Introduction

EVERYONE APPRECIATES A GOOD SIMILE. THEY ABOUND IN American rap. Mr. Funke of Lords of the Underground declares, "I hurdle over rappers just like Jackie Joyner-Kersee" ("Funky Child," 1993). Talib Kweli warns, "I'm like shot clocks, blood clots and interstate cops / My point is, your flow can stop!" ("Hater Players," 1998).[1] In oratory competitions on St. Vincent in the West Indies, a speaker can turn to simile as he closes his presentation in the hope of impressing the judges one last time:

> No, I will not, for if I continue these beautiful young ladies will fall on me just like the Falls of Niagara.
>
> No, I will not for there is someone else behind me whose head's hot, whose heart swelling, just as a rosebud swell and burst in the month of May listening for the voice of his sweetheart.[2]

A singer of an episode from the Egyptian oral epic *Sîrat Banî Hilâl* declares:

> A slave inhabits the diwans,
> an angel of death, within the DWELLINGS

His audience's reactions show that they have taken note:

> he compares him to the angel of death
> a simile
> [*laughter*][3]

[1] See Perry 2004: 64–65, Cobb 2007: 98–99 (who cites the verses from Talib Kweli), and Bradley 2009: 94–96.
[2] Abrahams 1972: 24 and 26, respectively.
[3] Slyomovics 1987: 92–93.

Homer's similes, too, have always caught the eye of readers. We are taken with his detailed vignettes set far from the battlefield: Aias fells the Trojan Simoeisios as if he were a chariotmaker cutting down a tree; Achilleus enters the battle like a proud lion willing to confront a whole town; the Trojans and Achaians fight like men quarrelling over a boundary stone between their fields. We admire the poet's ability to detect the likeness in apparently unlike terms: Paris compares Hektor's indomitable spirit to an ax; the blood flowing from Menelaos' wound resembles the dye used to color a cheek piece for a horse; the Trojans and Achaians tug at the corpse of Patroklos like men stretching out an animal hide. One of the most striking and memorable features of Homeric epic, the simile continues to receive critical attention.[4] After all, the careful study of Homer's similes has far-reaching consequences. It makes us better readers of Homeric poetry given how important similes are to the telling of the tales and to the tales' themes. It enables us to explore the reception of Homer's similes by later poets. And it allows us to evaluate one of the earliest considerations of a politically potent equation: when you say, "A is like B," you define and shape perceptions of A.

This book argues that Homeric similes can function as mechanisms and sites of competition.[5] The third portion of Chapter 2 and the Conclusion discuss passages from the *Odyssey*, but the bulk of the book investigates the *Iliad*'s similes. Chapter 6 looks at similes in the narrator-text, but Chapters 2, 4, and 5 provide the first sustained critical examination of similes spoken by Homeric characters.[6] Throughout,

[4] See, most recently, Scott 2009. Hadas (2008: 185) observes that whereas "simile is often treated in poetry texts like metaphor's slightly dumb or naïve younger sister," "Homer gets a free pass": readers look forward to his similes.

[5] On competition *and* cooperation in the society rendered in the Homeric poems, see, for example, Cairns 1993: 83, Zanker 1996: esp. Chapter 1, Thalmann 1998: 130–31, and Wilson 2002a: 36.

[6] There is need for such an investigation if for no other reason than scholarship's blind spots when it comes to similes spoken by characters. On the one hand, that there are far more similes in the narrator-text than in the character-text seems to compel interpreters routinely to imply or assert that there are no similes in the character-text. Austin (1975: 118) claims that omens "are like similes, but similes that are the property of the characters in the poem rather than of the poet." The suggestion is that characters do not use similes. Cf.

I deploy some of the analytical models in both Homeric studies and narratology that have developed in recent decades but have not yet been applied to similes.

In at least three ways, the *Iliad* poet reveals his interest in crafting his characters as competitors: (1) the heroes compete with one another in physical endeavors, namely war and athletics;[7] (2) the heroes compete as speakers. First, they compete among themselves. Richard Martin (1989) reveals the markedly agonistic orientation that Homeric speakers exhibit toward one another. Second, they compete against the narrator. The research of Robert Rabel (1997) and Egbert Bakker (2009) points to the verbal competitions that the poet fashions between the characters and the narrator; and (3) the poet constructs his characters as competitors for narrative attention. Taking these three points together, we see how important the theme of competition is to the *Iliad* poet. He does not just fill the lives of Homeric warriors with contests. He also makes them compete in their capacity as characters in a poem: hence their contests with the narrator and their portrayal as competitors for narrative attention.

