

BOOK REVIEW

Character, Narrator, and Simile in the Iliad. By Jonathan L. READY. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. x + 323. Hardcover, \$93.00/£55.00. ISBN 978-0-521-19064-0

In this thoroughly-researched, stimulating work, Jonathan Ready argues that similes can function as mechanisms of competition within the Iliadic narrative. Ready's introduction lays out in broad terms his conception of the "competitive dynamics" created by the poet, the characters, and the narrator of the *Iliad*. Similes construct the competitive dynamics of the *Iliad* in the following ways: 1) characters use similes to compete as verbal artists; 2) characters use similes to compete with the narrator, in the sense that they will "seek to top" (4) a simile used by the narrator with their own; 3) the narrator uses similes in his description of the competitions between characters, especially on the battlefield; and 4) the narrator uses similes as a means of conferring narrative attention, a honor for which the characters are striving.

In Chapter 1, Ready deconstructs the "A is like B" proposition of similes, showing that the nuance of a simile is not revealed in a direct comparison between A (the tenor) and B (the vehicle), but rather in the degree of actual likeness between A and B. A simile is defined by the degree of difference, or distance, between tenor and vehicle; the comparison by the degree of similarity, or proximity, between tenor and vehicle; and the likeness is defined by an ambiguous distance. The assessment of degree of actual likeness plays a central role in Ready's later analyses.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 address how similes are used in character-text to distinguish the speakers as competent verbal artists. In Chapter 2, Ready analyzes several stand-alone similes in a variety of discursive contexts to demonstrate how similes can enrich the rhetoric of a speech. In Chapter 3, as a preparation for following chapters, Ready outlines how characters can challenge a speaker's deployment of a simile by reusing and/or recharacterizing that simile in his own speech. Chapter 4 is the first analysis of such sequences of similes, with Ready paying particularly close attention to how the "recycling" character challenges the message or intent of the originating character. In chapters 5 and 6, Ready ex-

pands his scope to include similes spoken by the narrator. In Chapter 5, he claims that similes spoken by characters might expand upon or exploit the narrator's similes, or they might challenge or repudiate the rhetoric of the narrator's similes by reusing or recharacterizing the motifs in their own similes. Chapter 6 focuses solely on the narrator's use of simile to describe characters in martial contests. When the narrator uses similes or sequences of similes in his descriptions of battlefield valor, he amplifies the exploits of one character at the expense of the rest. Ready claims that this method has an "agonistic orientation" (211), as it contributes to the conception of characters as competitors for the narrative "spotlight," hoping to accrue "narrative status" (222).

Ready's strength is the care he takes in unpacking each simile, whether it stands alone or is in sequence. His treatment of the simile sequencing between Achilles and Phoinix in Book 9 is an especially fine example of how this works: in the course of his rejection of Agamemnon's offerings, Achilles compares himself to a mother bird, working hard to bring nourishment back to her chicks, but enjoying none of the spoils herself; Phoinix, in response, offers another simile of parenting in comparing Peleus' love for him (Phoinix) to the love of a father for an only son. Ready's close reading reveals how Phoinix recharacterizes parental love in a way that emphasizes love for a child rather than the work that goes into meeting his needs, offering a more mature understanding of obligation to home and community than Achilles can understand. Readings like these are the highlight of each chapter, and shine a bright light on the rhetorical value of comparative figures. Yet the sharpness of Ready's insight is blunted somewhat by his attempt to find comparable competitive dynamics at both the story level and text level of the *Iliad*. The chapters focusing on character-text are successful because Ready begins by assuming that Iliadic characters speak in competitively-charged atmosphere, and that each verbal engagement offers an opportunity to display virtuosity. Not all of the similes he examines are spoken in explicitly competitive contexts, yet the argument holds that the successful manipulation of comparative figures would distinguish a speaker among his peers. But Ready does not completely succeed in convincing the reader that the text level is governed by similarly competitive dynamics. He couches his argument that characters and the narrator compete via simile in a discussion of metalepsis (or paralepsis), the phenomenon of factual seepage between text and story levels that allows a character to remark on more than he ought to know within the logical confines of the story. But simile reuse and recharacterization is not dependent on knowledge of plot points, but rather, as Ready himself explains, on a facility with improvisation. Sim-

ilarly, the “agonistic orientation” of the narrator’s extended similes names the narrator as the orchestrator of the competitive dynamic, not the characters. Ready’s point that the characters display a marked interest in how their personal narratives will unfold after their death is well-taken, but does not lend immediate support to the suggestion that *if* they knew their battlefield exploits were being narrated, they would want to be in the spotlight as much as possible. These arguments distract somewhat from Ready’s otherwise engaging readings, but ultimately do not diminish the final result. In his conclusion, Ready reminds his reader that his goal was not to assess similes as mnemonic or interpretive aids, or as clues about the nature of life in the Bronze Age, but rather as rhetorical weapons deployed in competitive verbal contests. At this he is largely successful.

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