Queering the Simile: Being 'Like' in Ancient Epic and Contemporary Queer Poetry

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Submitted for the degree of DPhil in Classical Languages and Literature

Revised with major corrections following examination, and accompanied by a corrections report

92,637 words

Acknowledgements

I am above all thankful to my supervisors, Professor Costanze Güthenke and Dr Sebastian Matzner, for their expertise, support, and patience not only while guiding this thesis, but through my time as student more generally, from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. I would have not begun nor been able to continue this project without their sustained understanding and encouragement, for which I am incredibly grateful. My gratitude also goes to Professor Fiona Macintosh and the community she fostered at the APGRD, an incredibly important space for the study of classical reception at the University of Oxford and beyond. I also want to thank Dr Adrian Kelly, Dr Rebecca Armstrong, Dr Emma Greensmith, Professor Stephen Heyworth, Dr Sarah Cullinan-Herring, and Professor Giuseppe Pezzini for their constructive comments at the transfer and confirmation stages, which helped improve various parts of the thesis and its arguments. The thesis was completed with the generous financial support of the AHRC and the OOC DTP in conjunction with the Clarendon Fund.

I also want to express my endless gratitude for the formal and informal conversations with various colleagues, mentors and friends that have shaped my thesis and my positioning as a scholar and writer more generally. Thank you to Dr Ezra Badou, Dr Marcus Bell, Nicolette D'Angelo, Marta Martín Díaz, Dr Claire Heseltine, Dr Zoë Jennings, Dr Giovanna di Martino, Dr Justine McConnell, Professor David Ricks, Dr Mathura Umachandran, and Dr Marchella Ward. In particular, this thesis would not have been at all possible without my involvement in the Queer and the Classical (QATC) research project, a role that provided me with both a great deal of inspiration and encouragement throughout the years. I am incredibly grateful to both Marcus and Nicolette, without whom QATC would not exist, Marta and Claire for the roles they assumed and everything they poured into the project, and everyone else who joined our committees throughout the years, spoke at our seminars and conferences, and generally engaged us online, via email, in person, or simply as an attendee. QATC has been my greatest source of hope throughout my time in academia.

Over the course of my studies, I have also presented at various conferences and seminars, and contributed to some publications. I would like to thank all the organisers, co-panellists, and attendees for the discussions they allowed, and all the editors and publishers who have supported my work. Highlights include having had the opportunity to contribute to *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Queer Theory* (2023), edited by Ella Haselswerdt, Sara H. Lindheim, and Kirk Ormand; the chance to participate to the "Untimely Encounters; Queer Temporalities and the Reception of Graeco-Roman Antiquity" workshop, organised by Quintus Immisch and Saskia Schomber at the University of Giessen in 2023; and the pleasure to write and edit for the Queering the Past(s) project, started by Nancy Rabinowitz and supported by The Classical Association.

Thank you also to my parents, who supported me in many ways through these years of writing; to my friends in Italy, who have encouraged my academic endeavours since high school; to my friends in London, who have supported me and listened to me through all the highs and lows. I also want to send my love to the incredible queer community I am so lucky to have around me in London, and to the necessary moments of joy and release it has allowed me to experience. Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to everyone that has made me feel listened to and cared for throughout the course of this doctorate, be it through conversations, moments of happiness, shared meals, dancing, and more. Writing can be a lonely process and I could not have done this without all the people around me. If I have ever expressed my love and gratitude to you, know that you have made it possible for me to complete this achievement.

Table of Contents

Abstract

In this thesis, my aim is to interrogate how the simile may serve as a vehicle for unconventional and non-conforming modes of presentation, imagination, and articulation of identity in classical epic poetry, and to showcase how we can extrapolate from such examples more general functionalities of the simile as a figure of speech with a particularly pronounced queer potential. Each chapter begins by taking soundings in similes from ancient epic and develops, through close readings of selected examples, insights into how the simile's distinctive linguistic structure and conceptual framework yields such queer potential. It then carries these insights over into the analysis of, as it were, 'out and out' queer poetry by contemporary writers, both to test whether the formal-aesthetic analysis of the simile previously established on the basis of ancient material holds here as well and to examine if and how the previously detected queer potential is (or is not) realised in these contemporary queer works.

In the Introduction, I show what kind of relevancy a queer study of the simile might have across the study of Classics as a discipline today. In the first chapter, I position the simile as both an object of inquiry and a methodological framework, exploring its queer potential and its capacity to disrupt linear time. Rather than reinforcing stable literary genealogies, I argue that similes create dynamic, non-linear engagements with the past, offering a model for queerness as fluid and resistant to fixed categories. Focusing on epic poetry, I demonstrate how similes unsettle conventional narrative structures and enable transhistorical dialogues between texts. Ultimately, I show that the simile functions as a queer figure of speech that disturbs, disrupts, and opens new possibilities for engaging with both antiquity and contemporary literature. The second chapter, on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, concentrates on the simile as a tool for erotic fantasy. It takes as its point and mode of comparison explicit receptions of the studied texts via the technique of impersonation, such as Kae Tempest's *Hold Your Own* (2014). The third chapter, on Homer's *Odyssey* and similes on familial structures, then compares uses of

the simile in the *Odyssey* with uses of the simile in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), exploring dynamics of classical reception that implicate the simile by way of intertextual references. The fourth chapter, on Homer's *Iliad*, focuses on animal similes and their recurrence in contemporary queer poetry, taking Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* (2016) as a main example and adopting a more open, thematic way of comparison. The fifth chapter, on Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, discusses water similes in this poem and puts them into dialogue with the associative-conceptual notion of water-as-simile developed by Alice Oswald in her lecture "Interview with Water" (2020). The conclusion synthesises the findings of the previous chapters, reflecting on the broader implications of the study for the fields of classical reception, queer poetics, and comparative literature. It considers how the simile's queer potential might be further explored beyond the texts examined here, suggesting directions for future research in both classical and contemporary literary studies.

Across the different chapters, through these variations of comparative-critical engagement, the thesis seeks to model and make manifest, alongside the substantive analysis and arguments it develops, how the simile not only opens up new ways of imagining identity and kinship in classical poetry, but also enriches contemporary readerly and writerly practices, both scholarly and creative. My analysis then seeks to illustrate how the simile can inspire innovative methods of textual comparison, leading to new approaches for classical reception and comparative criticism. As I aim to show, comparing similes in epic poetry with those in contemporary queer poetry can reveal common themes and poetic techniques used across different genres, enriching the study of poetics and poetic imagination. Situated at the intersection of general descriptive poetics and decidedly queer formal-aesthetic analysis, this thesis approaches the study of poetics from an engaged queer perspective to shed new light on how the simile functions as a trope within classical epic and contemporary queer poetry and how it inspires new modalities of comparison, in both creative and literary-critical writing.

List of Figures

Notes on Abbreviations

Abbreviations used for classical texts are taken from the *Oxford Classical Dictionary.*

Introduction: Compared to What?

Preface

Similes disrupt. They fracture the flow of narrative, pull readers across temporal and conceptual distances, and create unexpected connections between seemingly unrelated worlds. In ancient epic poetry, this capacity for disruption allows similes to unsettle the expectations of epic representation: perhaps interrupting linear storytelling, or introducing alternative perspectives, or momentarily shifting the terms through which the poem constructs its world. One of the most striking ways in which similes disrupt epic narrative is through their manipulation of verb tenses: this complicates temporal experience and creates a layered sense of time, for instance by entering into the timeless or immediate vision of a present tense in the midst of a past-tense narration that speaks of long gone events. We see this interplay of tenses clearly in a simile from Book 11 of the *Iliad*, where the augmented aorist and present tense appear side by side (*Il*. 11.558-65): [1]

> ὣς Αἴας τότ᾽ ἀπὸ Τρώων τετιημένος ἦτορ
> ἤϊε πόλλ᾽ ἀέκων· περὶ γὰρ δίε νηυσὶν Ἀχαιῶν.
> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτ᾽ ὄνος παρ᾽ ἄρουραν ἰὼν ἐβιήσατο παῖδας
> νωθής, ὦι δὴ πολλὰ περὶ ῥόπαλ᾽ ἀμφὶς ἐάγηι,
> κείρει τ᾽ εἰσελθὼν βαθὺ λήϊον· οἱ δέ τε παῖδες
> τύπτουσιν ῥοπάλοισι· βίη δέ τε νηπίη αὐτῶν·
> σπουδῆι τ᾽ ἐξήλασσαν, ἐπεί τ᾽ ἐκορέσσατο φορβῆς·
> ὣς τότ᾽ ἔπειτ᾽ Αἴαντα μέγαν Τελαμώνιον υἱὸν
> Τρῶες ὑπέρθυμοι πολυηγερέες τ᾽ ἐπίκουροι
> νύσσοντες ξυστοῖσι μέσον σάκος αἰὲν ἔποντο.

[1] ‘As when a donkey heads towards a field | of crops, and children try to drive him back, | but he is stubborn—many sticks are broken | upon his back, but he gets to the field, | enters, and devastates the thick tall grain, | while children keep on hitting him with sticks | but very feebly though they try so hard, | and when at last they make him leave the crop, | he has already had his fill of food— | just so the valiant Trojans and their allies, | gathered from far and wide, assailed great Ajax, | constantly battering his shield with spears’. Text by Monro and Allen and translation by Wilson, unless stated otherwise.

Here, the shifting between aorist (ἐβιήσατο, 11.558; ἐάγη, 11.559; εἰσελθὼν, 11.560; ἐξήλασσαν, ἐκορέσσατο 11.562), present tenses (ἰών, 11.558; κείρει, 11.560; τύπτουσιν, 11.561; νύσσοντες, 11.565) and even imperfect (ἔποντο, 11.565) generates a complex temporal texture. This layering creates a sense of simultaneity between the donkey's movement and Ajax's stand: both are visualized not as remembered or abstract, but as momentarily present. Just as the donkey and Ajax are held in analogy without identification, so too are their temporal frames kept in dynamic interplay. This temporal doubleness mirrors the simile's broader disruptive potential: similes do not merely trouble narrative continuity, they also complicate the ways texts construct identity, relationality, and desire. Stephanie Burt gestures toward this potential in her essay "Like": here she proposes an 'easily drafted' but 'unwritten' essay called "The Queer Simile", in which 'comparisons using *like* or *as* stand for same-sex and non-procreative sexual pleasure, while metaphor, comparison using the copula, stands for heterosexual intercourse'.[2] Burt's provocation raises a crucial question: if similes are structurally defined by relationality without collapse (by *like* rather than *is*) might this formal openness itself be a site of queerness?

Burt herself demonstrates this potential by pointing to the way similes can hold contradiction and ambiguity in ways that metaphor does not, writing that simile, with its use of the 'like' preposition, 'can do justice (as metaphor may not) to antithetical aspects of one object, and to the vagueness and slipperiness of an object that remains abstract, or inward, or hard to pin down'.[3] She illustrates this through E. A. Robinson's poem *Eros Turannos*:[4]

> Though like waves breaking it may be,
> Or like a changed familiar tree,
> Or like a stairway to the sea,
> Where down the blind are driven.

[2] Burt (2014), 18.
[3] Burt (2014), 19.
[4] Robinson (1914).

Here, the similes accumulate rather than resolve, layering shifting images that refuse singular meaning. Each comparison gestures toward an approximation, a resemblance that is always slightly beyond reach. In this way, the simile becomes a figure of openness to alternative possibilities, just like queer modes of perception, relation, and self-presentation. Taking up Burt's invitation, my study examines how similes operate as moments of poetic instability that resist singular meaning, disrupt normative structures of time and narrative, and create spaces of interpretive potential that resonate with queer modes of being, perception, and desire. In particular, this thesis explores how similes' formal instability challenges what is expected within the conventions of narration and characterization of the epic genre, as the most prolific site for the exploration of similes and extended similes.

Each chapter begins by taking soundings in similes from ancient epic, and develops, through close readings of selected examples, insights into how the simile's distinctive linguistic structure and conceptual framework yields such queer potential. It then carries these insights over into the analysis of, as it were, 'out and out' queer poetry by contemporary writers, both to test whether the formal-aesthetic analysis of the simile previously established on the basis of ancient material holds here as well and to examine if and how the previously detected queer potential is (or is not) realised in these contemporary queer works, and vice versa. Through variations of comparative-critical engagement, the thesis seeks to model and make manifest, alongside the substantive analysis and arguments it develops, how the simile not only opens up new modes of perception, relationality, and presentation of the self in classical poetry, but also enriches contemporary readerly and writerly practices, both scholarly and creative. By examining the simile's capacity to create moments of interpretive suspension and resonance, my analysis also illustrates how this poetic device fosters innovative methods of textual comparison, ultimately leading to new approaches for classical reception and comparative criticism.

