

BOOK REVIEW

Simile and Identity in Ovid's Metamorphoses. By MARIE LOUISE VON GLINSKI. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. vi + 173. Hardcover, £55.00/\$95.00. ISBN 978-0-521-76096-6.

Von Glinski examines the role of simile in the *Metamorphoses* as engaging central narrative, thematic, and literary aspects of the epic, emphasizing especially the tensions inherent in the identity of the newly transformed. Carefully distinguishing simile from metaphor, often conflated, she argues that both the similarities and the differences inherent in the structure of the simile are central to its significance in its narrative context. The book comprises four chapters, each showing how simile can be a useful tool for approaching a broad theme within the poem. The first two chapters focus on the ways similes express the identity of characters within the poem; the last two chapters focus on the ways similes express the identity of the poem itself. Each uses a simile as starting point for discussion of an episode and its broader thematic concerns. Von Glinski's approach of close reading, considering the formal properties of the simile, is a valuable and productive one as it brings the literary qualities of the poem into conversation with the larger thematic issues. The central ideas of each chapter are compelling ways of reconsidering the poem, and many of the individual points are insightful readings of the episodes. But occasionally imprecision or unclear structure makes those close readings difficult to follow.

Chapter 1 considers the figure of the simile as negotiating the tension between the old and new identities in the process of metamorphosis. Providing a brief survey of scholarship and ancient discussions of simile and metaphor, she argues for a careful distinction between them; unlike metaphor, which posits equivalence, simile establishes similarity between distinct entities while at the same time preserving difference. She proceeds to examine how similes express different points in the process of metamorphosis. Similes capture the double nature of the newly transformed as the relationship between tenor and vehicle conveys the persistence of aspects of the previous in the new form. The simile comparing Actaeon, transformed into a deer, to a suppliant represents the tension between his human intention and new animal form; the onlookers' misin-

terpretation of the sight provides metapoetic commentary on the nature of similes as providing an alternate interpretation through figurative language. Similes can also concentrate the mysterious moment of change. The transformation of stones cast by Deucalion and Pyrrha into humans uses the image of sculpture to represent the process, while the transformations of Lichas and Adonis use scientific imagery, engaging broader issues of credulity and explanatory authority granted by myth, art, science.

Chapter 2 focuses on the ways similes negotiate the representation and identity of gods in the poem. The necessity for gods to disguise themselves in their encounters with humans combined with the disguise implied by the conventional anthropomorphism of gods even as “themselves” means that the appearance of the gods is always at issue in the poem (45). When they enter the mortal realm in disguise, gods complicate the divisions between animal, human, divine; similes allow one figure to occupy more than one of those positions simultaneously. Von Glinski’s discussion of the simile comparing the cries of Apollo grieving over the death of Coronis to the lowing of a cow watching the sacrifice of her calf on an altar is a nuanced reading of the ways the simile complicates notions of piety and divine agency, and ultimately brings Apollo close to the human experience of grieving for mortal death, from which gods are usually restricted.

Chapter 3 considers how the simile as literary figure, through its use, content, and context, highlights the generic diversity of the poem. In this chapter, intertextuality, an important component of Von Glinski’s methodology throughout, plays a larger role as she considers the literary heritage and specific allusions within similes as lending a concentrated richness to the narrative. Her discussion of the simile comparing the sea storm in the Ceyx and Alcyone episode to a battlefield effectively brings out the epic associations: the use of an extended simile evokes the long tradition of such similes in epic, and the vehicle of battlefield, soldier, captured city brings in the content of martial epic. But this discussion suffers from a lack of contextualizing overview of the episode; this tendency, here and elsewhere, has a disorienting effect and makes Von Glinski’s individual observations about the larger thematic significance of similes—often excellent points—more difficult to follow. Occasionally her observations about details of language are not supported with adequate quotation or argumentation. One of the more interesting arguments in this discussion is the incompatibility of Ceyx’s elegiac persona with this epic context; though Von Glinski brings in parallel passages from the *Tristia* and Propertius, the point about Ceyx specifically is

largely unsupported. This is one example of an insightful argument left underdeveloped.

Chapter 4 considers the metapoetic aspects of similes that engage the fictionality of the epic. Similes that exploit the distance between the perspective of those within the narrative and that of the reader of the poem “reflect on the nature of illusion” (116). The similes that compare Narcissus to a statue as he gazes on his reflection and that represent the intangible unreality of dreams in the House of Sleep prompt larger discussions of the relationship between verbal and visual representation, the potential for figurative language to provide a concrete perspective on the abstract and illusive. The aetiological premise of the epic suggests that “the fictional past accounts for the real present” (141); anachronism, then, as in the comparison of the color of Atalanta’s body to the effect of light on an awning in the theater, is one of the clearest and most common ways that similes break the fictional boundary of the epic.

In the end, despite some of the weaknesses in its particulars, von Glinski provides a compelling analysis and rich avenues for exploring the role of simile in the *Metamorphoses*. She brings out well the flexibility of the simile as poetic figure, showing how it can provide commentary on characters, on the text, and more broadly on the nature of perception and interpretation.

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