Introduction

A simile in an ancient Greek or Roman epic poem uses the simile form "A is like B" to frame a brief tale about something outwardly unrelated to the poem's main story. The simile structure asserts a kinship between two things that come from different conceptual domains: a warrior is like a wild beast, an ocean wave, or a dead flower.[1] But each of us must flesh out these relationships for ourselves: How are the two things alike? How are they different? How does one simile mesh with others to create a simile world that shapes an epic poem as a whole? An epic simile typically starts with an "as" phrase and ends with a "so" expression; this recapping "so," in particular, defines the extended narrative simile that characterizes epic poetry as a literary genre.[2] The "as/so" ring identifies likeness between superficially different phenomena as an explicit subject of the narrative. It fashions a border around a simile that both sets it apart and weaves it into the main story of an epic poem.[3] These deceptively simple framing expressions of likeness invite each of us to reweave those connections afresh, a process that is simultaneously intellectual, emotional, and immersive.

Most readers equate the story of an epic poem with its mythological characters and events. Homer's *Iliad* is a tale of Achilles, Hector, and the sack of Troy. Vergil's *Aeneid* tells the story of Aeneas founding Rome in part by drawing on the stories told in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* about the experiences of comparable characters. Because an epic poem presents the mythological story in a more connected and linear fashion than the stories of the individual similes, we have not tended to regard similes themselves as elements of a cohesive epic "story." But just as the story of any epic poem is woven from characters and plot, so too do the individual similes within an epic create a unified and unique *simile world*. A poem's similes band together to create an internally consistent world like any other story, peopled by individual characters, happenings, and experiences. The simile world that complements the epic mythological story is not an unchanging

transcultural baseline. Rather, it is re-imagined afresh in relation to the themes of each epic poem. Indeed, the story and simile worlds are reshaped in tandem from epic to epic. As each epic poem becomes part of the fabric of epic poetry over time, an ongoing simile world takes shape across many poems composed over many centuries. This evolving landscape resembles the epic story world of battles and heroes and voyages that comes into being through relationships among different epic poems. As the simile worlds evolve over the course of the epic tradition, so does the relationship between the simile and story worlds, with less and less separation between them. Epic narrative is woven from a warp of the mythological story world and a weft of the simile world. They are partners in creating the fabric of epic poetry.

Like Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, a poem fashioned from the similes and obituaries of the *Iliad*, my book is an answer to the question "What kind of stories emerge from ancient epic if we put similes front and center?" What do we see if we approach similes with the same assumptions of narrative significance that we grant automatically to the characters and events of the Trojan War or the Voyage of the Argonauts? First and foremost, similes are highly concentrated nuggets of immersive storytelling, which "invite the reader to construct a mental representation of the described situation that is grounded in perception, action, and emotion" (Allan 2019b: 17).[4] This feature of similes was familiar to ancient scholars, the scholiasts, who associated them with *enargeia* ("vividness").[5] Individual similes include spatial environments for the events they depict, bodily experiences of heat and rain and hunger and injury, emotional ties of love or loss, and social relationships powered by conflict, awe, or cooperation. Similes, in fact, are the most intensely embodied, immersive part of epic poetry. Moreover, like the individual scenes and characters of the mythological story, individual similes give rise to a coherent and cohesive simile world that is distinctive to an individual poem. Indeed, the themes and outlook of an epic poem reach the audience at least as much through its simile world as through the mythological story. In the context of an epic poem, a simile is not an analytical tool for dissecting experience. It is itself an experience that places us within a world that is just as important to the epic narrative as the mythological story.

Modern scholars working on embodied cognition have come to see mental processes not as fundamentally different or separate from the physical body but as closely dependent on and related to it: psychological and linguistic research has shown how someone reading words that refer to visual and spatial ideas activates areas of the brain associated with seeing

and moving. This view can shed light on virtually any kind of cognitive processing ranging from how we understand figurative language to the vividness of Homeric narrative.[6] From this perspective, similes provide a fruitful way not simply to study the immersive aspects of narrative but to "embody" it. Too often, scholarship on embodied cognition is far from embodied itself. In highly abstract language, such analyses present the phenomenon they seek to explain, but readers seeking a taste of what an embodied experience of literature would *feel* like are unlikely to find it in scholarly writing. As I will explain in more detail later in this Introduction, many of my choices of language, style, and presentation are intended to maximize the reader's experience of personal, affective engagement with the subject just as similes do in epic poetry. For example, I use the first-person plural when I refer to the experiences arising from a given simile to embody the emotional bonds created by the reading process between us and the poem as well as among different readers.