In engaging with similes as sites of imaginative reconfiguration and aesthetic intensity, I argue that these figures of speech do not merely embellish the texts in which they appear but actively reshape the conditions of interpretation. Situated at the intersection of general descriptive poetics and decidedly queer formal-aesthetic analysis (asking how do similes work and what is structurally-hermeneutically queer about similes respectively), I will then approach the study of poetics from an engaged queer perspective, shedding new light on how the simile functions as a trope within classical epic and contemporary queer poetry and how it inspires new modalities of comparison in both creative and literary-critical writing. By doing so, this work contributes to broader discussions about the politics of form in classical literature and the ways in which queer reading strategies can revitalize our understanding of literary devices that have often been examined within the constraints of traditional philological paradigms. The simile, as a figure of relationality and transformation, thus emerges as a crucial site for rethinking the intersections of classical and contemporary poetry, critical theory, and queer aesthetics. Through this exploration, the thesis not only expands our understanding of a fundamental poetic device but also contributes to ongoing conversations about how literary form mediates identity, history, and desire in ways that continue to resonate across different temporal and cultural contexts.

Ancient Queers, Queer Ancients: Moving Beyond Identity

To understand the topic of my investigation, it is first important to show what kind of relevancy a queer study of the simile might have across the study of Classics as a discipline today. Although the relationship between queerness and classical literature has received increasing attention in recent years, discussions of queerness in ancient texts have largely focused on questions of character, representation, and the expression of gender and sexuality. This approach has tended to privilege *who* is represented in a text over *how* language itself might

operate queerly.[5] As Matzner notes in his *Oxford Classical Dictionary* entry on queer theory and ancient literature:[6]

> Ancient literature's queerness, consequently, has two dimensions: (a) accounts—real and imagined—of sexual behaviours, erotic desires, intimate relationships, and notorious figures recognizably at odds with the sociosexual norms of Greece and Rome ("ancient queers"); and (b) accounts that, whatever their status in antiquity, appear strikingly odd in their later reception ("queer ancients"). These two dimensions can and do converge, as in the development of modern Western sexual identity categories (homosexual, bisexual, etc.), which drew heavily on ancient "case studies."

The distinction between "ancient queers" and "queer ancients", and specifically the focus on what might appear 'odd' in classical literature and later receptions is crucial for my study of the simile. Yet while Matzner's distinction usefully frames *who* we consider queer in antiquity and in later receptions, it does not fully account for *how* queerness operates structurally within ancient texts. My study of the simile extends this framework by shifting the focus from *who or what* is queer to *how* queerness is produced through language. While I build on Matzner's insights, I argue that queerness in ancient literature is not only about identifying queer figures or readings but also about tracing the mechanisms through which texts construct, unsettle, and reimagine identity across time. Rather than locating queerness in specific characters or relationships, equating queerness in classics with an identity-based approach, my analysis therefore examines how similes themselves, through their formal instability, relational structure, and resistance to fixed meaning, can function as queer textual moments. In this way, I seek to extend the conversation beyond who is represented in ancient texts to consider how poetic language operates in ways that align with queer aesthetics, perception, and temporality.

[5] This topic is becoming increasingly prominent in the field of what might be considered Queer Classics, as shown in Matzner (2022), Olsen and Telò, eds. (2022), Haselswerdt, Lindheim, Ormand, eds. (2023). See also D'Angelo's and Lam's recent Call for Papers for the SCS 2026. Available at: < https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2025/01/24/queerness-beyond-identity/>.
[6] Matzner (2022)

Identity-based approaches are something that queer and trans studies have long challenged,[7] but this pushback still needs to find its ground in the study of Classics as a discipline. This is perhaps because queer interpretations of ancient texts, ideas, and performances often face a greater burden of proof.[8] A queer approach to reading, analysing, and constructing knowledge about the ancient past is frequently seen as less legitimate or as ahistorical. Thus, in Classics and classical reception studies, there has been a particular emphasis on the need to justify the study of queerness in the ancient world through philological and historical evidence. This has often lead to the creation of a false genealogy of queerness as finding its birthplace in ancient Greece and Rome. Queer theory's engagement with Classics is often traced back to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978), a foundational text in understanding the connections between ancient Mediterranean societies and so-called deviant sexualities. Influenced by Kenneth Dover's *Greek Homosexuality* (1978), Foucault's work presents homosexuality not as a fixed identity but as a construct shaped by medical, legal, and social power structures. While Foucault's insights into power, sex, and discourse were revolutionary, his institutionalization as a key figure in the study of sexuality also reflects a tendency to stabilize and structure queer inquiry. His approach frames Greece as both distant from and foundational to modern European sexual identities, reinforcing a genealogy that links ancient practices to a Western yet falsely universalised framework of queerness. [9]

The focus on queerness as an object of enquiry, along with the adoption of the term as a personal politicised identity rather than 'a collective position' for 'mobilization and action' and

[7] See Wiegman (2012) on identity studies and social justice, Amin (2017) on the dangers of idealisation of specific figures and identities, Peterson (2024) on identity and self-determination, and Kotrosits (2023) on gender and sexuality as object of studies in the ancient world.

[8] I have further explored this in Bell and Colli (2022). Available at: < https://classicalreception.org/queer-theory-and-classics/>.

[9] See, for example, Foucault (1978) and Dover (1978). For a critique on Foucault's use of Dover, see Atack (2024).

'interrogation and imagining' has been detrimental to queerness as a generative, radical force for structural change.[10] As queerness has become increasingly tied to personal identity rather than a framework for coalition-building and social transformation, its radical edge has been blunted. As Cohen notes, this is a concerning trend for queer politics: [11]

> I worry that as more individuals take on the identity of queer as an embodiment of sexual positionality, queer becomes less effective—if it ever was effective—as a unifying framework for solidarity work across domains of struggle and across identities. What I see now is a queer politics defined by bodies and practices and less about collaborative politics: what I might crudely call the queer politics of identity over the queer politics of positionality.

Cohen's desired shift of queerness from a politics of identity to a politics of positionality is something that is necessary for the study of queer theory and Classics as well. The focus that Classics as a discipline puts on trying to validate queer identities of characters and authors, as opposed to utilising queer theory as a broader theoretical lens, is even reflected in the available bibliography in Classics that explicitly uses the term 'queer' in its title. A search of the *L'Année Philologique* database, for example, will reveal that out of twenty-three entries that contain 'queer' in the title,[12] more than half of those are related to 'queering' a specific author or character. In recent years, discussions regarding queer methodologies in the field,[13] or inquiries reflecting upon the history of queer studies in Classics,[14] have significantly increased, and the recent publication of *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Queer Theory* (2023) signals a growing recognition of the need for more expansive approaches in Classics.[15] But much work

[10] Cohen (2019), 142.
[11] Cohen (2019), 143.
[12] From 2007, and as of April 2025. I am here counting texts that use the term 'queer' to indicate a deviation from the norm in terms of gender and sexuality.
[13] Encouraged by research groups such as The Lambda Classical Caucus, Queer and the Classical (QATC), and Critical Ancient World Studies (CAWS).
[14] See for example Ingleheart (2018) on the nexus between Classics, sex, and Victorian education; or, more generally, discussions put forward by the *Res Difficiles* conference series. Available at: https://resdifficiles.com/.
[15] Haselswerdt, Lindheim, and Ormand (2023).

remains to be done in exploring how queerness can function as a critical lens beyond identity-based readings.

By shifting the focus from who is represented to how queerness operates at the level of textual structure and meaning-making, my thesis therefore seeks to contribute to this broader reorientation of queer inquiry in Classics. I aim to extend the conversation beyond representation to consider how poetic language itself can instantiate queer ways of knowing and relating, reinforcing the potential of queer studies as an expansive and destabilizing critical framework rather than a rigid identity category. Examining the simile within epic through a queer lens allows for a broader reconsideration of how queerness and poetry intersect. Rather than treating queerness as merely an aspect of identity or representation, this approach highlights its potential as both an aesthetic and political force, one that reshapes our understanding of poetic form and meaning. Traditionally, discussions of eroticism, pleasure, and identity in the classical world turn to lyric, elegy, and epigram; genres associated with personal reflection and individual experience. Figures such as Sappho, Ovid, and Catullus, despite their undeniable literary and cultural weight, are often read as exploring queerness primarily in private or sentimental terms. By contrast, epic can still too easily be regarded as the pinnacle of public and political storytelling, reinforcing a harmful and problematic separation between queerness as personal and epic as grand and collective, or at any rate as not invested in subjectivity and affect.

Queer literature, however, like epic, is always political. As Amin argues, for queer studies to fully engage with historical and social contexts, it must first dismantle its own idealized imaginaries:[16]

> Queer Studies […] must first deidealize its various political and historical imaginaries and disaggregate their assumed relation to one another. For an attention to the variegated textures of queer, as it exits the realm of high theory to be assumed,

[16] Amin (2017), 175.

> embodied, and enacted within particular social contexts, requires us to deidealize the queer imaginaries we treasure the most.

Amin's call for deidealization is particularly relevant when we note that the study of queerness in antiquity often frames Greece and Rome as the origins of modern queer identities, a genealogical approach which risks stabilizing queerness within a historical narrative that privileges Western conceptions of sexuality. By treating antiquity as a point of origin rather than as a site of complex and unstable discourses on desire, queerness has often been inadvertently reinforced as a rigid and teleological concept.[17] My approach, in contrast, seeks to move beyond the idea of Greece and Rome as a birthplace of queerness and instead interrogate how language itself, and the simile in particular, functions as a site of queer potential. By looking at the figure of the simile in epic, and by looking at its queer potential, I also want to recognise the possibilities of the pairing of queerness and poetry more widely as a 'category that can combine aesthetics and politics at once, and transform the two into the formalization of a project'. [18]

Rather than reading queerness as something that must be located in particular figures or acts, I examine how similes create relational structures that resist fixed meaning, disrupt narrative continuity, and generate slippages between categories. If queer studies is to resist becoming an ossified academic discourse, it must continually expand its methods and objects of inquiry. My study of the simile within epic poetry as a queer textual form is one such attempt to rethink how queerness operates beyond identity. In choosing to pair epic with queer poetry, and in choosing to explore the queer within epic, I want to bring about a deidealization of queerness in the ancient world and ancient literature as something that can only be found in the private, in the secretive, in the sentimental. By shifting the focus from characters and identities

[17] Traub (2013) provides an overview of theories and methods of queer unhistoricism that actively challenge teleological perspectives. I will discuss queer unhistoricism in more depth in Chapter 1.
[18] Abi-Karam and Gabriel (2020), 4.

to the mechanics of language itself, my approach not only broadens the scope of queer classical reception, but also suggests that queer meaning might reside not only in who texts represent, but in the ways they articulate relationships between self and other, past and present, known and unknown.

Uncovering The Queer Simile

Along with an increased interest in queer theory in Classics, in recent years there has also been a growing scholarly interest in the destabilizing nature of the simile, both in ancient and contemporary literature. Over forty years ago already, Foley's seminal article on "reverse similes" had clearly shown the potential for the simile to be explored as a destabilising force when it comes to gender and gender expression.[19] More recently, scholars such as von Glinski, Beck, and Purves have explored how similes function not simply as comparisons but as moments of rupture, transformation, and reconfiguration within epic and other genres. Von Glinski's *Simile and Identity in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (2012) stands out as a fundamental study on how the epic simile conveys states of fluid and unresolved identity, whether in the transitions between human, animal, and divine forms or in the poem's broader oscillation between genres and the interplay of fiction and reality.[20] Beck (2023) has presented the simile as a site of constantly evolving narratives that run parallel to the main plot, evolving across different authors and time periods.[21] Purves (2024) has recently investigated the ways in which simile opens up alternative forms of thought and expression in Homer, particularly with respect to the body.[22] The simile has therefore been increasingly recognised as a site of cognitive and affective disturbance, rather than a straightforwardly transparent rhetorical device. By

[19] Foley (1978).
[20] Von Glinski (2012).
[21] Beck (2023).
[22] Purves (2024)

positioning similes as sites of conceptual slippage and multiplicity, these studies open up new ways of understanding ancient texts, offering insights not only into poetic form but also into how ancient literature engages with ideas of identity, temporality, and relationality.

Importantly, an affinity between simile and queerness has also already been noted. While the idea of the queer simile has not yet been fully theorized or employed as a critical lens within Classics, hints of its potential can be found in the works of contemporary poets and theorists such as the poetry scholar Stephanie Burt and the poet Ocean Vuong. Burt, as I have mentioned, gestures toward the ways in which simile and comparison can destabilise fixed categories of identity and meaning. Similarly, Vuong has spoken on the simile as a site that creates queer kinships and affinities. Yet the potential of interpreting the simile as a queer figure of speech, and the potential of applying this analytical framework to individual similes in literary texts to examine their formal instability, resistance to fixed meaning, and alternative modes of relation, remains underexplored. Rather than focusing solely on what a simile depicts, I argue that the very mechanics of simile and its capacity to defer meaning, to resist resolution, and to forge unexpected connections, align with queer modes of thinking and being. In applying this framework to Classics, my work seeks to extend these nascent ideas, arguing that similes themselves can be inherently queer, not simply because of their content but because of their structural and epistemological operations.

