Handout for

Similes in Homer and Plato:
Similarities and Significant Differences
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Section E: Greek Philosophy  1:15-3:00 pm (April 12, 2018)

1 Definitions: The following terms identify the parts of a simile (“an explicit figurative comparison of two essentially unlike things”): prothesis (underlined), tenor (italicized), vehicle (underlined and italicized), and apotoposis (boldface):

   The armies rushed forward like thick tribes of bees . . . even so did their many tribes march from their ships. (Iliad 1.86-93)

Let us define a simile further as ‘a figurative comparison in which both tenor and vehicle are expressed (with or without a prothesis)’ while a metaphor is ‘an implied comparison in which only the vehicle is stated’ (e.g., “plunge beneath the broad bosom of the sea “ [Il 18.140]).

2 Similes in Plato (ca. 500):
(a) Visualization of verbs, nouns and adjectives: everyone gazed at Charmides like a statue. (Charm. 154c)
(b) Humorous exaggeration: I began to turn like a fish caught in a net. (Euthy. 302)
(c) Distinctions made: wisdom is NOT like water (Symp. 175d)
(d) Abstractions clarified: evil in the soul is like a disease (Sophist 227d)
(e) Literary references: like Creon in Euripides’ play (Alc. 2, 151b)

3 Similes in Homer (ca. 344 in Iliad and 128 in Odyssey):
Most would be classified under category (a) above, either short phrases or scenes (e.g., Trojans are compared to cranes shrieking at Il 3.2-7). A few examples of (b) humorous exaggeration and (c) distinctions with negatives occur, but no abstractions defined (d) or literary references (e) in similes.

4 Homer’s Similes: A Compendium of Similes in the Iliad and Odyssey GWU, ScholarSpace (2016): https://scholarspace.library.gwu.edu/files/rx913p90h