Similes about relationships offer the fullest variety of immersive features, showing the characters as they experience the world in which they live, the sensations of their own bodies during those experiences, and the feelings that bind them to other characters. Shepherding similes embody several relationships that bring out a range of themes fundamental not simply to all the poems in this book but to any exploration of the human experience. The shepherd needs skill, strength, and mutual trust to fulfill his responsibilities to his flock. The shepherd's domestic animals have feelings for one another and for their shepherd. Their behavior as a group brings forward the bonds of community and how communities respond to internal conflict or external threats. The predators, storms, and other dangers endured by both shepherds and flocks evoke the hazards that threaten a safe, stable, and orderly way of life for animals and human beings alike. Because shepherding similes explore several of the most basic themes in epic poetry by immersing us in the experiences and feelings of different kinds of creatures, this one type of simile scene offers the best view of both the simile world of a given poem and the epic narrative in which that world is found. Moreover, herding and animal scenes form part of the simile worlds of all five poems in my book. Therefore, shepherding scenes offer both a wide-ranging perspective on a particular poem and a standard by which to compare poems to one another. Such scenes define the shape and the aims of one poem, and they give a sense of the qualities unique to each poem in comparison to the others.

In the landscape of the epic similes, this book strives to be both a guidebook that describes the sights and sounds that the traveler encounters

and a safari in which we experience the feelings, emotions, and sensations of the simile world for ourselves. As we set off to explore the simile worlds of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Apollonius' *Argonautica*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, we begin our journey in this Introduction with a simile that includes many features typical of the simile world. One of the most typical features of similes is the way they create meaning, not by stating it explicitly but by the accumulation of details that invite us to forge relationships among them. It is in these relationships, and the interpretive and affective process of experiencing them, that the significance of similes lies. So too, my analysis of this simile – and of the "typical simile" that opens each chapter of the book – begins with the simile itself rather than with an overview of the main conclusions the analysis will reach. My points will emerge over the course of exploring the simile, and they are summarized at the end of the section.

I.1 Simile Shepherds and Their Flocks: Apollonius *Argonautica* 2.121–29

The opening of Book 2 of Apollonius' *Argonautica* finds Jason and the Argonauts in quest of the Golden Fleece, sailing from Greece to the city of Colchis on the eastern end of the Black Sea. On their way to Colchis, they beach their ship *Argo* in the kingdom of the Bebrycians, located just to the east of present-day Istanbul. Here, the Argonauts encounter a warlike people living under the rule of the hostile and inhospitable king Amycus. Instead of welcoming his visitors politely, as a civilized host would be expected to do, Amycus greets the new arrivals by telling them that anyone who wants to return home must box with him first. Several punches later, the Argonaut Polydeuces lands a deadly blow to Amycus' head. The Bebrycians then try to kill Polydeuces to avenge the death of their king, but instead, several of them are hurt or killed by Greek fighters. As Jason and several other Argonauts advance on the Bebrycians, a simile compares them to a pack of wolves menacing a flock of domestic sheep.

Apollonius *Argonautica* 2.121–29

And with him charged
Aeacus' sons, and with them rushed warlike Jason.
And as when countless sheep in their pens
are attacked and terrified by gray wolves on a winter day,
having eluded the keen-scented dogs and the shepherds themselves, (125)
and they seek out which animal to assail first and carry off,

as they survey many at once, while the sheep from all sides
merely huddle together as they fall over one another – thus did they
grievously terrify the arrogant Bebrycians. (after Race 2008 trans.)

ὁμοῦ δέ οἱ ἐσσεύοντο
Αἰακίδαι, σὺν δέ σφιν ἀρήιος ὦρνυτ᾽ Ἰήσων.
ὡς δ᾽ ὅτ᾽ ἐνὶ σταθμοῖσιν ἀπείρονα μῆλ᾽ ἐφόβησαν
ἤματι χειμερίῳ πολιοὶ λύκοι ὁρμηθέντες
λάθρῃ ἐυρρίνων τε κυνῶν αὐτῶν τε νομήων, (125)
μαίονται δ᾽ ὅ τι πρῶτον ἐπαΐξαντες ἕλωσιν,
πόλλ᾽ ἐπιπαμφαλόωντες ὁμοῦ, τὰ δὲ πάντοθεν αὖτως
στείνονται πίπτοντα περὶ σφίσιν· ὣς ἄρα τοί γε
λευγαλέως Βέβρυκας ὑπερφιάλους ἐφόβησαν.

