

EPIC SIMILES

BECK (D.) *The Stories of Similes in Greek and Roman Epic*. Pp. xii + 279. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £85, US\$110. ISBN: 978-1-108-48179-3.

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B. has produced an ambitious and helpful book that treats the thematic significance of similes in a variety of Greek and Roman epic poems, covering the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Apollonius' *Argonautica*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The book comprises an introduction and five main chapters: Chapter 1: 'Homer *Odyssey*: Heroism, Home, and Family', Chapter 2: 'Homer *Iliad*: Leadership and Loss', Chapter 3: 'Apollonius *Argonautica*: Gender, Emotion, and the Limits of Human Skill', Chapter 4: 'Virgil *Aeneid*: Rage and Isolation' and Chapter 5: 'Ovid *Metamorphoses*: Stories of *Eros* and Epic'; and it ends with a conclusion, bibliography and indexes. I include the chapter titles here because each subheading is an accurate preview of a given chapter's analytical approach to the similes of the epic under discussion. Each chapter uses endnotes, a decision that B. defends at the end of the introduction (p. 19).

I will outline the book's argument and theoretical approach with examples from Chapter 1 and then conclude with some evaluative comments. There is a fair amount of conceptual vocabulary in B.'s introduction, beginning with the term 'simile world', which B. characterises as the aggregated creation of a given epic's similes, which 'band together to create an internally consistent world like any other story, peopled by individual characters, happenings, and experiences' (p. 1). The relation of a given epic's similes to the larger work is conceptually framed via a weaving metaphor (pp. 10–16), featuring, firstly, a 'pattern': the content of and internal relationship between similes in an epic that contribute to the creation of that epic's simile world, and, secondly, a 'weave': the framing of similes (structural features of introduction and conclusion) that creates a relationship between the simile world and that outside of it: the 'story world'.

The structure of the book is complex owing to the asymmetry between the enormous scope of investigation (how similes work in five Greek and Roman epics) and reasonable length (279 pages): its contents resist easy summary precisely because of B.'s focus on the contextual particularities of individual similes linked by larger poetic themes, but B. provides a useful 'roadmap' of the work in the introduction (pp. 16–18). Her analysis focuses on similes belonging to the following categories: shepherds, herd animals, craftsman, sailors and 'human beings' (p. 16), the last category largely pertaining to how humans exist in relationships to one another.

Each chapter is divided into a somewhat regular sequence of parts. Part 1 features a close reading of a simile as a thematic synecdoche for its epic (e.g. the homecoming simile at *Od.* 5.392–9 as representing a programmatic, Odyssean vision of homecoming). Part 2 treats the way in which the simile world of a given epic is formed (e.g. the similes of the *Odyssey* prominently feature human beings and relationships as a function of the epic's emphasis on these relationships). Part 3 analyses the way in which the simile world interacts with the story world of a given epic (e.g. when Odysseus is particularly isolated, the similes surrounding him tend to lack humans). Part 4 generally picks up a thematic thread introduced by the simile of Part 1 and consists of several close readings of related similes (e.g. similes from books 16, 19 and 23 of the *Odyssey* are particularly suited to drawing out mixed and complex reactions to reunion as the notional culmination of Odysseus' homecoming). Starting with Chapters 3 and 4, this arrangement becomes

gradually less stable, first by featuring sections explicitly dealing with the poetic antecedents of similes from the *Argonautica* and the *Aeneid*, and culminating in Chapter 5, in which the somewhat predictable structure of the earlier chapters' narrative is largely abandoned. This breakdown in sequence is intentional (p. 18) given Chapter 5's treatment of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, famous for its own playful engagement with epic narrative. My impression is that each chapter can stand on its own, so readers who are primarily interested in how similes work in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* could read the introduction and Chapter 5 with much profit. B. writes in a deliberately accessible way (pp. 18–19), and in considering my own usual areas of teaching, I think Chapters 1 and 2 would work well in an advanced undergraduate or (post-)graduate discussion on Homer or Homeric simile.

B.'s conclusions on the 'story' of similes in each epic are convincing and demonstrate the involvement of larger poetic themes; for example, even in its similes the concept of absent or inept leaders runs throughout the *Iliad*. Overall, the book consists of a principled selection of case studies. In one highlight B. chooses a somewhat unassuming simile at the end of *Argonautica* 1 (pp. 129–31) and demonstrates that time is there characterised by discrete, quantitative units of measure rather than through a continuous flow of human experience (as it frequently is in the Homeric epics). In another B.'s analysis of the *Aeneid*'s final simile (12.905–16) and its Homeric and Lucretian antecedents is particularly strong (pp. 197–204).

Although the book focuses on select categories of similes in five epics, its analysis relies on a complete inventory of similes for which B. and R. van der Horst have created a digital database (<https://epic-similes-beck.la.utexas.edu/>). This is an excellent resource that includes detailed search criteria according to simile content, length, starting and ending metrical feet, narrator and more. It also demonstrates the enormous amount of painstaking work that facilitates the book's more selective analyses.

Regarding the explication of the book's motivation and conceptual framework, I had some *desiderata*. On the topic of conceptual terminology, B.'s use of the noun 'embodiment' and particularly of the verb 'to embody' (often with inanimate subjects such as e.g. 'word' [p. 27], 'verb' [p. 76], 'word order' [p. 118] etc.) is jarring to me given the importance of 'embodiment' as a technical term in a variety of intellectual traditions (including cognitive linguistics) that challenge clear distinctions between language/thought, mind/body and emotion/cognition. I do not expect every monograph in Classics to engage with such theories, but B. in fact cites several works aligned with cognitive linguistics, particularly in note 17 of the introduction (p. 22). Consequently, the short shrift given to what 'embodiment' or 'embodied cognition' might mean for similes surprised me.

Specifically, I think this terminology could have been clarified by closer engagement with J. Ready's application of Frame Semantics to Homeric simile (J. Ready, *The Homeric Simile in Comparative Perspectives* [2018], pp. 231–8), which argues that one can understand the 'templates' of early epic simile through systematic conceptual correspondence between the movements of bodies/objects through space. Ready's analysis is a pre-existing theory of 'embodiment' in Homeric simile that B.'s work could have challenged or extended to the similes in later epic. Relatedly, from a cognitive linguistic perspective, a statement such as 'Similes, in fact, are the most intensely embodied, immersive part of epic poetry' (p. 2) requires more extensive argumentation, since this presupposes a transparent ranking of how 'intensely' language is embodied/immersive. These comments are meant as fodder for future conversations generated by B.'s impressive work, which I would recommend to anyone interested in the 'stories' of epic similes.

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