My central goal is to demonstrate that the *Iliad* poet implicates similes in the competitive dynamics of the three spheres delineated here.[8] I concentrate primarily on the character-text and the interactions

Hardie (2004: 88) on "the narrator's art of simile" (cf. Pellicia 2002: 199). Bakker (2005: 132) writes, "In contradistinction to similes, such statements [i.e., general statements and aphorisms] are not confined to the discourse of the narrator," and Tsagalis (2008: 272) contends, "[S]imiles never appear in speeches." On the other hand, if critics do look at similes spoken by characters, they regularly privilege those of Achilleus: see, for example, Benardete 2005: 61n1, Clarke 1995: 145–46, and Gaca 2008: 160.

[7] See, for example, Finley 2002: 120 and 122 and Wilson 2002a: for example, 36–37 on the "fluid ranking system."

[8] I deploy an intentionalist rhetoric throughout this book both for the sake of simplicity and in keeping with the reemergence of various species of intentionalism in the work of some literary critics and theorists: see Kindt and Müller 2006: 168–80. For a classicist defending an intentionalist orientation, see Clay 2003: 9. For an interpreter of Homeric similes making use of such language, note Scott's experiment: "I will propose a possible program of thoughts that might have occurred to the poet as he composed three tree similes" (2009: 176).

between the narrator-text and the character-text to argue that the poet uses similes in his depiction of the characters as competitors when it comes to speaking (see [2], earlier). First and most fundamentally, the characters contest with one another through (in the sense of by way of) simile: characters introduce similes into their performances as verbal artists as one means of competing against other characters in the linguistic field. Second, the poet also makes his characters contest both with one another *and* with the narrator not just through but at the same time over simile. A simile spoken by a character will seek to top the previous simile(s) of another character or of the narrator.

I end with two points about similes in the narrator-text. First, the poet introduces competitive dynamics into the similes that describe the physical contests in which the heroes engage (see [1], earlier). The poet fashions pairs and series of similes in the narrator-text in which that or those which follow(s) aim(s) to better that or those which precede(s): this move redounds to the credit of the character who is the referent of the capping simile. Second, the poet constructs similes in the narrator-text such that they contribute to his rendition of his characters as competitors for narrative attention (see [3], earlier). A more detailed summary of these arguments follows.

Chapter 1, "The Simile and the Homeric Comparative Spectrum," defines a simile by exploring what it means to say "A (is) like B" in the Homeric poems. (As for what to call the "A" and the "B," I will use I. A. Richards's terminology: in the statement, "Diomedes is like a lion that kills a calf," "Diomedes" is the tenor, and "lion" is the vehicle.[9] I designate the part, "a lion that kills a calf," as the "vehicle portion" of the figure.[10]) We can distinguish between the figures of simile

[9] See Richards 1936: 96–101.

[10] Scholarly practice in this matter needs refining. It makes little sense to use the word "simile" both for the whole statement "Diomedes is like a lion that kills a calf" and for only a part of the whole statement, in this case the "a lion that kills a calf" part. Beyond the fact that such imprecision is confusing, it is manifestly not the case that "a lion that kills a calf" is a simile: there is no comparison in that statement. Only the whole assertion, "Diomedes is like a lion that kills a calf," is a simile. Having registered that complaint, I shall nonetheless for the most part use the term "simile" in the traditionally

and comparison. The defining feature of a simile is the dissimilarity between tenor and vehicle, and in such cases one can speak of the distance between tenor and vehicle. For example, the narrator describes the Trojan Adamas gasping in death "as when a bull [gasps], which in the mountains herdsmen bind with ropes although it is unwilling and drag it off by force" (*Il.* 13.571–72).[11] By contrast, the defining feature of a comparison is the similarity between the tenor and vehicle, and in such cases one can speak of the proximity of tenor and vehicle. For instance, Themis questions Hera: "Why have you come? You are similar to one terrified" (*Il.* 15.90). The simile evinces a relatively larger gap between tenor and vehicle, and the comparison a smaller gap. Within each category of simile and comparison, however, differences exist. Some similes either exhibit or assert a greater degree of similarity between tenor and vehicle than other similes, and some comparisons present a greater degree of similarity between tenor and vehicle than other comparisons. A comparative spectrum emerges, bounded on one end by the notion of lesser similarity and on the other end by the notion of greater similarity. Where a figure falls on the spectrum depends on the perceived or actual gap between its tenor and vehicle.

Chapter 2, "Similes and Likenesses in the Character-Text," begins presenting the argument that similes are mechanisms of verbal competition for the heroes. Comparative material shows that the use of figurative language enables a performer of verbal art in a competitive arena to exhibit his distinctive degree of linguistic competence. Just so, Homeric heroes perform as verbal artists in a competitive environment, and simile provides a way for them to distinguish themselves. Characters pursue this goal by assigning similes integral parts in their presentations and arguments. For example, in constructing himself as a model for Patroklos and Achilleus, Nestor talks of how he once fought like "a black whirlwind." In rebuking Achilleus, Hektor deploys two similes that interrogate and exploit the erotic dimension of supplication.

imprecise manner, but on occasion, when the need for specificity becomes paramount, I shall use the phrase "vehicle portion."