Stephanie Burt's 2014 essay "Like", as we have seen, poses a fundamental and interesting provocation: 'consider an unwritten (so far as I know) but easily drafted essay called "The Queer Simile"'.[23] To Burt, 'the "like" in simile reminds us that we cannot hold on after all; each wave moves, in sequent toil, and all do contend'.[24] In this thesis, therefore, I want to consider more fully the possibilities of a study of 'the queer simile', inspired by Burt's analysis

[23] Burt (2014), 18.
[24] Burt (2014), 19.

of the 'like' as expressing an instability in language which points at a lack of fixed identity as well. Burt's analysis of simile in "Like" positions it as a fundamentally destabilizing linguistic structure, one that resists the assertion of fixed identity. She argues that simile inherently 'denies identity (implies "is not")', distinguishing it from metaphor, which asserts equivalence. While metaphor collapses difference, declaring that one thing *is* another, simile maintains separation, emphasizing approximation rather than identity. As she illustrates, the phrase 'it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas' has an entirely different meaning than 'it *is* Christmas', highlighting simile's insistence on similarity without substitution.[25]

Burt also explores the epistemological implications of simile, suggesting that it accommodates complexity and contradiction in ways that metaphor does not. The simile, she argues, 'can do justice […] to the vagueness and slipperiness of an object that remains abstract, or inward, or hard to pin down'.[26] She also further considers the grammatical and conceptual flexibility of 'like', noting that it is 'the only word in English that is both a preposition and an active verb'.[27] This duality reinforces simile's status as a linguistic structure that foregrounds relation and approximation over fixed identity. Burt thus presents simile as a form of linguistic resistance to the totalizing force of metaphor. While metaphor asserts, simile questions; while metaphor fixes meaning, simile suspends it in a state of contingency. As she puts it, 'we can always decide whether we will use "like"':[28] simile thus signals an awareness of linguistic artifice, a self-conscious engagement with the provisional nature of meaning itself.

More recently, poet and writer Ocean Vuong has also shared his own thoughts on connections between queerness, metaphors and similes. While many of Vuong's theories on poetry and language can be found either within his own poetry or in his essays, in addition to

[25] Burt (2014), 17.
[26] Burt (2014), 19.
[27] Burt (2014), 21.
[28] Burt (2014), 22

this, and perhaps more accessibly, Vuong often and generously shares thoughts and reflections on his social media accounts. In November 2020, Vuong replied to a series of questions on his theory of the metaphor, and in doing so, also discussed the simile: to him, in fact, 'similes reside under the umbrella of metaphor 'and 'behave, cognitively, like metaphors'.[29] Vuong perceives the 'like' of the simile as a 'demarcation': however, 'something happens in the act of reading wherein we collapse the "bridge" and the mind automatically forges synergy between the two images, so that all similes, once read, "act" like metaphors in the mind'.[30] Vuong thus argues that 'the poem becomes the theatre in which fixed elements can be transformed, their borders subject to being dissolved, shifting towards something entirely new': fundamentally, in this way, he understands both the simile and the metaphor as enacting 'a foundational QUEER praxis of alterity'.[31] This is because metaphors and similes allow us 'to point at something or someone so different from us, so far from our own origins and say, "Yes, there IS a bond between us. And if I work long enough, hard enough, I can prove it to you—with this thing called language, this thing that weighs nothing but means everything to me"'.[32] By recognising the impossibility of language and simile to capture stable meaning, Vuong sees these poetic tropes as acting in a way that is inherently queer, where the reader is the one in charge of creating a new meaning and recognising affinities where perhaps, before, there were none. As Vuong concludes 'good metaphors, in the end, come from writers who are committed to looking beyond what is already there, towards another possibility'.[33]

My study therefore examines how similes, as concrete poetic devices within texts, function as sites of disruption, transformation, and alternative relationality, and it further interrogates the critical concept of the simile. By simile, I mean the explicit, formally marked

[29] Vuong (2020).
[30] Vuong (2020).
[31] Vuong (2020).
[32] Vuong (2020).
[33] Vuong (2020).

figure introduced by particles such as ὡς or *velut*. While this thesis takes into account textual comparisons as well, comparison refers more broadly to the act of juxtaposing or relating elements, maintaining an explicit distinction between the two terms being compared without necessarily employing the simile's formal apparatus. Although the simile has traditionally been defined by its structural markers, in fact, some critics argue that its underlying cognitive and relational logic extends beyond these formal signals.[34] Mack, for instance, has discussed similes and metaphors as sharing a single 'deep structure' of comparison,[35] noting how the relational logic of the simile persists even when explicit markers such as 'like' or 'as' are absent, allowing similes to operate within a broader category of figurative comparison while retaining distinct formal properties. Similarly, Darian suggests that similes may also be defined by a variety of other comparative markers, proposing that simile encompasses analogy more broadly and is a pervasive mechanism for constructing relational meaning in language and literature.[36] By attending to both simile and comparison more broadly, then, this thesis can trace how analogous processes of juxtaposition, relational thinking, and figurative extension operate both within formally marked similes and across other comparative structures, revealing continuities in how texts construct meaning, generate ambiguity, and open interpretive possibilities for queerness to emerge.

While recent scholarship has illuminated how individual similes can unsettle fixed categories of identity, meaning, and even genre, in fact, the broader potential of the simile as a queer analytic remains largely unexplored in Classics. Drawing on contemporary poetic and theoretical insights, I argue that, as a critical framework, the simile's structural insistence on approximation, rather than equivalence, aligns with queer modes of thinking, foregrounding instability, contingency, and the ongoing negotiation of self and other. In looking both

[34] See Brogan (1993) for a brief summary of such theories.
[35] Mack (1975), 221.
[36] Darian (1973).

backward to ancient texts and forward to contemporary queer poetics, my work highlights the simile as a form that does not simply reflect queerness but actively enacts it, operating as a mechanism of world-making, speculative possibility, and affective rupture. In doing so, it not only reconfigures our understanding of epic and classical literature but also situates these texts within a broader, evolving discourse on queerness, time, and poetic language.

Reading the Epic Canon: Text Selection and Methodological Criteria

Epic has long occupied a privileged and normative position in the hierarchy of ancient genre, being widely regarded as the apex of poetic achievement and the primary vehicle for cultural memory and identity.[37] Precisely because of this ideological centrality, epic provides an ideal terrain on which to test how the simile, being an inherently unstable and comparative form, functions within, and against, the genre's normative structures. Additionally, the simile is not simply one amongst many rhetorical figures in epic, and is instead defined as the genre's 'master trope', a defining feature of epic style and thought: extended similes in particular shape the very identity of epic, and ancient critics consistently treated them as a privileged marker of the genre. Yet epic's canonical status and the epic simile's role as one of the main distinctive traits of the genre sits uneasily with the simile's tendency to proliferate resemblances, defer closure, and open the epic text to lateral and unexpected affiliations. Attending to similes within epic therefore means engaging with the very mechanism through which epic asserts its distinctiveness and authority as a genre, while also exposing the points at which that authority becomes unstable. Simile performs, at the level of language, the same negotiation between authority and disruption that defines epic's relationship to its own canonical and yet ever-evolving tradition. For this reason, my analysis aims to situate the simile and the unstable moments it generates at the centre of a broader inquiry into queerness and poetic form: if epic

[37] For a recent account on the role of epic in Ancient Greece and Rome and after, see Greensmith (2024).

has long been the most canonical and normative of genres, then the simile, its most self-reflective device, provides the means to expose the fissures within that canon.

With this conceptual framework in mind, the four primary texts selected for this study (Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Apollonius' *Argonautica*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) represent pivotal moments in the evolution of the epic tradition, each reimagining the possibilities of the simile in distinct ways. These epics are not equally canonical, nor do they occupy the same position within the tradition; yet this unevenness in roles is in fact part of their interpretive richness. Homer's epics exemplify the genre's foundational authority, while Apollonius and Ovid both engage with and unsettle epic conventions from their own vantage points within the tradition, engaging with tragedy and elegy specifically. Precisely because their canonical status differs, these texts collectively provide fertile ground for investigating the simile as a disruptive, reconfiguring force. Their uneven canonisation is methodologically productive: by comparing highly canonical epics with texts that deliberately unsettle epic conventions, my study can then trace how similes operate as a site of tension between normativity and instability when it comes to both genre and form.

As Greensmith shows, the simile's negotiation between authority and disruption is made evident in post-classical poetry in particular. Taking Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica* as an example, Greensmith shows how by acknowledging Homer as part of an established tradition, Quintus simultaneously preserves and transforms that same legacy, making its internal alterations visible. The poem literalises what Greensmith terms the 'poetics of the interval', exploiting the liminal space between *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and addressing issues of literary origins and contemporary style. Crucial to this strategy is Quintus' deployment of similes, which operate self-reflexively as a stylistic 'middle way' where old and new are intertwined. Extended similes, Greensmith notes, even act as 'similes of similes', embedding

commentary on the epic tradition itself.[38] Kneebone's study of Oppian's *Halieutica* similarly focuses on the simile's epistemological role:[39] in Oppian's didactic epic, simile builds knowledge through continual comparative reference. Extended similes define the poem both through and against Homeric practice by reversing Homeric norms and thereby transforming established Iliadic and Odyssean correspondences.

The simile's self-conscious engagement with its own tradition, then, shows its ability to structure knowledge and to engage in intertextual dialogue with its canonical predecessor, while also highlighting the ever-shifting instability inherent in analogy itself. Because of their relationship with the canon, similes are able to operate as sites of interpretive multiplicity: they preserve epic authority even as they destabilize it, allowing the genre to reflect on its own norms, assumptions, and limits. Similes are therefore central to epic's reflexive negotiation with its canonical and ideological foundations, revealing the mechanisms by which the genre asserts, revises, and interrogates its distinctiveness. Yet, while postclassical epic undoubtedly offers rich material for this kind of analysis, I chose to focus on the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Argonautica* and the *Metamorphoses* in part because of their canonical status, and in part because of the interpretive potential that comes with queering such foundational texts, which have so often been appropriated as paradigmatic sites of normative and foundational storytelling. Approaching the epic canon and the epic simile through a queer lens means consciously moving beyond authors, figures, and genres that have conventionally been treated as more readily available to queer interpretation, and to therefore challenge the assumption that queerness in classical literature must be located primarily in private, lyrical, or identity-driven modes of expression. My aim, then, was to disturb the authority of the canon from within, drawing out queer resonances in passages and similes often treated as paradigmatic, and tracing

[38] Greensmith (2020).
[39] Kneebone (2020).

how queerness can emerge at the level of poetic form itself. The prominence of these texts also makes it easier to trace their reception in contemporary queer poetry, allowing for a more immediate and legible comparative framework through which epic's formal strategies can be shown to generate queer meanings across time, rather than merely reaffirming canonical authority.

This conceptual framework also shapes my methodological approach: if similes operate differently across the epic tradition, then attention to their distribution and density provides a useful context for the selective close readings that follow. For this reason, quantitative data offers a useful starting point for assessing how a study of the queer simile in epic should proceed. The number of similes in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in particular, and all epics more broadly, has long been debated and varies according to the different criteria and definitions adopted by scholars.[40] For instance, Friedländer counts 218 in the *Iliad* and 58 in the *Odyssey*, whereas Wilkins records 342 and 129 respectively, Fränkel registers 399 and 139, Lee 350 and 132, Scott 341 and 123, and De Jong notes roughly 200 extended similes in the *Iliad* and 40 in the *Odyssey*. These discrepancies reflect multiple factors: differences in whether short phrases, divine comparisons, or abstract protheses are included; whether repeated or slightly modified similes are counted once or multiple times; and the broader methodological distinction between similes and other rhetorical devices.[41] In later epics, Goodwin identifies 79 extended similes and 50 shorter ones in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, totalling 129; while Brunner counts roughly 38 extended similes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a figure that rises substantially when brief comparisons and implicit analogies are included. Each poem therefore exhibits distinct patterns

[40] See Friedländer (1853); Wilkins (1920); Fränkel (1921); Green (1877); Scott (1974); De Jong (2001); Goodwin (1891); Brunner (1966).
[41] Green (1877); Lee (1964); and De Jong (2001) in particular have broader discussion of selection criteria.

of simile density, distribution, and thematic emphasis: the multiplicity and variety of such patterns clarifies the scope of this study and underscores the methodological necessity of focusing on selected examples rather than attempting exhaustive catalogues. Differences in density, clustering and thematic emphasis can be broadly summarised in the table below:

Epic Text	Simile Count	Distribution & Thematic Focus
Homer, *Iliad*	226 (Friedländer, 1853); 342 (Wilkins, 1920); 399 (Fränkel, 1921); 350 (Lee, 1964); 341 (Scott, 1974); ca. 200 (De Jong 2001).	High density, especially in battle scenes; clusters in key narrative sections.
Homer, *Odyssey*	58 (Friedländer, 1853); 129 (Wilkins, 1920); 139 (Fränkel, 1921); 132 (Lee, 1964); 123 (Scott, 1974); 40 extended (De Jong, 2001).	More dispersed than in the *Iliad*; often found in natural, domestic, or emotional contexts rather than martial.
Apollonius, *Argonautica*	129, of which 79 extended and 50 shorter (Goodwin, 1891).	Nautical and voyage-related similes predominate; frequent allusions to Homeric models; clusters in storm, battle, and shipwreck scenes.
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*	38 extended (Brunner, 1966).	Emphasis on transformation, nature, and desire.

