

BOOK REVIEW

The Artistry of the Homeric Simile. By William C. SCOTT. Hanover and London: University Press of New England (also Dartmouth College Library and Dartmouth College Press), 2009. Pp. 267. Paper, \$45.00. ISBN 978-1-58465-797-2.

“Things seen are things as seen”: useful here is this similetic and subtly metaphorical phrase, engaging seeming and seeing, from Wallace Stevens’ *Adagia*. (Stevens often seems useful when thinking about simile and the like.) A simile encourages a simultaneous *thelxis* (enchantment) and *thauma* (amazement): we imagine the world represented but also note the ways in which the words (and our imagined narrator) create that world. This double movement allows us to feel the force of the *comparanda* together, while the explicit simile still reminds us that they are not the same—that we are seeing (hearing, reading) a version of the world. The Homeric *hōs* acknowledges the mediating comparison, highlights the alembication of language that helps us to imagine what we imagine, encourages a critical reflection that balances an illusion of identity (*thelxis*), and invites our admiration of that poetic language (*thauma*). This is, however, not the lament or disillusionment that we find in later theoretical accounts of the inconcinnity of language and world. Homeric similes, rather, celebrate the temporary concinnity of the *comparanda*, a likeness made real in the language of the simile. The balancing of *thelxis* (enchantment) with *thauma* (admiration) also encourages attention to the role of the simile on the narrative, its topical felicity, as well as both the local and distant force of the comparisons within the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

William Scott in this good book focuses on the latter, on the thematic and narrative role of the similes in the Homeric poems. Scott uses a flexible hermeneutic triangle for the creation of meaning and coherence: a creating poet (for Scott, confidently, Homer, not “Homer”), a fertile oral tradition that enhances (not diminishes) meaning, and a co-creating audience. In the case of the last of these, Scott teases out very well an early audience’s ability not only to recognize adaptations of the received formulaic and thematic store, but also to notice significant absences or adaptations, which become part of how the poems do what they do.

This book acts somewhat like “further thoughts” on his earlier book, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile* (1974). The earlier book’s program was to develop the context for Homeric similes within an oral tradition (*Oral Nature* 11): “the actual handling of the simile—the placement, the choice of subject matter, the use of the simile in telling the tale, and the technique by which the simile is extended (...).” This new book advertizes itself on the first page of the preface (vii) as a complement, now focusing on “the aesthetic qualities that Homer sought in forming each simile,” i.e., “the variations and modifications to each of the topics that Homer employs in order to make similes blend expressively with the larger context.” Scott is committed to a consistent view of authorial intent and the literary unity of each epic. While at times his attribution of authorial intent may be too sanguine (e.g., 40), it is explicit, consistent, and in many ways a useful counterbalance to an uncritical hermeneutic of suspicion in some other studies of texts. Scott’s insistence on the roles of reception and cultural/poetic context also give balance and depth to the attributions of authorial intent.

Chapter 1 (Similes, the Shield of Achilles, and Other Digressions) is a lively and clear introduction, creating an interpretive frame within which similes are manifestations of narrative features found in other passages, most notably ekphrasis. This chapter can even be read on its own for a clear account of Scott’s view of Homeric narrative.

Chapter 2 (The Simileme: the Background of the Homeric Simile) sets out a theoretical background. Scott notes the relation of his “non-verbal similemes” to Nagler’s “root” and “allomorphs” (see Garvie’s introduction to his Cambridge commentary on *Odyssey* 6–8 for a good *précis* of Nagler’s generative approach). Especially good in this chapter is the discussion (31–2) of the lion and Penelope at *Odyssey* 4.791 (although p. 212, n. 46 talks of stored scripts, which, in its focus on the actual words, seems to fit less well with Scott’s non-verbal similemes.)

Chapter 3 (Homer’s Use of Similes to Delineate Character and Plot) discusses *Iliad* 2, 21–22, and 11. Scott brings out the ironic undercutting in unwarlike aspects of the similes (e.g. 59, 74, 93)—a welcome affirmation and illustration of the self-conscious complexity of Homeric narrative, especially in his further reference to Homeric ekphrasis. This irony is particularly well presented in reference to the cluster of similes that precedes the catalogue (60 ff.). Here and elsewhere, Scott gives considerable summary of passages in the epics, but it is useful, interpretive summary. He recasts the passages with a focus on the narrative force of the similes; e.g., the summary of similes in *Iliad* 2 (59–65) shapes the subsequent analysis well. In fact, all the chapters have good introduc-

tions and summative codas that help orient the reader (e.g., in this chapter the coda on pp. 89–93). (The talk of generative “rules” [58] gives me pause, but more on this below.)