[11] I use the Oxford Classical Texts of the *Iliad* (Monro and Allen 1920) and *Odyssey* (Allen 1917 and 1919). All translations from those poems are my own. They aim to be precise, not elegant.

The chapter ends with an excursus on another statement that characters use in the shape "A (is) like B." I posit a third category of figure, the likeness, to account for moments in which there is a purposeful ambiguity as to the gap between a figure's tenor and vehicle, that is, for moments in which characters play around with the meaning of "like." This model enables interpretation of, for instance, Odysseus' description of the suitor Antinoos as a king, Menelaos' reminiscence of Helen's mimicking the voices of the wives of the Achaian warriors, and Nestor's suggestion that Patroklos don Achilleus' armor. The likeness can be counted along with the simile as a way in which characters generate distinguishing utterances in the shape "A (is) like B" and thereby seek to stand out in the linguistic arena.

Chapter 2 investigates figures that do not interact with the simile(s) of another character or of the narrator. Chapter 3, "A Preparation for Reading Sequences of Similes," lays the groundwork for investigating the competitive dynamics of pairs and series of similes in the *Iliad*. The first section shows how previous scholarship helps to define what precisely that project entails. First, the most oft-cited examinations of pairs and series of similes over the course of an episode or of the poem as a whole tend to concentrate on similes with the same vehicle. We can join other critics, however, in exploring as well pairs and series of similes that do not use the same vehicle. This latter enterprise makes sense not least because similes constitute a subgenre: they have distinct formal and thematic features that make them stand out from the surrounding narrative. Second, when reading pairs and series of similes, we should follow the guidelines articulated most clearly by Stephen Nimis (1987): bearing in mind that Homeric poetry was orally composed in performance in real time, the interpreter should pay attention to the sequential arrangement of pairs and series of similes, that is, how one follows upon another. Such a charge is in keeping with present-day Homeric scholarship's concern with the intersection between sequence and meaning. Leonard Muellner (1996), for one, argues for a "metonymic" sequencing of and within episodes in archaic Greek epic: a character seeks to "top" (e.g., 87) his predecessor's move by "incorporating the previous one and going one step beyond it" (155). Muellner's research also helps us with a third point of preparation. We can adapt his model in order to delineate the competitive dynamics of some sequences of similes. To demonstrate two ways in which the poet can make a simile top a previous

one, I propose to redirect two common scholarly procedures for connecting similes: the poet reuses material and/or recharacterizes the actors in the scene from one simile to the next. The second section of the chapter shows that an additional perspective guides the critic toward the competitive dynamics of sequences of similes involving character-text. From Catullus' carmen 62 to the song duels of Turkish minstrels to tantalisin sessions in Guyana, a speaker regularly attempts to best the previous figure of his interlocutor with one of his own: the pair contest over simile. We might fairly expect the Homeric poet, as he depicts his characters contending verbally, to have them contest over similes.

Chapter 4, "Sequences of Similes in the Character-Text," begins by analyzing the implicit figurative confrontations in a conversation that has often piqued the interest of critics. In the scene in *Iliad* 3 known as the *teikhoskopia*, in which the Trojans look down from the walls of Troy at the Greek army, all the characters present at least one simile. Helen, for instance, likens Idomeneus to a god to assert her standing in the male circle of Priam and the Trojan elders. In other scenes, the poet makes a character explicitly attempt to incorporate, resist, or better the previous figurative effort of his interlocutor. I explore how, by deploying a simile about a woman or child, Diomedes rejects Paris' self-representation as a shepherd who alone can defend the Trojans and how Nestor appropriates Odysseus' figuration of the Achaians as children and widows. I then discuss how, in his image of Peleus as a father handing down property to his son, Phoinix reuses and reframes the notion of perpetuating the household central to a simile spoken by Achilleus: in the preceding speech the angry warrior had likened himself to a mother bird struggling to feed her young.

Chapter 5, "Narrator, Character, and Simile," starts from the work of Irene de Jong (esp. 2004a [1987]), Robert Rabel (1997), and Egbert Bakker (2009): they chart the interactions and confrontations between what the Homeric narrator says and what the characters say. Just as the poet has a character respond to another character, so can he make a character contest with the narrator. The narrator is treated as another speaker with whom the characters can engage in verbal disputation. Competition over simile plays a role here as well. I investigate pairs and series of similes in the *Iliad* in which the poet has the last one, which is spoken by a character, respond to the narrator's previous figuration(s)