Such disparities make evident the rationale for a selective methodology throughout the thesis. The *Iliad* is densely packed with similes, particularly in martial contexts, whereas the *Odyssey* favours more dispersed, domestic, or emotional imagery. Apollonius' *Argonautica* balances extended and brief similes to navigate narrative and allusive complexity, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* emphasizes transformation and thematic nuance, with a notable increase in shorter or implicit similes, used to dramatize metamorphosis itself as a perpetual act of

becoming. These variations are not merely statistical but conceptual, and reveal shifting attitudes toward analogy, resemblance, and difference across time.

Glaringly, Virgil's *Aeneid* is missing from my selection of arguably the main texts from Greek and Roman epic. While some of Virgil's similes would have fit into the different thematic explorations of simile I conduct in each chapter (similes that concern erotic imagination, familial relationships, animal kinships, or meta-rhetorical examples of reception within simile), they were not enough to warrant an entire separate chapter dedicated to the poem, and the *Aeneid* itself as a text has not generated many queer receptions and contemporary re-imaginings. Thus, a chapter on the *Aeneid* would not have shown new ways of reading the simile as a queer figure of speech, and would have also not significantly contributed to my discussion of the simile as a tool to re-imagine classical reception. The texts I chose to focus on were thus chosen for their canonical status and my interest in disturbing such standing, for their interpretive potential, for the ways they mutually inform one another, and for the comparison that can be made between them and contemporary queer poetry.

These considerations showcase how an extensive discussion of all similes within the selected texts would be both impractical and theoretically counterproductive for the aims of my research. This thesis will then avoid extensive cataloguing to instead focus on close readings of selected passages within each text, chosen to show how the simile's linguistic structures and conceptual frameworks yield queer potential that is specific to each epic. Focusing on selected examples makes it possible to explore the simile's capacity to create moments of interpretive suspension and resonance, while also providing a manageable framework for comparative analysis across classical and contemporary texts. Reading the simile queerly, then, means attending to the ways epic language itself allows for divergence and reconfiguration. In the chapters that follow, I trace how the tension inherent in the structure of the simile operates

within each epic, showing that the simile's formal mechanisms both reveal and enact queerness as an aesthetic and critical practice, while also providing a lens through which to assess contemporary queer poetry in dialogue with its classical precedents.

My study therefore selects specific examples to explore how the simile functions as a site of imaginative and unconventional meaning-making in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Argonautica* and the *Metamorphoses*. These texts all contribute to showing the queer potential of the simile in different ways. As I am exploring not only how the simile can be read as a queer figure of speech in ancient epic, but also how this potential is explored in contemporary queer poetry, my selection takes into consideration contemporary receptions of these texts, and what those receptions can uncover about the role of the simile both as a poetic trope and as a tool for comparative criticism. The four texts here analysed do not only all showcase the queer potential of the simile across different ways of expressing desire and identity, but also add to my exploration of the simile as inviting new forms of comparison and reception.

Chapter Overview

Each chapter of my thesis examines how the simile functions within a different literary and thematic context, demonstrating its potential to disrupt normative structures and generate new forms of meaning. By tracing its historical development or its role in classical reception, I am also interested in how the simile can function as a rhetorical device that can generate new ways of thinking about queerness across time and space. As Matzner explains, queerness, at any moment in time, demands a continual renegotiation of the relationship between past and present.[42] What scholarship knows as 'queer unhistoricism', and which I will treat in more detail in Chapter 1, resists both the homogenizing consolidation of historical moments and the rigid separation of distinct temporal strands, instead envisioning a fluid, shifting web of

[42] Matzner (2016), 192.

connections in which similarity and difference are in constant negotiation. Within this framework, anachronism becomes a productive force, bending time and forging new modes of relation. Similes, I argue, operate in precisely this way: as figures of speech that inherently hold together proximity and distance, they create moments of communion across texts, traditions, and histories. This thesis thus explores the simile as a dynamic and transformative rhetorical device, capable of challenging conventional boundaries in both ancient epic traditions and contemporary queer literature. The order of the chapters has been chosen to reflect a conceptual progression in how the simile operates as a site of queer meaning-making and reception.

In the first chapter, I position the simile as both an object of inquiry and a methodological framework for reading queerness in literature, exploring its potential to disrupt linear time. Rather than reinforcing stable literary genealogies, I argue that similes create dynamic, non-linear engagements with the past, offering a model of queerness as fluid and resistant to fixed categories. Focusing on epic poetry, I demonstrate how similes unsettle conventional narrative structures and enable transhistorical dialogues between texts. Ultimately, I show that the simile functions as a queer figure of speech that disturbs, disrupts, and opens new possibilities for engaging with both antiquity and contemporary literature.

In the second chapter, I analyse the *Metamorphoses*, where the simile emerges as a crucial medium for articulating desire. Ovid's similes blur the lines between fantasy and reality, creating spaces for imagining alternative embodiments and relationalities. However, the *Metamorphoses* primarily employs the simile to express transgressive sexual fantasies rather than fully realizing its potential for representing the radicality of queer desire. This tension between the simile's liberatory potential and the constraints imposed by its cultural context positions it as both a site of possibility and a reflection of structural limitations. The chapter

also engages with contemporary receptions, particularly Trish Salah *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* (2014), Kae Tempest's *Hold Your Own* (2014), and Cassils' *Tiresias* (2013) to explore how impersonation of characters from the *Metamorphoses* as a way to articulate desire can serve as a mode of reclaiming classical narratives through queer reimaginings.

The third chapter turns to the *Odyssey*, examining how similes disrupt traditional familial frameworks and illuminate diasporic experiences. Focusing on Telemachus and father-son dynamics, I investigate how Homeric similes reconfigure kinship roles, moving beyond rigidly defined familial hierarchies and highlighting connections formed across distance, displacement, and social dislocation. These similes challenge heteropatriarchal models of the family by foregrounding emotional resonance, chosen bonds, and relational improvisation, suggesting alternative ways of imagining intimacy and belonging. Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) provides a contemporary counterpoint, where similes perform similar work in rethinking intimacy, lineage, and diasporic relationalities. This chapter thus emphasizes the simile's capacity to act as a disruptive force within cultural narratives, aligning with queerness as an anti-normative mode of kinship, connection, and diasporic belonging.

In the fourth chapter, I focus on the *Iliad*, where animal similes, particularly in relation to Achilles, complicate human norms by invoking nonhuman experiences. While Homeric similes frequently maintain a stark binary between predator and prey, they also open spaces for imagining forms of being and desiring that transcend rigid social constraints. These possibilities are expanded in contemporary queer poetry, particularly in Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* (2016), where the animal simile is reimagined as a vehicle for fluid, interconnected modes of existence and kinship. This chapter explores the interplay between classical texts and contemporary reinterpretations, emphasizing how similes provide a means of articulating queerness beyond human-centred perspectives, even as they remain embedded in historically contingent frameworks.

The fifth chapter examines Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* and its innovative use of water similes to convey fluidity, transformation, and relationality. Apollonius' similes, through their association with water, reflect the temporal and intertextual dynamics of the epic tradition, linking past and present while emphasizing the instability of meaning and identity. This chapter draws on Alice Oswald's conceptualization of water-as-simile (*"*Interview with Water"*,* 2020) to explore how fluidity operates within poetic structures. Here, the simile is not only a descriptive device but also a meta-rhetorical tool that draws attention to the epic tradition and its ongoing reception, as well as interrogates its own function, highlighting its capacity for self-reflection.

The thesis moves from the most explicit and embodied forms of classical engagement to more implicit, abstract, and self-reflexive modes of critical comparison. Beginning with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the first text-based chapter centres on poetic impersonations of mythological figures, where contemporary queer poets such as Trish Salah, Cassils, and Kae Tempest take on classical personas in order to articulate desire and embodiment. This chapter establishes a mode of reception that is performative, immediate, and deliberately foregrounded. The second chapter, turning to the *Odyssey*, explores how similes rework familial relationships, particularly through intertextual references that Vuong takes up and revises. Here, the engagement with classical material is still evident, but becomes more thematically embedded, focusing on echo and reinterpretation rather than direct embodiment. The third chapter on the *Iliad* traces this shift further: the simile's queer potential emerges through imagistic association, especially through animal imagery that invites nonhuman kinships and fluid identities. In Donika Kelly's *Bestiary*, these Homeric similes serve as a point of inspiration for reimagining queerness through metaphor and mood, rather than through recognisable narrative or character. Finally, the chapter on Apollonius' *Argonautica* moves to a meta-rhetorical level, showing how similes,

particularly aquatic ones, reflect on their own function within epic discourse and poetic tradition. This trajectory thus mirrors the broader methodological arc of the thesis, moving from overt acts of queer reanimation to increasingly generative and recursive forms of engagement, where the simile becomes not only a rhetorical device but a conceptual framework for queer comparative reading.

Together, these chapters reveal the simile as a powerful rhetorical tool that navigates the tension between similarity and difference within literary texts. Taken as a whole, they also illustrate a set of diverse critical approaches to studying ancient and modern literature in relation to one another, demonstrating how the simile, as a critical concept, can inform new comparative methodologies in classical reception studies. Inspired by the simile's ability to create alternative modes of meaning-making, the new comparative approaches foregrounded in this thesis challenge traditional models of reception, which have often relied on a linear, genealogical framework, positioning classical antiquity as an authoritative past that later texts either inherit, imitate, or subvert. The simile, by contrast, as a device that inherently refuses stability, invites a different kind of reception: one that is recursive, non-hierarchical, and transformative. As a rhetorical device, the simile generates meaning through both resemblance and differentiation, forging unexpected connections while resisting fixed identification. In a similar way, queer approaches to reception unsettle received historical narratives, creating new relational possibilities across time. Similes not only produce meaning within their immediate textual context but also extend beyond it, forging links between ancient and modern texts, between past and present bodies of knowledge, between historical and speculative modes of thinking. This interplay of resemblance and differentiation, of continuity and rupture, is what makes the simile such a productive site for thinking about queerness, not just as a thematic concern, but as a methodology, a way of reading, writing, and imagining otherwise.

The conclusion of this thesis will reflect on the broader implications of this argument, considering how the simile's resistance to closure and fixed identity might inform contemporary conversations in queer theory, classical reception studies, and literary analysis more broadly. If similes enact a process of world-making, then they also offer a way of theorizing reception that moves beyond appropriation or adaptation, toward a more dynamic, relational model. Rather than treating reception as a passive act of transmission, this approach sees it as a generative practice, one that continually reinvents and reanimates the past in ways that speak to the urgencies of the present. By engaging with a wide range of texts, this thesis ultimately seeks to illustrate how the simile functions not only as a poetic device but as a conceptual force, and expands our understanding of both classical antiquity and queerness. In doing so, it contributes to an ongoing conversation about how we read and inhabit the past, how we forge connections across time and tradition, and how literature continues to shape and be shaped by the possibilities of queer world-making.

Chapter 1: The Simile as Object and Method of Comparison

Introduction

To analyse how the simile acts as a queer figure of speech within epic, I want to establish my interpretative approach by positioning the simile as both an object of inquiry and a methodological framework for classical reception and queer studies alike. In this chapter, I begin by examining the simile's queer potential, drawing on scholarship from classical and contemporary literary studies as well as ancient rhetorical theory, to consider how the simile enables a critical mode of reception that foregrounds non-linear, relational modes of meaning-making. I next explore the simile's relationship to temporality, demonstrating how it disrupts linear time: within its own structure, across texts transhistorically, and as a mode of comparison. Rather than reinforcing stable literary genealogies, similes generate dynamic, non-linear engagements with the past, complicating conventional notions of inheritance and tradition. By foregrounding relationships without collapsing distinctions, similes offer a model for conceptualizing queerness as fluid, open-ended, and resistant to fixed categories.