As we readers leap to our mental "feet" along with the Greek fighters rushing at the Bebrycians (2.121–22), a simile comes along to interrupt our forward motion. The simile announces itself with "as when" (ὡς δ᾽ ὅτ᾽, 2.123), a common simile introductory expression that indicates that the narrative is about to change direction. Instead of attacking the Bebrycians, we now find ourselves literally reversing course along with a large herd of fleeing animals in a sheepfold (ἐνὶ σταθμοῖσιν ἀπείρονα μῆλ᾽ ἐφόβησαν, 2.123).

The antagonists of the sheep, a pack of gray wolves that rush at the sheep on a winter's day, arrive in 2.124. Now we are off and running once again, but this time as the predators who are attacking the sheep. The reader in effect has walked the paths of both antagonists, the sheep and the wolves (and thus also, the Bebrycians and the Argonauts). The bulk of the detail in the simile describes the wolves (2.125–27). First, they evade the notice of both dogs and shepherds (λάθρῃ ἐυρρίνων τε κυνῶν αὐτῶν τε νομήων, 2.125). The aptness of these additional characters is self-evident in the simile – well-tended sheep require both animal and human supervision – but unclear in the adjacent story where no characters are mentioned besides the sheep and wolf analogues. So, this verse would arouse extra attention, as we both inhabit the experiences of the sly wolves and the keen-nosed dogs and wonder how the dogs and their human masters might be related to the adjacent story.[7]

Having eluded the caretakers, the wolves now reconnoiter the herd to decide which animal to attack first (μαίονται δ᾽ ὅ τι πρῶτον ἐπαΐξαντες ἕλωσιν, / πόλλ᾽ ἐπιπαμφαλόωντες ὁμοῦ, 2.126–27). The wolves, in fact, never progress beyond spying out possible victims. The end of the simile returns to the sheep, who are piled on top of each other – and us – in a compressed heap of words (πάντοθεν αὖτως / στείνονται πίπτοντα περὶ σφίσιν, 2.127–28). We finish the simile underneath a crush of frightened

bodies whose connection to the story once again becomes unclear as it links penned-in, passive, terrified herd animals to the "arrogant" Bebrycians (ὣς ἄρα τοί γε / λευγαλέως Βέβρυκας ὑπερφιάλους ἐφόβησαν, 2.128–29).

We come away from this simile with vivid experiences of both the sheep-Bebrycians (who begin and end the comparison, the most emphatic positions not only in poetic composition but also in psychological understandings of how human beings process and remember sequences, Smith 2008) and the wolf-Argonauts (whose behavior is described at the greatest length). Moreover, the simile is full of sensory details, many of which would linger in part because they have no clear relevance to the story: the weather is cold (ἤματι χειμερίῳ, 2.124), the wolves are gray (πολιοὶ λύκοι, 2.124), the dogs have a keen sense of smell (ἐυρρίνων τε κυνῶν, 2.125). As a group, these individual details create a lively scene in which we inhabit the experiences of both sheep and wolves and so of both Argonauts and Bebrycians, even while the Bebrycians are some of the most violent and uncivilized of the peoples encountered by the Argonauts along their journey. While the lush detail in the simile creates an engaging sensory experience for us, it also raises unanswered (and unanswerable) questions about the relationships between the simile and the story. Our experience of epic similes arises in large part from grappling with such questions, even – or especially – when we cannot fix on specific answers. What does it imply for the human fighters in the mythological story that the simile takes place in the winter? Is there a story analogue to the behavior of the wolves who "survey" their prey before deciding which one to kill first? In what way does the frontal assault of the Greek fighters (2.121–22) relate to the wolves sneaking into (λάθρῃ, 2.125) the sheep's pen?

We cannot know for sure, in part because the story never describes the Greek attack that precedes the simile. Instead, the Greek soldiers' assault on the Bebrycians is narrated by the simile itself. When the simile begins, the Greeks are rushing at the Bebrycians; when it ends, the defeated Bebrycians are fleeing in all directions. The intervening step unfolds between the wolves and the sheep, not between the human combatants. Similes regularly fill such silences, telling parts of the epic tale that are not included in the main story.[8] These gaps themselves are carriers of meaning through both the interpretations that we create in order to fill them and the subjective experience of these gaps as places where meaning comes not from words and content but from empty space. When the edges of a mythological story on either side of a simile do not join up smoothly with each other, it falls to us to weave together the simile and the story to create the poem's narrative. The meaning of a simile, in fact, is fashioned from

both the connections that it forges ("wolves are like Greek fighters") and the gaps that it opens up ("who in the story corresponds to the dogs and shepherds in the simile?").