through, for the most part, processes of reuse and recharacterization. More specifically, the audience is invited to observe three types of interaction. First, a character is made to respond to the previous *simile* of the narrator with a simile of his own. For example, whereas the narrator uses a simile to stress the role of skill in Odysseus' victory in the footrace in the games in honor of Patroklos, the Lesser Aias uses a simile to point to Athena's help as the reason Odysseus won. Second, a character is made to respond to the previous *similes* of the narrator with a simile of his own. For example, Asios uses a simile to complain about the unexpected resistance offered by the Lapithai's defense of the Achaian wall. His simile redeploys elements of the narrator's similes describing the Lapithai's martial prowess. Third, a character is made to respond by way of simile both to his opponent's argument in a flyting contest and to the narrator's use of a simile or similes right before the contest began. For example, after the narrator (through two similes) and Hektor depict Paris as a man best suited to cultural endeavors who should not venture out into the wilds of combat, Paris' simile about Hektor challenges the separation of nature and culture.

Chapter 6, "Similes in the Narrator-Text," queries the agonistic orientation of the narrator-text's images. I begin with an application of the same model used in Chapters 4 and 5 to a pair and a series of similes in the narrator-text. In the final duel in *Iliad* 22 between Achilleus and Hektor, the description of Achilleus' spear as a star aims to best the previous figuration of Hektor as an eagle. As Hektor momentarily gains the upper hand in the battle in *Iliad* 15, the narrator describes the combat with a series of similes in which those that follow cap those that precede. The arrangement of these similes makes for a contest in the figurative arena, the outcome of which replicates and amplifies the success of a fighter on the battlefield.

To explain the competitive dynamics evident in individual extended similes in the *Iliad*'s narrator-text, I introduce a different model. The poet can concentrate on a character's actions (the character is in focus) and/or perspective (the character is the focalizer). Whether he is in focus or is the focalizer, a character is receiving the poet's attention and can be said to be in the spotlight. Previous scholarship has recognized that especially in an oral poem the more time a character spends in the spotlight, the greater is his narrative importance or narrative status. Now,

by shifting the spotlight between his characters and by expanding it to embrace more than one person, the poet portrays his characters as competitors for the valuable spotlight. The poet furthers that vision when he trains the spotlight on one character: he fashions the character as an entity that keeps others either entirely or to a great degree out of the spotlight, that keeps others from increasing their narrative status. The poet buttresses this portrayal of what it means to be a character in his poem by assigning to the characters the notion that the spotlight in future tales told by others is something over which they compete.

Extended similes in the narrator-text offer an additional forum in which the poet can portray his characters as competitors in this regard. The poet uses similes with a multiplicity of actors in the vehicle portion but only one tenor/vehicle pairing to lengthen a character's time in the spotlight and, therefore, the time that he keeps others out of the spotlight. Furthermore, by presenting a plurality in the vehicle portion, the poet points to the existence of other competitors for the spotlight. The poet can use multiple-correspondence similes (those with more than one discrete tenor/vehicle pairing) for a similar purpose. In some similes of this type, one tenor or tenor/vehicle pairing obscures another. The poet thereby portrays one character as the cause behind his curtailing the time another has or others have in the spotlight. Conversely, the poet can construct multiple-correspondence similes in which one tenor/vehicle pairing is made to keep another from sole possession of the spotlight. The vehicle portion of a simile can attend equally to two tenor/vehicle pairings, but it is more interesting to trace the following: the spotlight in the vehicle portion of a multiple-correspondence simile can expand such that one tenor's vehicle intrudes upon the space initially controlled by another tenor's vehicle and denies that tenor/vehicle pairing the entirety of the spotlight. For example, in a simile describing one warrior killing another, the spotlight can shine first on the vehicle that represents the victim but then widen to include the vehicle that represents his slayer.

In "Conclusion: The *Odyssey* Compared," I observe that generally speaking similes in the *Odyssey* do not evince the same competitive dynamics as those in the *Iliad*. The construction of similes may be one way in which Odysseus competes with the narrator, but the *Odyssey*'s characters do not respond to the narrator's images as the *Iliad*'s

characters do. For their part, many extended similes in the *Odyssey*'s narrator-text rehearse the interconnectedness of the poem's actors. It makes sense that they do not reveal a competition for the spotlight. After all, true competition for the spotlight is not something with which the epic concerns itself: Odysseus is the poem's one protagonist. Finally, we do not find competitively oriented sequences of similes either in the character-text or the narrator-text, an absence consistent with one of the poem's broader points. Whereas there are real rivalries among characters in the *Iliad*, scholarship has long noted that Odysseus has no human competitors in the *Odyssey*: he is far and away the best in both word and deed. The absence both of moments in the character-text in which a character contests over simile with another character and of moments in the narrator-text in which one simile seeks to cap a previous one mirrors this portrayal of a world in which competition between mortals never rises to the same fevered pitch as it does in the *Iliad*. All told, the *Odyssey*'s use of similes throws into relief the *Iliad*'s more frequent construction of its similes as mechanisms and sites of competition.