I conclude by briefly outlining how this interpretative model informs my reading of epic as a genre. Because similes play a central role in epic poetry, they serve as key sites of disruption, unsettling conventional narrative structures and opening new possibilities for meaning. Instead of adhering to a chronological or genealogical framework, I emphasize the simile's role in facilitating transhistorical dialogues between texts, authors, and readers. Each of the chapters that follows will then bring ancient and contemporary poetry into conversation, demonstrating how the simile not only shapes literary meaning across time but also functions as a queer figure of speech: one that disturbs, disrupts, and gestures toward alternative ways of engaging with both antiquity and contemporary literary practice.

The Queer Potential of the Simile

The simile has long been recognized as a defining feature of ancient epic poetry, distinguished from other forms of figurative language by its extended, often elaborate, and clearly marked structure; and yet its destabilising potential has not fully been explored. An epic simile is characterized by its starting with an "as" phrase and ending with a "so" expression: simply stated, a simile is a figure of speech that draws an explicit comparison between two entities, often introduced by words such as ὥς (as) or ὡς δ' (just as) in Greek, and *qualis*, *ut*, or *velut* in Latin. The epic simile also generally unfolds into the poem by stretching across several lines. This expansion allows the simile to function not only as a descriptive device but also as a narrative and thematic intervention, momentarily shifting the attention away from immediate action and introducing alternative perspectives. As a result, epic similes complicate the relationship between resemblance and difference, opening interpretive spaces that resist closure. This is particularly evident in similes where the comparison between tenor and vehicle does not exactly correspond. For instance, a simile in the *Iliad* comparing the number of Trojan campfires to stars on a night sky introduces a shepherd as a figure that finds no correspondence outside of the simile (*Il.* 8.553-61):[1]

> οἳ δὲ μέγα φρονέοντες ἐπὶ πτολέμοιο γεφύρας
> εἵατο παννύχιοι, πυρὰ δέ σφισι καίετο πολλά.
> ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ ἄστρα φαεινὴν ἀμφὶ σελήνην
> φαίνετ' ἀριπρεπέα, ὅτε τ' ἔπλετο νήνεμος αἰθήρ·
> ἔκ τ' ἔφανεν πᾶσαι σκοπιαὶ καὶ πρώονες ἄκροι
> καὶ νάπαι· οὐρανόθεν δ' ἄρ' ὑπερράγη ἄσπετος αἰθήρ,
> πάντα δὲ εἴδεται ἄστρα, γέγηθε δέ τε φρένα ποιμήν·
> τόσσα μεσηγὺ νεῶν ἠδὲ Ξάνθοιο ῥοάων
> Τρώων καιόντων πυρὰ φαίνετο Ἰλιόθι πρό.

[1] 'Hearts high, they sat in lines arranged for war | all night and burned a multitude of fires, | as when around a dazzling moon, bright stars | shine in the sky when no wind moves the air— | all the high lookout points and tall clifftops | and valleys suddenly are visible— | the vast expanse of upper air breaks open, | and all the stars are seen—the shepherd's heart is glad— | so many were the gleaming fires | burned by the Trojans on the plain of Troy | between the ships and streams of River Xanthus'.

The simile creates an expansive, almost serene image. The battlefield, often a space of chaos and violence, is momentarily transformed into a peaceful celestial scene, viewed from afar by a lone shepherd. Yet this simile resists a direct one-to-one correspondence: if the Trojans' fires are the stars, who is the shepherd? Scholars have debated whether he represents Hector or simply an unnamed figure observing from a distance. To de Jong, the shepherd figure corresponds to the Trojans, [2] whereas according to Wofford, 'the shepherd whose heart rejoices at the bright sky has no analogue in the world of the war',[3] and his role as an onlooker is much more similar to the audience of the poem. This interpretive ambiguity complicates the function of the simile. While the comparison initially seems straightforward, with the campfires being compared to the stars, the introduction of the shepherd disturbs this symmetry. Similes can thus introduce comparisons where the tenor and vehicle do not perfectly align, and where the slippage between the elements of the simile generates a moment of interpretive instability.

Beyond its formal features, the epic simile is therefore recognized as a site of interpretive complexity.[4] In Homeric poetry, for instance, similes frequently introduce elements from nature, domestic life, or the animal world, juxtaposing them with scenes of human action. These comparisons do not always clarify or reinforce the primary narrative; rather, they often introduce alternative affective and conceptual registers, complicating the listener's or reader's perception of events. This duality of stability and transformation within simile has been a focal point of modern scholarship, leading to diverse interpretations of their function within the epic tradition. As von Glinski notes, apropos the simile's function in Ovid's

[2] De Jong (2004), 131.
[3] Wofford (1992), 36.
[4] As Feeney (2014) argues, similes function as a defining element of heroic epic, serving both a structural and a thematic role in shaping narrative progression. Furthermore, Addison (2001) highlights the particular richness of postclassical extended similes, describing them as 'whole fictions in their own right' (498). For further discussion of simile within the context of Homeric epic, Latacz and Bierl (2015) offer a detailed treatment in their Basel Commentary on the *Iliad*, while broader discussions of simile as a poetic device across different traditions continue to illuminate its complexity as both a literary and a cognitive phenomenon (Minchin 2001).

Metamorphoses, 'the mismatched outside and inside of a person leads to conflicting emotions, social status, and behaviour, all of them prolonged in perpetuity. The simile's openness offers a way to capture such contradictions and explore their meaning'.[5] Von Glinski's analysis of the difference between metaphor and simile mirrors my preoccupation with the simile as a trope characterized by its openness and deferral of definition, and thus as better suited to describing the contradictions of queerness. As von Glinski states, 'the simile deals in the polyvalence of appearances, with the tension between tenor and vehicle in the simile illuminating the inherently ambiguous state of metamorphosis. Simile, like metamorphosis, connects two shapes by proposing a likeness - while retaining the identity of both'.[6]

Von Glinski's preoccupation with the openness of the simile is a key starting point of my analysis. Her study of the simile, of course, emerges out of previous scholarship on the simile and on the epic simile,[7] which has developed along multiple trajectories, reflecting shifts in literary theory and interpretive methodology. Early analyses focused on cataloguing and classifying similes within ancient texts, treating them primarily as decorative flourishes or mnemonic devices in oral composition.[8] Subsequent scholarship, however, has moved beyond these functionalist readings to explore the simile's cognitive, performative, and ideological dimensions.[9] More recent approaches, particularly those influenced by postclassical theory,

[5] von Glinski (2012), 3.
[6] von Glinski (2012), 8.
[7] Muellner (1990) comments primarily on the traditionality of Homeric simile, while Martin (1997) focuses on their role as transitions within the text. Bakker (2005) remarks on similes as a tool for the poet to communicate with their audience, while Ready (2011) sees it as a method for them to interact with their characters.
[8] This perspective is evident in the foundational work of Scott (1974) and Edwards (1987-1991), both of whom emphasize the simile's role in reinforcing narrative cohesion and aiding audience comprehension.
[9] Moulton (1977) invites a study of the Homeric simile as part of specific thematic groups rather than individual cases. Martin (1989) highlights the performative function of epic speech, arguing that similes contribute to the construction of heroic identity. Taplin (1992) examines the ways in which similes shape audience perception, particularly in relation to characterization and thematic development. Minchin (2001) looks at similes from a cognitive perspective.

have emphasized the simile's role in intertextuality and reception, foregrounding its function as a site of dialogue between texts and traditions.[10]

Ancient rhetoricians were also already aware of the simile's potential to unsettle meaning.[11] Discussions of the simile, its distinction from metaphor, and its capacity to disturb rather than simply explicate are present in ancient literary theory. This is evident in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* where he states: ἔστιν δὲ καὶ ἡ εἰκὼν μεταφορά: διαφέρει γὰρ μικρόν (Aristot. *Rh*. 3.4.1).[12] To Aristotle, the simile (εἰκών) is not dissimilar from a metaphor (μεταφορά): there is very little difference between the two. While he recognises the simile is meant to avoid ambiguities by extensively explaining the terms of comparisons, when used in poetry, Aristotle recognizes that similes are like metaphors in that they always involve two terms in relation to each other: εἰσὶν δὲ καὶ αἱ εἰκόνες, ὥσπερ εἴρηται καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄνω, αἱ εὐδοκιμοῦσαι τρόπον τινὰ μεταφοραί (*Rh*. 3.11.11).[13] While the simile is predominantly described as a rhetorical tool meant to clarify rather than obscure, Aristotle implies, in comparing it to metaphor, that it has a similar potential to disrupt meaning. In the *Poetics*, he states (Aristot. *Poet*. 1457b):[14]

> μεταφορὰ δέ ἐστιν ὀνόματος ἀλλοτρίου ἐπιφορὰ ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ γένους ἐπὶ εἶδος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ εἴδους ἐπὶ τὸ γένος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ εἴδους ἐπὶ εἶδος ἢ κατὰ τὸ ἀνάλογον.

The term ἐπιφορά, transference, underlines metaphor's capacity to disturb meaning by calling something something else. If simile is like metaphor, as Aristotle suggests, it then holds a

[10] Hardie (2002) and Greensmith (2020) explore how later poets manipulate and subvert epic similes to engage with their predecessors, reframing their thematic and ideological implications.
[11] For a comprehensive discussion of this, see McCall (1969).
[12] 'The simile also is a metaphor; for there is very little difference'. Text by Ross and translation by Freese.
[13] 'Similes also, as said above, are always in a manner approved metaphors; since they always consist of two terms'.
[14] 'Metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy'. Text by Cassel and translation by Fyfe.

related but distinct potential, not through transference, but through adduction of meaning. Aristotle's acknowledgment of the simile's metaphorical qualities reveals an interpretative space in which similes, like metaphors, can unsettle meaning and challenge fixed definitions. By allowing for both resemblance and differentiation, the simile resists the stability of singular meaning, creating a dynamic interplay between clarity and ambiguity. This tension opens up possibilities for reimagining categorical boundaries, inviting interpretations that move beyond rigid distinctions to more fluid and relational ways of understanding language and identity.

Similarly, in the *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian borrows from Aristotle's description of the simile and arrives at a similar conclusion (Quint. *Inst*. 8.6.2-8):[15]

> *Nos omissis, quae nihil ad instruendum oratorem pertinent, cauillationibus, necessarios maxime atque id usum receptos exsequemur, haec modo id his adnotasse contenti, quosdam gratia significationis quosdam decoris assumi, et esse alios id verbis propriis alios id tralatis, vertique formas non verborum modo sed et sensuum et compositionis. […] Transfertur ergo nomen aut verbum ex eo loco id quo proprium est, id eum id quo aut proprium deest aut translatum proprio melius est. […] Totum autem metaphora brevior est similitudo, eoque distat, quod illa comparatur rei quam volumus exprimere, haec pro ipsa re dicitur.*

Here, Quintilian defines metaphor as a poetic operation in which a noun or a verb is transferred (*transfertur*) to a place where there is either no literal term or the transferred (*tralatum*) is better than the literal (*proprium*). Transference of meaning is again at the centre of the discussion of both simile and metaphor; and again, metaphor and simile are themselves compared, with the primary distinction being that metaphor is a condensed form of simile. While this distinction

[15] 'I propose to disregard such quibbles as in no wise concern the training of an orator, and to proceed to discuss those tropes which are most necessary and meet with most general acceptance, contenting myself merely with noting the fact that some tropes are employed to help out our meaning and others to adorn our style, that some arise from words used properly and others from words used metaphorically, and that the changes involved concern not merely individual words, but also our thoughts and the structure of our sentences. […] A noun or a verb is transferred from the place to which it properly belongs to another where there is either no literal term or the transferred is better than the literal. […] On the whole metaphor is a shorter form of simile, while there is this further difference, that in the latter we compare some object to the thing which we wish to describe, whereas in the former this object is actually substituted for the thing'. Text and translation by Butler.

is largely formal, it also signals a fundamental difference in meaning-making. Quintilian classifies rhetorical tropes into two categories: those that embellish speech while simultaneously conveying meaning, and those that serve purely aesthetic functions. As in Aristotle, the simile is recognized as a device that constructs meaning, yet, when likened to metaphor, it acquires a secondary function that allows it to destabilize meaning even as it clarifies.

