mile as a thousand paces would vary according to the length of the legs of the pacer, although I understand that about five feet was considered a pace -- which I would consider the footprints of one of the giants.

Time also is approximated in such Homeric statements as: "No more time than it takes fig juice to curdle milk."

Another thing that happens in all three poems is the use of the double or triple simile, where something is compared to two or three different things. In the *Iliad*, for instance, we are told that the number of Greeks is like the number of leaves in the forest or the sands of the sea; and Achilles says that Agamemnon has the eyes of a dog and the courage of a doe. The *Iliad* again has more than twice as many of these as the *Odyssey*. But here the *Aeneid* comes in as the winner, with five more than are even in the *Iliad*. These are all double similes. As for the triple ones, the *Odyssey* has one, the *Odyssey* three, and the *Iliad* six. Twice in the *Iliad* a warrior is described as falling like an oak, a poplar, or a towering pine cut by an axe; and Menelaus describes Euphorbus as having the courage of a panther, a lion, or a wild boar.

The *Iliad* even has one quadruple comparison: Agamemnon's mind was racked with worries as the sky is pierced by lightning when a hailstorm is brewing, or a torrential rain, or a blizzard of snow, or the dogs of war are about to be let loose.

But many of the most colorful and interesting similes in all three poems are those that are unique to each work. In the *Aeneid* we might cite the comparison of the Carthaginians to busy bees, and that of Neptune quieting the seas to a respected man taming down a furious mob. In the *Odyssey* Polyphemus' ram is as dark as a violet; Penelope's complexion is whiter than new-sawn ivory; and Odysseus tests his bow like a man testing a lyre. The *Iliad* has so many of these that it is hard to choose. The Trojans retreating before Achilles are compared to small fish trying to avoid a dolphin; twice soldiers hovering around a dead or wounded warrior are said to be like flies around cows with full milk pails nearby; Hera and Athena strut around like pigeons; the color of Zeus's eagle is like ripening grapes; and the glitter of the Greek armor in the sunlight ripples like laughter. This list could go on and on, but this is enough.

As for the dimensions of the similes, it is impossible to make a clear distinction between the simple ones and the complex ones. The two extremes are obvious, but the stages between fade into each other. However, I feel secure in saying that the *Iliad* has four times as many expanded similes as the *Odyssey*. In Book xi of the *Iliad*, for instance, are three long similes with only a few lines separating them from each other. Here is one example of the epic simile in the *Iliad*: Achilles is being compared to a lion (what else?) in Book xx: "He was like a lion whose ravages have caused a village full of men to turn out to destroy him. At first the lion goes his way and treats them with contempt; but when one of the bolder young men has hit him with a spear, he gathers himself up with a snarl, the froth collects on his jaws, he growls to himself in noble indignation, he lashes his ribs and his flanks with his tail to work himself up into a fighting fury, and then with eyes aflame he charges, determined in his passion to kill or perish at the first

encounter." Vergil uses this same simile at the beginning of Book xii of the *Aeneid* to describe Turnus, but only in a shortened version.

Since Vergil was writing with copies of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* open in front of him, some of his similes were understandably transferred directly from these works, for there was no such thing as a copyright law in those days. When Dido first appears before Aeneas, looking like Diana with her chorus of nymphs, the description is almost a verbatim translation of the passage about Nausicaa and her handmaids at the river in the *Odyssey*. Also, Vergil's description of Aeneas when the mist dissipates in Book i compares his beauty to the work of a skilled artist who has overlaid silver with gold. This simile was used twice in the *Odyssey*, both times to describe Odysseus (Books vi and xxiii). And in Book xi of the *Aeneid*, when Turnus is compared to a stallion which has broken free of its halter and is running wild, Vergil is using the same comparison that was used twice in the *Iliad*, referring once to Paris and once to Hector.

Many of the shorter similes that are similar or even identical in these works I hesitate to call derivative. I suspect that they were as standard in ancient times as the modern "red as blood" or "hot as fire." Among these are such comparisons as "as swift as the wind (or lightning)" and "as many as the leaves on the trees."

Judging solely on the basis of the similes, one must conclude that the *Iliad* is the most ornately written of these poems. And in this poem, Homer seems to have a special knack for drawing sensitive and vivid similes from daily farm life. Who could do better than these comparisons: Ajax and Odysseus wrestling look like a couple of sloping roof rafters; Achilles and Aeneas glaring at each other are like two nagging women arguing; and the Lycians and Danaans harass each other like two men fighting across a fence.

But I would like to come back to the *Aeneid* for just a minute. I have no desire to belittle Vergil, whose *Aeneid* is a constant joy to me. The disparity in the number and variety of similes in the *Aeneid* and in the *Iliad* is, of course, partially due to the fact that the Roman poem is only about two thirds as long as the Greek poem. And the *Aeneid* has some charms that are not found in either of the Homeric poems, like the vivid word pictures that can be found on any page. Besides, ornateness can become excessive. Perhaps Vergil's less florid style is really more artistically satisfying than the elaborate *Iliad*.

Texts used in this study:

*Iliad* - translation by E. V. Rieu

*Odyssey* - translation by S. H. Butcher and A. Lang

*Aeneid* - translation by Kevin Guinagh