Regardless of how we respond to those gaps, our immersion in the landscape of the simile world creates a subjective, embodied experience of an epic poem that arouses a bodily rather than a lexical response from us. Describing and analyzing this experience inevitably offers a pale shadow of the experience itself both for your author and for you, the reader. But for travelers in the world of epic poetry, as for travelers anywhere, knowing what to expect and how to make the most of our experience can lead to a more satisfying trip. Following the simile shepherd through the different relationships in which he participates will show us a road map that – like similes – makes a broad narrative terrain more approachable and engaging. Shepherding similes, a motif common to all five poems in this book in which the main characters have a wide range of embodied and emotional experiences, offer a good overview of the simile worlds of epic narrative.

I.2 Shepherds and the Simile World: "Pattern"

Relationships among the typical shepherding characters in *Argonautica* 2.121–29 – both within the simile and between the simile and the adjacent story – help to establish the tone and themes of the *Argonautica* as a whole. Although dangerous wild animals menace a shepherd's charges in several similes besides this one, no domestic animals in similes in the *Argonautica* come to any real harm. This simile is one of several in which the predator frightens or threatens the flock without hurting any of them. In fact, just as the simile of wolves and sheep narrates the otherwise missing clash between Greek and Bebrycian fighters, so too the fleeing Bebrycians who follow the simile (2.128–36) may supply the end of this simile by implying that the sheep, like the Bebrycians, escaped unharmed.

In a scenario that is unique to the simile world of the *Argonautica*, various shepherds take strategic actions that put their animals out of harm's way, preventing a predator from threatening them in the first place. One group of herders in the simile world of the *Argonautica*, for example, shut their flocks into their pens before a wild animal can get to them, and their careful advance planning is one of the main subjects of the simile: "for beforehand the shepherds themselves have shut them in their pens" (πρὸ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἐνὶ σταθμοῖσι νομῆες / ἔλσαν, 1.1246–47). "For beforehand" (πρὸ γάρ) draws us into the shepherds' thought process as they make a plan to protect their sheep, and the intensifier "the shepherds

themselves" (αὐτοὶ . . . νομῆες) highlights both the actions of the shepherds and their bond with the flocks. In this simile – in contrast to the wily wolves in 2.131–39 – the hungry predator cannot figure out how to get past the shepherds' defenses. Through simile vignettes of shepherds who make and carry out plans to keep their animals safe, the *Argonautica* establishes the positive force of human expertise as a key theme of the poem. While the shepherds in the *Argonautica* differ from the shepherds in other poems, the *Argonautica* similes about human relationships – also a feature of the simile worlds of all five of our poems – depict feelings as even stronger and more powerful than the human intellect. The mythological story of the *Argonautica* is, of course, the sum of all its individual scenes and happenings and characters. In the same way, the individual scenes and characters of the various similes in the *Argonautica* create a simile world with consistent features that define this particular poem.

By and large, the shepherds in the simile world of the *Argonautica* are watching over their animals and keeping them safe from harm. But shepherds in other epics do not fare as well. For instance, *Iliad* shepherds often fall short in their responsibilities, both because they are defeated by enemies who are stronger than they are and because they make mistakes – or fail to show up at all – when danger threatens their animals. The *Iliad* explores themes of bad or ineffective leadership in no small part through the experiences of its simile shepherds.[9] *Aeneid* shepherds, meanwhile, almost never appear in the same simile as domestic animals; when shepherds and their flocks do interact, they relate to each other with fear and conflict rather than trust and harmony. Like Aeneas, Dido, and Turnus, these shepherds and their flocks inhabit a world where meaningful emotional connections are the exception rather than the rule, and relationships may be even more painful and destructive than loneliness. In each poem, herding motifs in the simile world help to depict key themes about leadership, authority, and bonds between people. By contrast, there are no herders at all in the simile world of the *Metamorphoses*, a poem that takes delight in placing the central characters of earlier epics on the sidelines and focusing on previously marginal figures instead. Such sidelined heroes of earlier epics characterize both the story world – the mere four verses devoted to the tragedy of Dido is a famous example (*Metamorphoses* 14.78–81) – and the simile world.