In both Aristotle and Quintilian, the simile is both likened and opposed to metaphor, as a trope with a similar and yet more explanatory effect. By noting its similarity to metaphor, Aristotle admits the simile's potential to have an effect on language and to disturb meaning and definition: Quintilian also regards it as an adornment to speech and thus as a change from what he sees as 'the natural state of language'.[16] Similarly, Rowe claims that 'every trope constitutes an impropriety' as it 'causes a deviation from the proper meaning of the word'.[17] This characterisation of rhetorical tools as altering a supposed natural state of language is again resonant with many strands of queer theory, where queer is often reclaimed as an alteration of the natural state of heteronormativity. While Aristotle and Quintilian, and ancient rhetoricians in general, are somewhat limited in their definitions by the fact that 'classical theory is further restricted by the assumption that a term has a single primal meaning',[18] already in ancient rhetoric there is a sense of the metaphor in particular, but also of the potentiality of the simile, to adorn language and disturb its natural state, not by changing the meaning of words themselves, but by introducing surprising relational frameworks between them. In the original texts, this is signalled by the use of terms such as ἐπιφορά and *transferor*, both of which indicate

[16] Peirano (2019), 39.
[17] Rowe (1997), 125.
[18] Innes (2003), 14.

a movement and shift in perception through juxtaposition, rather than a transformation of individual word meanings.[19]

This dynamic interplay between simile and metaphor, wherein simile is positioned as both an explicatory device and a potential disruptor of meaning, is further reflected in ancient terminology. A survey of Greek literary criticism reveals that παραβολή was the primary term for an extended simile, while εἰκών encompassed a broader range of rhetorical figures, including but not limited to similes.[20] This distinction underscores the simile's status as a marked rhetorical feature within epic poetry, both as an instrument for clarification and as a device that can, paradoxically, generate ambiguity and complexity. Thus, while classical rhetorical theory has often framed simile as an explicatory figure of speech, its affinity with metaphor and its inherent capacity for ambiguity suggest a far more complex role. Ancient discussions of the simile gesture toward its potential to generate interpretative instability, even as they primarily emphasize its clarificatory function. By foregrounding the simile's role as a site of meaning-making and meaning-disruption, I aim to re-examine its function within epic poetry and beyond, shedding new light on its capacity to engage with broader conceptual and theoretical concerns.

The ability of similes to hold disparate elements in simultaneous view, I believe, makes them uniquely suited for exploring questions of identity, relationality, and temporality: the simile does not demand that one thing *be* another, but rather that both be held in parallel, preserving their differences even as it draws them into comparison. This structural openness allows the simile to accommodate fluidity and multiplicity in a way that foregrounds relationality through explicit juxtaposition. Other poetic tropes such as metaphor and

[19] See also Serres and Latour (2008) on Hermes as the god of metaphor: 'Metaphor, in fact, means "transport." That's Hermes's very method: he exports and imports, thus, he traverses. He invents and thus is mistaken […] we know no other route to invention' (66).
[20] Nünlist (2009).

metonymy also explore complex relationships and can generate open-ended interpretative possibilities, but they do so differently**.** As opposed to simile, which keeps tenor and vehicle separated, metaphor and metonymy both lack the explicit visibility and separation of their components. Metaphor,[21] characterized by referring to a term or terms by way of using another or others, obscures the distinct boundaries between the tenor and the vehicle, blending them into a whole.[22] Similarly, metonymy, which relies on association or contiguity between terms, renders the connections between its components implicit and often less immediately perceptible.[23] Both tropes produce rich and proliferative chains of meaning, yet the simile maintains a clear delineation between its components, offering a distinct mode of open comparison that preserves difference while inviting connection**.** While metaphor and metonymy offer valuable insights into and dynamic experiments with linguistic and conceptual relationships, their potential for exploration and expression is thus distinctively different from that of the simile,[24] which retains a visible gap between the compared elements and thus allows for the coexistence of similarity and difference. As Beck notes:[25]

[21] Though in Homeric scholarship the study of simile has usually overtaken that of metaphor, as shown by Zanker (2019), contemporary literary studies has mostly focused on metaphor, after Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and their explanation of conceptual metaphor as holding a systematic set of correspondence between two domains of experience. As Kövecses shows (2017), a large amount of research has been conducted on conceptual metaphor theory (CMT): some of it explores the amount of knowledge that can be transferred from the metaphor's source domain (Grady 1997a, 1997b; Kövecses 2000, 2002), the connection between language and visual metaphors (Forceville 2008; Cienki and Müller 2008), cultural metaphors and embodiment (Taylor and MacLaury 1995; Yu 1998, 2002; Musolff 2004), the data needed to back up CMT (Deignan 2005; Pragglejaz Group 2007). See Gibbs (2008) for an overview of theories of metaphor.

[22] For poetic language and its interaction with imagery in classical literature, see Silk (1974). For the metaphor's influence on time, speech and thought in Homer specifically, see Zanker (2019). For a broader discussion on metaphor and the classical tradition, see Boys-Stones (2003) and Gibbs (2007).

[23] Matzner (2016) establishes a theory of metonymy as a literary trope based on contiguity, and analyses it in depth in relation to metaphor (pp. 55-166). For more on differences and similarities between metaphor and metonymy, see Dirven (2002), Silk (2003), and Allan (2008).

[24] Scholarship on the difference between metaphor and simile is large. For a short summary on their uses and definitions, see Silk (2016). For a concise and informative survey of the various ways in which simile and metaphor have been theorized in relation to one another, Haught (2013) provides a useful overview.

[25] Beck (2023), 1.

> 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. 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? […] A simile differs from a metaphor because it uses an explicit "like" expression to join the two comparanda and from a literal comparison because the two comparanda come from different conceptual domains.

Beck highlights the simile's unique ability to maintain both separation and connection between its compared elements, making it particularly well-suited for engaging with questions of identity and relationality. Her observation that similes require active interpretation from the audience underscores their openness, rather than imposing fixed equivalences, as they invite readers to negotiate similarity and difference on their own terms. This capacity for openness and interpretation underscores the simile's broader potential, not only as a literary device but as a mode of thinking that resists closure and embraces multiplicity. By preserving both similarity and difference, the simile creates a space for fluidity and relationality, allowing meaning to remain in flux rather than settling into fixed categories.

Recent scholarship on classical texts has also explored the role of the simile not only as a destabilising force but also in relation to gender roles and identity. Pache's analysis, for example, of simile and mourning in the *Iliad*, alongside Oswald's *Memorial* (2011), highlights the 'relationship of biography and simile' in the text.[26] Pache, in particular, examines how similes often coincide with the brief 'biographical' sketches of Homeric heroes (short accounts of their lineage, achievements, or impending deaths) offering a form of characterization that deepens the reader's understanding of these otherwise fleeting figures. Von Glinski's focus on simile in Ovid and its capacity to capture transformation and metamorphosis also places importance on the connections between simile and the

[26] Pache (2018), 188.

formation of the self.[27] More broadly, recent studies on the role of poetic language in constructing gender identity, such as Corbeill's *Sexing The World* (2015), have also recognised a complicated relationship between simile, the grammatical gender of its two terms, and their connection to the biological sex of the tenor and/or the vehicle.[28]

Foley famously posed a fundamental question in her still influential article on what she named 'reverse similes': addressing how similes can start from a linguistic term of one gender only to reverse it in the second term, she asks 'why are there so many similes with this consistent change of perspective or reversal of social role in the comparison, and in particular, what is the meaning of the elaborate images of sexual inversion'.[29] To her, the reverse simile seems 'to suggest both a sense of identity between people in different social and sexual roles and a loss of stability, an inversion of the normal'.[30] One of the first similes Foley comments on compares Penelope to a pious king (*Od*. 19.108-14):[31]

> ἦ γάρ σευ κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἱκάνει,
> ὥς τέ τευ ἠ βασιλῆος ἀμύμονος, ὅς τε θεουδὴς
> ἀνδράσιν ἐν πολλοῖσι καὶ ἰφθίμοισιν ἀνάσσων
> εὐδικίας ἀνέχησι, φέρησι δὲ γαῖα μέλαινα
> πυροὺς καὶ κριθάς, βρίθησι δὲ δένδρεα καρπῶι,
> τίκτηι δ᾽ ἔμπεδα μῆλα, θάλασσα δὲ παρέχηι ἰχθῦς
> ἐξ εὐηγεσίης, ἀρετῶσι δὲ λαοὶ ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ.

Foley comments on this simile as evoking in their comparison 'an inversion of social role or a social theme with an equivalent difference of focus or point of view',[32] inserting its discussion in a broader commentary on reverse similes and how they reflect on gender roles

[27] Von Glinski (2016).
[28] Corbeill (2015), 99.
[29] Foley (1978), 8.
[30] Foley (1978), 8.
[31] 'You must be | the daughter of a holy king who ruled | a mighty people with good laws; his rule | made the black earth grow wheat and barley; trees | were full of fruit; the sheep had lambs; the sea | provided fish, and people thrived'. Text by A.T. Murray and translation by Wilson, unless stated otherwise.
[32] Foley (1978), 7.

in the *Odyssey*. While the simile has been read and employed to disturb the gender binary, as Foley does, no studies have opened up this figure of speech to the explorations of identity *beyond* the binary in classical literature, addressing its meaning and value for queer theory specifically. In considering queer theory as an approach which aims to disrupt binary definitions by disturbing language and meaning, it becomes apparent how it could provide a valuable lens for the study of the simile. According to Sedgwick, in fact, 'queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive - recurrent, eddying, *troublant'*.[33] Noting that 'the word "queer" itself means *across*',[34] Sedgwick seems to find in queer theory and approaches a disturbance similar to that of the simile in its transferring of meaning, thus making the lens of queer approaches an extremely productive one for studying the disturbance similes might produce.

Following this connection between disturbance of meaning and queerness, it is only right to finally come to a theory of the queer simile. As mentioned in my Introduction, the queer potential of the simile as a figure of speech is recognised in Stephanie Burt's "Like". While this study will not necessarily make so bold a claim as to contend that all similes in classical literature can indeed be read as queer, I am interested in the potential that a queer reading of similes would unlock when looking at epic similes. I thus aim to consider the possibilities of a study of 'the queer simile', inspired by Burt's analysis of the 'like' as expressing an instability in language which points at a lack of fixed identity as well. Burt's analysis of simile in "Like" positions it as a fundamentally destabilizing linguistic structure, one that resists the assertion of fixed identity. While metaphor asserts, simile questions; while metaphor fixes meaning, simile suspends it in a state of contingency. As she puts it, 'we can always decide whether we will use "like"':[35] simile thus signals an awareness of linguistic artifice, a self-conscious

[33] Sedgwick (1993), xii.
[34] Sedgwick (1993), xii.
[35] Burt (2014), 22

engagement with the provisional nature of meaning itself. As previously mentioned, Vuong has also argued that both simile and the metaphor enact 'a foundational QUEER praxis for alterity'.[36] This is because metaphors and similes allow us to establish bonds in spite and because of differences. By recognising the impossibility of language and simile to capture real meaning, Vuong sees these poetic tropes as acting in a way that is inherently queer, where the reader is the one in charge of creating a new meaning and recognising affinities where perhaps, before, there were none, looking beyond what is already present and towards future possibilities.

What happens, then, when we look at Vuong's definitions of the simile as something 'looking beyond what is already there, towards another possibility' in temporal terms? It seems to me that Vuong's definition of the simile as a queer practice of alterity across identities can be also considered as a practice of alterity across temporality as well, as I will explore in the following sections of this chapter. This is not to say that the process is backward looking, or that we, as modern readers, should learn from the classics, but rather that the simile itself, through its like, is always operating, both in ancient and contemporary texts, as queer, as a site of struggle for identity, self-recognition, and belonging. If Burt reads the simile as an inherently destabilizing force and Vuong frames it as a queer practice of reaching toward alterity, the classical material offers a compelling and underexamined archive in which these dynamics are already at play. Foley's observations on gender inversion in Homeric similes reveal an ancient poetic consciousness of the simile's power to disrupt stable roles and identities. The simile has always performed the work of queerness, of opening identities to comparison, of creating meaning in the space between, of troubling any easy or fixed equivalence. This thesis, then, seeks not to overlay a modern theory onto ancient texts, but to uncover a shared poetic logic

[36] Vuong (2020).

across them in which simile serves as a site of queer meaning-making, connecting disparate bodies, roles, and temporalities in ways that resist closure and embrace possibility.

Reception through Simile

Having established the queer potential of the simile, I next want to show how it can inform new terms, associations, and expectations through which we might approach with the study of the classical tradition, as well as the fields of classical reception and comparative criticism. The idea of the classical tradition in particular is often conceptualised as a hierarchical and chronological process, where the ancient text simply influences the modern one and is therefore considered as more influential, more original, more important.[37] Models of the classical tradition thus posit a one-way trajectory of influence, supporting the idea that ancient texts illuminate the modern, but not the reverse: instead, they seek 'the source of Western literature and culture in a classical canon valued as timeless, exemplary, and universally true'.[38] The classical tradition thus often assumes a seamless continuity between classical antiquity and the modern West, representing such continuity as 'an objectively true historical relationship between Greco-Roman antiquity and Anglo-European modernity, between past and present'.[39] By contrast, classical reception studies have challenged this model by insisting on reciprocity: in this framework, modern texts not only respond to antiquity but actively shape how antiquity is perceived, interrogated, and reconstructed. The reception paradigm, first articulated by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in the 1960s,[40] situates texts in three interrelated contexts:

[37] See for example Highet (1949), who in his landmark book *The Classical Tradition* explores all the ways in which Graeco-Roman literature has influenced and shaped European and American texts.
[38] Broder (2013), 508.
[39] Ibid.
[40] See Iser's (1960) and Jauss' (1977) seminal works on reception aesthetics, which together laid the foundations for the so-called "Konstanzer Schule" (Constance School) and the modern paradigm of reader-response and reception theory.

firstly, the historical setting of the text's initial production; secondly, the reception of the text by communities of readers in diverse times and places; and finally, the social function of the text, which could include an exploration of the values and meanings of the text for readers at the time of the text's production or during any subsequent period of the text's reception, including for today's reader. In this framework, modern readers and authors are not passive inheritors of a classical canon, but rather actively engage with, reinterpret, and reconfigure antiquity, producing new meanings that are historically and culturally situated.