Chapter 4 (Similes to Delineate a Narrative Theme) treats *Iliad* 12 and 5, then *Odyssey* 22 and 5. Scott’s *modus operandi* is very clear here: outline and characterize the book (e.g., 112–16, 118–26) then show how similes support his reading. Scott sums it up (127): “In each of these books the themes are carried principally through the narrative; never does the simile control the direction of the story. Yet the similes are a wonderfully subtle and flexible device to enhance and bring into focus the essential features of that narrative.” Scott has written a patient book, one that will frustrate readers in a hurry—and this, I think, is a good thing. Less patient readers can, however, get a taste of the virtues of the more detailed discussion in the above-mentioned summative codas to each chapter (for this chapter 126–9).

Chapter 5 (Problem Books), on *Iliad* 13, 17, and 16 (in that order), is perhaps the strongest and most convincing. Scott builds on the relationship he has established earlier between simile and narrative to explain the artistry, coherence, and, he argues, intentional complexity underlying the apparent structural problems some find in these books. E.g., on the “purposeful confusion” of *Iliad* 13 (p. 137): “The similes reinforce the theme of directionlessness in the clash of forces; in effect, the similes remain one of the strongest uniting threads in the book, a strong clue that the poet did have a constant purpose in forming this collection of seemingly independent units.” Scott shows a high degree of trust in a composer’s control and an audience’s ability to discern the changes, adaptations, and reordering in traditional themes. While he goes farther than I would, the generosity of attention and the close analysis of the passages can reward even the skeptical reader.

The final chapter (The Creative Poet and the Co-creating Audience) spins out the role of reception that Scott has insisted on throughout the book. The presumption of an audience’s role in creating meaning is not novel, but it is well used here to explain specific scenes and passages. More liable to raise eyebrows is the depth to which Scott takes his interpretation of the mind of a simile maker (176 ff.)—the speculative psychologizing is odd, but Scott acknowledges it as such. More useful here is a return to the assumption of a critical and reflective audience (in the terms I’ve been using, *thauma* not just *thelxis*). The audience is assumed to sweep along with the story, but also to recognize the ways in which this narrative is innovating and shaping the tradition (see, e.g., 180, 188). Of cru-

cial importance here is his affirmation of and alignment with those who argue that the oral tradition adds meaning—that it allows something like a ground against which the individual poem or scene can create its figure (e.g., 185).

The book ends with an appendix (Charts of Similemes: The Basic Motifs), which will be a useful reference. But this brings me to a difficulty I have with the book: it has an apparent lack of interest in surfaces, the actual words and lines of the poems, the actual material from which we imagine the oral tradition. His project is to think about themes and generative structures. Scott, in his generative bent, treats the abstraction, in this case the *simileme*, as the locus of explanatory force. This can be useful. Nevertheless, I find it less congenial for those who do not share or do not put as much stock in the generative interpretation of poetic (or, for that matter, of linguistic) phenomena. Many see the manifest surface—the words of the poem, the rhythmical lines, the particularity of words in particular order in particular lines—as more central, more real, more laden with hermeneutic power, than any presumed, abstracted, imagined deep structure. The book would benefit from attention to the language—treating the material surface, the words and lines of the poem, as a source of meaning and engine of the tradition, and treating the abstraction (deep structure, similemes, etc.) as a more contingent albeit useful tool we devise to think about it.

I fear that Scott might object to being characterized as such, but so the drift of his argument leads. One manifestation of this is that all similes appear in translation without quoting the Greek—not even in a footnote. It fits with his approach, focusing on theme, but I miss some closer attention to the play of the language. The very processes he explicates in generative terms could also be described in terms of reworking old language into the present, into new contexts, not the use of pre-verbal or non-verbal similemes. Were Scott to bring light to the Greek lines as we have them, perhaps the themes and interpretations he proposes could be recast as a literary artist bringing old *language* into the present for a new audience (Javanese *jarwa dhosok*). Such an approach could preserve Scott's insistence on authorial intent and could still explain the phenomenon of the similes as significant in the narrative. It would still keep in play the tripartite hermeneutic of tradition, poet, and audience, but would avoid the appearance of attributing primacy to a putative generative simileme or theme. In this way he could have bridged the gap, a bit, between (to use the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's formulation) the "laws and instances" camp and the "cases and interpretations" camp.

Nevertheless, the book is compelling and useful, and grows more convincing on second reading. While we may not agree with all of Scott's assumptions (or the degree to which he takes them), he does set out his case: strong authorial control coupled with the audience's intimate awareness of the tradition allows the similes to appear in unexpected contexts and to foreground significant absences—absences that become part of what it all means. Scott consistently sees similes as underscoring the dehumanizing and delusional effect of the heroic code and the futility of the war it creates (e.g., 68, 100, 101–102, 110, 117). Scott assumes throughout that the similes are made fit for their particular contexts; that they support, enhance, deepen, ironize, undercut, or otherwise interact with the surface narrative. They are integral to understanding and interpretation, not appended to it. Scott leaves us with a humane reading of the epics, in which the similes contribute mightily to the “reality” of the narrative. In such a generous synthesis, Scott's Homeric poetics appear to “let be be finale of seem” (Stevens again, from “The Emperor of Ice Cream”). “Things seen” and “things as seen” come together, creating a new reality fully implicated in the similetic versions that interact to create, in the end, a newly understood world.