Within the *Argonautica*, capable shepherds form one thread of a narrative that is keenly interested in the power of human knowledge, strategy, and expertise to shape the world.[10] But in the larger simile world found across multiple epics, the successful shepherds in the *Argonautica* are

outliers whose success becomes even more striking in contrast to their more feckless and less attentive colleagues. A simile world is part of the narrative not simply within an individual poem but across multiple epics. In many cases, individual similes in post-Homeric epics allude to specific passages in earlier literature, and meanings are created in their new contexts in part through precise relationships with these earlier contexts. Indeed, similes resemble allusions because they juxtapose two superficially unrelated things from which we are invited to create connections and meaning about both the narrative itself and the narrative process.[11] But even without an allusion to specific passages from earlier epic, the simile world of the *Argonautica* takes on its unique coloring in part alongside the simile worlds found in other poems.

For various reasons, we have not explored these simile worlds before, in large part because the ways that similes tell their individual stories do not invite us to put them together to fashion larger tales. For one thing, the structures that weave a simile into the narrative connect it to the adjacent story rather than to other similes. And because most similes feature nameless, timeless, self-contained scenes, they do not foster the chronological and causal links that we naturally create when we build longer stories out of individual incidents.[12] The absence of such ties fosters the illusion that similes across the centuries exist in an unchanging natural or precultural landscape shared by all epic poems, which in fact is far from true. While we can reframe the mythological story component of an epic poem as a series of individual events that happen to specific people – as something that we can summarize, however superficially and simplistically, one step at a time – similes barely exist as individual discrete stories that can be summarized. Their meaning cannot be understood apart from the fabric of connections that they weave with multiple storytelling contexts and the experiences that they create for us. The stories of the simile world of an epic poem are, quite simply, less congenial to conventional interpretive tools than the mythological story.[13]

For many of the same reasons, the challenges of analyzing similes extend to scholarly interpretations as well. Because similes are defined by webs of relationships, they mean several things at once, depending on the specific vantage point from which we approach them. Yet academic studies of similes almost without exception are organized around a single main idea, and whichever features of similes are most relevant to that idea. This approach unavoidably produces a partial view of the rich variety of roles that similes play in shaping epic narrative. Even foundational analyses that argue for the "multiplicity" of similes (such as Fränkel 1921 and West

1969) use "multiple" in one particular sense: both of these influential studies strive to correct the idea – stretching back to ancient literary critics – that a given simile has only one point of contact with the adjacent story, and our job is to identify what that point of contact might be. While it is both important and useful, this sense of "multiple" is also limited. It leaves out most of the multiplicities that similes create.

Books on similes within a single epic poem effectively bring together the various threads that weave similes into one particular epic narrative, at the cost of seeing individual poems within a larger epic story told by multiple poems over the course of several centuries.[14] The largest proportion of such studies focus on Homeric epic, both because Homeric poetry has more similes than later epics and because it sets the baseline for those later poems.[15] Conversely, wide-ranging studies of "the simile" can show us sweeping vistas of the simile as a narrative or rhetorical technique but limited views of how the object of study functions within its poetic habitats.[16] All of these approaches are useful; none of them is adequate to the engaging and elusive power of the same-yet-different paradox that is a simile. How, then, can a single approach embrace the different kinds of multiplicities found in epic similes without becoming so broad or diffuse as to be unworkable?

To do justice to epic similes, they should be studied both within the immediate narrative contexts in which they appear and within the many webs of meaning that they create. Some of these are found within a single poem while others emerge across multiple poems over time. To some extent, this approach is a contradiction in terms because a bodily sensation or a multifaceted relationship cannot easily be captured in a single verbal description. But even though key aspects of similes in some fundamental sense lie beyond conventional verbal forms of analysis, we can learn a great deal by openly admitting these challenges and forging ahead as best we can. Similes use words to convey several forms of meaning and experience at the same time. This book will strive to do the same by drawing on the variety of approaches to similes in Greek and Roman epic, complemented by ways of thinking about how people engage with similes that focus more than literary criticism has done on the nonverbal and the experiential.[17]

I.3 Similes and the Mythological Story

At the story level, whether and how individuals and groups interact in fighting scenes resembles the various relationships that unfold in shepherding scenes of the simile world across multiple epic poems. Indeed, battle is