

## Similes in Homer and Plato: Similarities and Significant Differences

Research on similes in Homer has been an important topic of Homeric scholarship both in analyzing individual similes and investigating their use in the larger framework of the two epics. It is customary to view similes as entirely natural in poetry although less so in philosophical works. Questions have arisen about repeated similes within each poem and between the two, why there are many more similes in the *Iliad* than the *Odyssey* (and why more in some books than others), why a simile is added to one passage and not to another one, and what determines whether a simile will be short or long. No doubt the action of the plot is determinate, with more similes introduced when there is battle movement or other such activity that requires vivid description.

Until recently there did not exist a resource where one could find a listing of all the similes in these poems. (See the online compendium which provides the Greek text and an English translation.\*) In this compendium there are 344 similes in the *Iliad* and 128 in the *Odyssey*, not counting epithets, divine comparisons, transformations, disguises and of course factual comparisons. The totals vary among scholars who include some of these categories as similes. The following terms identify the parts of a simile: prothesis (underlined), *tenor* (italicized), vehicle (underlined and italicized), and **apothesis** (boldface):

The *armies* rushed forward like *thick tribes of bees* . . . **even so**

did their many tribes march from their ships. (*Iliad* 1.86-93)

Since the topic offered here is a comparison of the use of similes in Homer and Plato, one might observe that this would be like comparing English poets (Shakespeare or John Milton) with philosophers like Bertrand Russell. Why would there be any stylistic similarities and what might be the significance? The answer lies in the abundance of similes in each ancient author

(surprising in the case of Plato) and their usage: when are similes introduced, with what effect and what types are they? Comparison between Homer and Plato brings up questions that would not occur in the study of either one of these authors (like the distinction between short and long similes or the absence of humorous and abstract similes in Homer).

Ancient prose works have rarely been studied for the use of similes, although Plato's Dialogues offer an impressive array of these rhetorical features (over 500 in a recent collection\*\*). The soul is compared to a sieve, or a tomb, or a shooting star. The Greeks are like ants or frogs living around a marsh. Socrates calls himself a philosophical mid-wife and a gadfly that pesters Athenians. These similes have become familiar images in our literary and philosophical tradition. They also reveal to us an aspect of Platonic writing that is humorous and imaginative. Similes provide an insight into Plato's efforts to explain philosophic topics in an appealing manner, to clarify an argument (e.g. a concrete example for an abstract concept: will power is like the rudder of a ship [*Cleitophon* 1]) or add literary embellishment (even using quotations from Homer to support an argument) and humorous exaggeration (not a feature of epic poetry: "I began to turn like a fish caught in a net [*Euthydemus* 15]). In contrast to Plato, Homer does not need to use similes to define abstract subjects (like truth, speech or argument) since the majority of Homeric similes illustrate specific subjects like the heroes of epic or military movements.

Scholars have found a variety of functions attributed to similes in Homer, although the most common single explanation is that they offer relief from the monotony of battle scenes, especially in the *Iliad*, and lend variety and contrast to the narrative. Sometimes similes play a structural role in Homer when they are used to mark the beginning or ending of a scene. Are the functions of similes completely different in Homer and Plato? What can be said about the density of similes in the different books of the *Iliad* or the various *Dialogues* of Plato? The investigation of these

and other questions is fascinating and justifies a comparison of the use of similes in these two ancient authors.

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List of works cited:

\*Homer's Similes: A Compendium of Similes in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

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