While recent scholarship on the classical tradition offers a more nuanced perspective than earlier hierarchical models of influence, highlighting that its sheer scope defies 'any attempt to establish clear proprietorship',[41] it also insists on its terminology, noting that 'the tensions between common and critical understandings of "tradition" are surely one facet of the study of the classical tradition itself'.[42] Though this is certainly true, classical reception and, more specifically, critical classical reception studies have more explicitly and further distanced themselves from linear or hierarchical models of inheritance, emphasizing instead a dynamic, reciprocal process in which modern readers and authors actively engage with, reinterpret, and reshape antiquity while also learning from and interacting with other disciplines altogether. In particular, Hanink's coining of the term Critical Classical Reception Studies addresses how the discipline of Classics can and should be pushed further by its engagement with disciplines such as 'Critical Race Studies, Critical Ethnic Studies, Critical Gender Studies':[43] 'by giving this work a name that acknowledges the debt to other critical fields — and aspires to alliance with them', as Hanink says, 'we can more fully embrace reception work's potential to let classicists be activist scholars, too'.[44]

[41] Silk, Gildenhard, and Barrow (2014), 28.
[42] Silk, Gildenhard, and Barrow (2014), 31.
[43] Hanink (2017).
[44] Hanink (2017). Hanink's approach has been further advanced by Critical Ancient World Studies (CAWS), a methodology that moves beyond classical studies' colonial and Eurocentric frameworks and seeks not merely to recover subaltern narratives but to dismantle entrenched structures of

Although this thesis does not claim to undertake activist work, it explicitly positions itself within the field of critical classical reception, engaging with theoretical frameworks that extend beyond traditional Classics to encompass queer and other critical approaches to the epic canon and the epic simile. My analysis therefore starts from critical and reciprocal models of reception by focusing on the simile as a site where the exchange between ancient and modern becomes especially legible. By situating similes within both ancient literary traditions and contemporary queer theory, I propose that they operate as interpretive crossroads: ancient similes can illuminate modern conceptualisations of queerness, while modern theoretical frameworks, in turn, open fresh perspectives on ancient poetics. The simile therefore exemplifies the dialogic movement central to reception studies, where the boundaries between source and response and antiquity and modernity are continually negotiated rather than fixed.

To discuss models of reception, I want to first turn to examine the temporal operations of the simile itself, before later returning to how this might reframe our understanding of reception. When discussing queer receptions of classical texts it is indeed important to consider what ideas of temporality underlie the notion of simple chronological influences, and how similes, with their disruptive potential, arguably always operate with a queer temporality instead. This might seem an exaggeration, yet the verbal morphology of similes almost always differs from the main time of the narrative, creating complex temporal relationships between the main text and the temporal plane opened by the simile. A simile in the *Iliad*, for example, compares the singular event of two armies crashing against each other to the recurrent, cyclical event of two rivers meeting (*Il*. 4.452-6):[45]

knowledge; questioning the categories, themes, and epistemological assumptions traditionally taken as objective and essential within the inherited discipline of classics (Umachandran and Ward, eds., 2023).

[45] 'The earth was flooded | with blood—as when from two opposing mountains | from mighty springs, two river torrents, swollen | by winter storms, flow down the deep ravines, | then clash, collide, and mingle in the gorge, | creating an enormous flood—the shepherd | high on the hilltop hears the waters roar— | such was the noise of fighting and of screaming | as those two armies met'.

ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε χείμαρροι ποταμοὶ κατ᾽ ὄρεσφι ῥέοντες
ἐς μισγάγκειαν συμβάλλετον ὄβριμον ὕδωρ
κρουνῶν ἐκ μεγάλων κοίλης ἔντοσθε χαράδρης,
τῶν δέ τε τηλόσε δοῦπον ἐν οὔρεσιν ἔκλυε ποιμήν·
ὣς τῶν μισγομένων γένετο ἰαχή τε πόνος τε.

As Bray notes, this simile presents a stark 'temporal contrast':[46] the simile not only interrupts a moment of violence to transport us in a different landscape, but further confuses straightforward notions of temporality by comparing the fast and violent meeting of the two armies to a continuous event, the movement of the rivers. As she explains:[47]

> The traditional opening of the simile contributes to this sense of continuity: ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε, 'and just as when …', indicates a timeless, recurrent event. The reference to the torrents as χείμαρροι, 'winter-flowing', implies that the rivers are swollen every spring by snowmelt, emphasizing the seasonal recurrence of natural events. The scene might occur deep in the past, or far into the future, but the sense is that this event has always happened and always will.

The simile, within the microcosm of the text, can thus stop the time of the narrative, expand it, push it forward into a different future or propel it back into the past. Similarly, it affects our own time of reading, perhaps changing our very experience of the text as we move back and forth from the procession of a narrative (plot-driven or not) into the temporality of this particular figure of speech. In fact, an added internal effect of the simile, and of its interaction with time, is how it disturbs the time of reading or listening. This is the case particularly for epic, where extended similes are many and common. Their length influences the time of reading and/or listening, thus increasing our self-consciousness of how simile affect temporality. As noted by Fusillo, the simile fundamentally transcends time: 'the extended simile of classical epos is indeed its own thing, and constitutes a definitive pause in the flux of

[46] Bray (2022), 30.
[47] Bray (2022), 31.

narration.'[48] The simile propels readers into a different spatial and temporal dimension, and leaves behind the world of the narrative we have so far been getting used to through narration.

The simile can therefore provide a way to think about time as fluid, non-linear, and multidimensional, resisting a singular linear narrative. This understanding of temporality aligns strongly with queer theories of time and, crucially, offers a model for rethinking classical reception, not just as a chronological or hierarchical transmission of influence, but as a more relational and intertextual dynamic. The simile's capacity to open multiple temporal planes within a single moment in the text can also operate trans-historically, allowing later texts to engage with earlier ones in ways that are dialogic, recursive, and non-linear. Discussing the epic tradition and post-Homeric poetry, Hunter defines the simile as 'a marked poetic form […] which by its very nature foregrounds issues of similarity and difference, [and] is a very powerful tool of intertextual allusion and variation',[49] as the principal mode through which poetic crafts and allusions are displayed. He mentions the first simile of the *Aeneid* as an example (*Aen*. 1.148-54):[50]

> *ac ueluti magno in populo cum saepe coorta est*
> *seditio saeuitque animis ignobile uulgus*
> *iamque faces et saxa uolant, furor arma ministrat;*
> *tum, pietate grauem ac meritis si forte uirum quem*
> *conspexere, silent arrectisque auribus astant;*
> *ille regit dictis animos et pectora mulcet:*
> *sic cunctus pelagi cecidit fragor...*

[48] Fusillo (1985), 327. My own translation.
[49] Hunter (2006), 85.
[50] 'As when unrest often arises among a great people and the common crowd's minds turn violent and torches and rocks are hurled as their rage finds weapons; then, if they chance to see a man whose sense of duty and whose deeds carry weight, they fall silent and stand by with ready ears, and his words govern their minds and soothe their hearts. So did all the roar of the sea fall'. Text and translation by Hunter.

This simile in Virgil presents a reversal of the second extended simile in the *Iliad*, where the Achaean troops' response to Agamemnon's misguided proposal to abandon the campaign is likened to a storm at sea (*Il*. 2.144-9):[51]

> κινήθη δ᾽ ἀγορὴ φὴ κύματα μακρὰ θαλάσσης
> πόντου Ἰκαρίοιο, τὰ μέν τ᾽ Εὖρός τε Νότος τε
> ὤρορ᾽ ἐπαΐξας πατρὸς Διὸς ἐκ νεφελάων.
> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε κινήσηι Ζέφυρος βαθὺ λήϊον ἐλθὼν
> λάβρος ἐπαιγίζων, ἐπί τ᾽ ἠμύει ἀσταχύεσσιν,
> ὣς τῶν πᾶσ᾽ ἀγορὴ κινήθη·

While in Homer's version the assembly in the narrative descends into chaos, Virgil's simile depicts a tumultuous assembly that is instead brought under control. The simile is therefore used as a tool to reflect a trans-historical relationship between the text that both recognises and subverts the Homeric tradition. The temporal dimension of the simile, both within the text and across texts, serves as a marker of temporal interplay that disrupts conventional interpretations and invites a more dynamic understanding of epic. Through such intertextual moments, the simile as a result emerges as a space where past and present converge, allowing for a reading of epic that acknowledges its layered temporalities and its potential to unsettle rigid narrative orders.

This capacity of the simile to bridge different temporal and textual landscapes also underpins its role in this thesis, where it facilitates the pairing of ancient epic with modern queer reimaginings. In addition, the simile can also be taken as a strategy of comparison. This has already been discussed by Hardwick, who takes the simile 'as a means to explore the interaction between Greek texts and modern creative literature',[52] using the relationship between Homer

[51] 'The group was moved, as mighty waves at sea | beside Icaria are roused by Eurus | and Notus, rushing from the clouds of Zeus, | their father, or when Zephyr blasts thick wheat | and bends the ears with blasts of boisterous wind— | so the whole crowd was moving'.
[52] Hardwick (1997), 326.

and Derek Walcott as an example. Admittedly, Hardwick's choice of texts is more straightforward than my own: Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) famously engages, starting from the title, with both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in very explicit terms. Yet Hardwick's model is both relevant and valuable for the way in which by simile she does not mean 'a simple likeness', but rather 'a formal element in the poet's technique'.[53] As she notes, 'the simile has a structural role within the work. In both form and content it is also, in a variety of ways, a factor in generating and transmitting the intertextual relationships between ancient and modern texts'.[54] Fundamentally, 'the simile becomes […] a vehicle for the audiences' reading and transformation of a text which explores social values and contexts'.[55] Hardwick goes on to argue that the simile, by virtue of comparison, allows audiences to explore and witness experiences that are not their own, connecting between communities and allowing for a transformation in perspective within the poems and audiences. She focuses particularly on Walcott's reinterpretation of Homer's cyclops in *A Stage Version of the Odyssey* (1993) and his consideration of otherness, arguing that by enacting a simile between the two episodes and twisting the second terms of comparisons in relation to the original Homeric text, he 'creates a double consciousness, an awareness that Homeric images, situations and relationships exert a cultural power and that this cultural power is problematic'.[56]

Hardwick's theory explores reception through the framework of the simile, emphasizing not only likeness but also reversal and transformation. Her argument suggests that similes in modern reinterpretations of ancient texts do more than reference their predecessors: they actively reshape them, exposing the cultural power and problematics embedded in Homeric imagery, relationships, and situations. This is particularly evident in her discussion of

[53] Hardwick (1997), 327.
[54] Hardwick (1997), 327.
[55] Hardwick (1997), 327.
[56] Hardwick (1997), 337.

Walcott's reworked similes, which she argues generate an awareness of these tensions. While Hardwick's examples are explicit in their engagement with Homer, I propose that modern similes can interact with ancient ones in ways that are less direct yet equally significant. Rather than assuming a linear model of influence, as is often the case in reception studies shaped by Martindale's *Redeeming the Text* (1993), I seek to develop an approach that accounts for the simile's capacity to unsettle temporal hierarchies.

Martindale's analysis in *Reedeming the Text* starts from the conviction that 'the interpretation of texts is inseparable from the history of their reception',[57] as proved by the theoretical studies of critics such as Hans Robert Jauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, who focused on the historical embeddedness not just of the text but also of the reader, proving how a literary work can be understood only if perceived as creating a dialogue between itself and the reader's expectations. Martindale's work therefore draws from reception theory and other thinkers from the schools of semiotics and post-structuralism in order to prove how '*meaning* […] *is always realized at the point of reception*'.[58] His main thesis consists in the belief that a text is always integrated within a 'chain of reception':[59] being received and re-elaborated by different authors throughout the course of history, the meaning of a text evolves with its reception, and can thus never go back to its original one. From this consideration, Martindale argues that ancient literature is therefore the most suitable to being analysed with this particular theoretical setting, as its texts have travelled and been received throughout the whole of history. As he puts it, '*a classic becomes a text whose "iterability" is a function of its capacity, which includes the authority vested in its reception, for continued re-appropriations by readers*'.[60]

[57] Martindale (1993), xiii.
[58] Martindale (1993), 3.
[59] Martindale (1993), 7.
[60] Martindale (1993), 28.

Martindale is himself attuned to the limitations of a teleological or linear model of reception. In many ways, he inverts traditional chronology by insisting that we can only read the past through the lens of the present: nevertheless, while Martindale's model of reception positions texts within a historical chain, framing their meaning as continually reshaped through successive reinterpretations, this approach still risks reinforcing a hierarchical structure of literary influence that privileges chronological succession and direct textual engagement. This theoretical approach has in turn been widely received, discussed, and critiqued in literary reception studies.[61] Especially pertinently, Holmes points out how reinforcing the idea of the transhistorical and of the universal value of some texts without critically discussing its value brings forward an idea of literature 'whose omissions are conveniently forgotten so that it can be offered up as a totality to reground the unity of "the classical" as "Western"'.[62] Despite its emphasis on interpretative dynamism, Martindale's framework thus remains vulnerable to reproducing hierarchies of influence grounded in chronology and direct textual succession. Similes, however, challenge this framework by resisting fixed points of reference and by generating fluid, open-ended networks of comparison instead. Unlike a model that situates meaning within a linear progression of reception, similes operate through associative leaps, proliferating unexpected connections that are not necessarily bound by historical continuity.

Yet the openness of the simile is tempered by its own formal limits. Unlike metaphors, which can diffuse indefinitely into their surrounding discourse, similes are structurally finite: they open with a 'just as' and close with a 'so', containing their imaginative expansion within a clearly demarcated frame. Each simile builds a temporary microcosmos whose autonomy is always curtailed by its inevitable return to the diegesis. Yet this boundedness strengthens,

[61] *Classical Receptions Journal* 5.2 (2013), for instance, is entirely dedicated to responses to Martindale's *Redeeming the Text*. Of particular influence on my analysis are the contributions by Elsner and Güthenke, and Martindale's own analysis of his past work, as they all reflect on issues of supposed 'universality', historical influence, and the problems of new humanism as a discipline.
[62] Holmes (2016), 279.

rather than diminishes, the interpretative potential of its form: the friction between openness and closure defines the simile as a site of productive instability that swings between expansion and containment, alternative and return, imaginative persistence and limited textual duration. Even as the simile formally closes and the narrative resumes, the alternatives and tensions it generates do not vanish, and may continue to haunt the diegesis and resonate in the reader's imagination beyond the simile's immediate textual duration. It is precisely in this tension between formal closure and imaginative expansion that the simile's critical force lies, revealing how epic form negotiates, and sometimes resists, possible alternative ways of reading, seeing, and being.

Through this movement, similes invite new modes of reading that are shaped by dis/similarity rather than direct influence, producing forms of reception that are dynamic, recursive, and sometimes disruptive: the simile can then be treated metaphorically as a conceptual model for comparative criticism and classical reception. Similes hold the potential for reimagining identity and power structures, and for exploring alternative ways of engaging with both ancient and modern texts. They do not simply mark a moment of reception; they create dynamic fields of comparison, allowing for forms of engagement that are not always structured by direct textual reference. Within epic, similes provide a space for exploring identity, carrying what I see as an untapped queer potential, one that, while generative, also remains entangled with the ethical and political limitations of both ancient and modern texts.

My approach to simile as reception thus moves away from Hardwick's focus on explicit textual pairings, yet retains her insight that similes open windows onto different worlds, making space for reinterpretation and transformation. By unsettling traditional notions of reception and influence, similes carve out imaginative spaces that are not constrained by linear temporality or hierarchical structures of meaning. Instead, they invite a mode of engagement that is provisional, associative, and open-ended, as well as modes of reading that resonate deeply with

queer theoretical approaches to temporality and representation. While Hardwick highlights the transformative potential of similes in reworking classical texts, and Martindale situates meaning within a chain of reception, my analysis builds on these perspectives to propose two intertwined claims: first, that similes within ancient texts themselves can invite queer modes of reception through their formal and conceptual openness; and second, that adopting the simile as a critical model allows us to rethink reception as a process shaped by dis/similarity, multiplicity, and fluid relationality, while also keeping in view their role as poetic devices within the texts. Rather than reinforcing an authoritative past or grounding meaning in a fixed interpretive sequence, similes create openings for multiplicity, fluidity, and reinterpretation across time.

Queer Unhistoricism and Temporality

Having discussed how similes disrupt linear models of temporality and reception, we can now turn to the ways in which queer time similarly unsettles conventional temporal structures. Just as similes resist fixed meaning and linear influence, queer time disrupts conventional genealogies by foregrounding temporal non-linearity and the coexistence of multiple, overlapping temporalities. If simile enables a form of reception that moves beyond historical transmission toward associative and open-ended modes of engagement, then queer time offers a broader theoretical lens for understanding how such disruptions operate. Both frameworks challenge inherited structures, making space for alternative ways of relating to past and future. Within classical studies, where time has often been framed as linear and positivist, positioning Greece and Rome as origins from which meaning flows, this intervention is particularly urgent. Rather than reinforcing a model of transmission that privileges continuity and derivation, queer time, like simile, invites us to think in terms of simultaneity, contingency, and transformation.

By resisting the gravitational pull of an authoritative past, both simile and queer temporality create openings for fluidity, multiplicity, and reimagination across time.

Linear time carries with it the understanding that difference is constructed on absolute separation between past, present, and future. This model has been critiqued by many:[63] queer temporality has been a significant focus within queer theory over the past two decades, challenging normative understandings of time as linear and teleological. This reshaping of time has resulted in fresh approaches to understanding historical and literary connections, moving past simple genealogies or cause-and-effect relationships. Thanks to this scholarship, literary reception can now be read not as a straightforward flow of influence, but as a vast, multidirectional interaction between the past, present, and future. Similarity across time therefore does not necessitate identity but rather (much like simile) an awareness of the non-self-identical, the unstable, and the unfixed. As Golderg and Menon put it in an exemplary way:[64]

> In opposition to a historicism that proposes to know the definitive difference between the past and the present, we venture that queering requires what we might term "unhistoricism." Far from being ahistorical—or somehow outside history—unhistoricism would acknowledge that history as it is hegemonically understood today is inadequate to housing the project of queering.

Goldberg and Menon's concept of unhistoricism challenges the assumption that history, as traditionally conceived, is capable of fully accommodating the complexities of queerness.

[63] Scholars such as Halberstam (2005) have articulated how queer time exists in opposition to the institutions of heteronormativity, including marriage, reproduction, and familial inheritance, producing alternative modes of temporality that reject reproductive futurism (Edelman, 2004) and chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010). This reconfiguration of time has led to new ways of conceptualizing historical and literary relationships, moving beyond straightforward genealogies or causal determinism to embrace spectral, associative, and affective linkages across time (Freccero, 2006). Scholars such as Dinshaw (1999) and Muñoz (2009) have explored how queerness manifests through temporal disruption: for Dinshaw, this involves a queer historical touch that forges affinities across time, while Muñoz envisions queerness as a futurity of possibility and potential. This ongoing theoretical discourse invites us to rethink literary reception not as a linear progression of influence but as an expansive, multidirectional interplay between past, present, and future.

[64] Goldberg and Menon (2015), 1609.

Rather than positioning queerness as something that can be neatly mapped onto a linear historical framework, where past, present, and future are clearly demarcated. Unhistoricism resists such containment. This approach does not deny history but instead questions the authority of historicist methods that claim to offer definitive accounts of temporal difference. It suggests that history, as an epistemological structure, is itself a product of ideological forces that privilege continuity, causality, and teleological progression. By contrast, unhistoricism offers a way of thinking about the past that refuses absolute separation while also rejecting simple equivalences. It aligns with broader critiques within queer theory that challenge the assumption that historical continuity necessarily entails identity or direct transmission. Instead of assuming a stable relationship between past and present, unhistoricism acknowledges the instability and multiplicity of temporal connections. This resonates with the function of the simile, which operates by establishing a relation between two terms that are neither fully identical nor wholly distinct. Much like how the simile invites us to perceive resemblance without collapsing difference, unhistoricism asks us to engage with the past in ways that recognize affinity without erasing disjunction.

This conceptual shift has been particularly influential in classical reception studies, where scholars like Matzner have applied queer theoretical insights to challenge dominant historicist models of influence and inheritance. To him, time is 'a complex and shifting web in which proximity and distance, similarity and difference are constantly (re-)negotiated and in which changing desires give rise to moments of communion and of forging community'.[65] Queer connections are thus 'brought about by acts of bending time, productive mobilizations of anachronism, and transitions from temporal normativities into osmotic temporalities'.[66] Matzner's articulation of time as 'a complex and shifting web' foregrounds the instability of

[65] Matzner (2016), 192.
[66] Matzner (2016), 192.

temporal boundaries and the ways in which relationships between past and present are continually renegotiated. His emphasis on 'changing desires' as a force that shapes these connections highlights the affective dimension of temporal experience, and how acts of reading, interpretation, and identification do not simply recover a fixed past but actively produce new configurations of meaning. This view departs from traditional classical reception studies, which often privilege a model of influence predicated on stable genealogies, where the classical past is seen as a coherent source that transmits its legacy in a linear fashion to the present. Instead, Matzner's approach embraces temporal fluidity, emphasizing how acts of reception are shaped by shifting contexts and subjective engagements.

This framework, I argue, finds an analogy in the mechanics of the simile, which similarly unsettles temporal and conceptual fixity. Just as Matzner describes queer temporal relations as moments of communion forged through non-normative movements across time, the simile operates by establishing unexpected linkages between disparate elements. Similes generate meaning not through a rigid structure of cause and effect but through a movement of dis/similarity, in which two things are brought into proximity without collapsing into identity. This allows for a form of reception that is not strictly historicist but instead engages with texts through relational affinities and affective resonances.[67] Such a framework has profound implications for how we engage with classical texts. It suggests that rather than viewing antiquity as a distant, self-contained past that can only be accessed through rigorous historicist methods, we might instead approach it as something that is continually reshaped by the desires, perspectives, and imaginative investments of those who engage with it. Like the simile, which defies linearity by activating associative and provisional connections, queer reception helps bring these dynamics of to the surface, offering a way of reading that is attuned to openness, indeterminacy, and the ongoing potential for reinvention.

[67] On queer time and affect see Ahmed (2006) and Love (2009).

In this light, I propose a reading of the simile as a poetic device that allows for a 'practice of queer world-making', defined by Jose Muñoz as the queer expression of 'the possibility to map a world where one is allowed to cast pictures of utopia'.[68] In his seminal book *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Muñoz suggests that many queer performances and reading strategies can in fact be used to avoid a set temporality, specifically when restricted to the present, and instead present us with many possible futures and utopian possibilities for queer subjects to inhabit. As he explains it: [69]

> Minoritarian performance—performances both theatrical and quotidian—transports us across symbolic space, inserting us in a coterminous time when we wit- ness new formations within the present and the future. The coterminous temporality of such performance exists within the future and the present, surpassing relegation to one temporality (the present) and insisting on the minoritarian subject's status as world-historical entity. The stage and the street, like the shop floor, are venues for performances that allow the spectator access to minoritarian lifeworlds that exist, importantly and dialectically, within the future and the present. […] These performances are thus outposts of an actually existing queer future existing in the present.

This interpretation of queer world-making as allowing for the minoritarian subject to explore new possibilities and ways of being is how I interpret the simile as acting within the text. Queer world-making as a mode of resistance that allows the minoritarian subject to explore new possibilities and ways of being offers a compelling framework for understanding how similes function within a text. If similes are defined by their capacity to create unexpected connections, disrupt fixed meaning, and defer closure, then they too can be understood as a practice of queer world-making. Rather than reinforcing dominant hierarchies of meaning, similes create relationality without insisting on equivalence, gesturing toward forms of likeness that do not demand a stable or essentialized identity. The simile's disturbance of time within the text

[68] Muñoz (2009), 40.
[69] Muñoz (2009), 56.

allows the reader to imagine new ways of being for the first term of comparison, positioning the second term not as an ultimate definition but as a provisional, shifting horizon of possibility.

Similes, then, are not only queer in their refusal of rigid identification but also minoritarian in their capacity to foreground alternative modes of relation, ones that do not privilege sameness but instead embrace the generative potential of difference, fluidity, and transformation. The simile's disturbance of time in the text further allows for the reader to imagine new ways of being for the first term of comparison, exploring a second term that is yet not its ultimate definition or defined by identity but instead by similarity and constant deferral of a fixed form of being. This, to me, when we look at similes within classical epic, goes hand in hand with Muñoz's theory of what he calls disidentification: [70]

> Disidentification, as a mode of understanding the movements and circulations of identificatory force, would always foreground that lost object of identification; it would establish new possibilities while at the same time echoing the materially prescriptive cultural locus of any identification. […] Disidentificatory performances are performative acts of conjuring that deform and re-form the world. This reiteration builds worlds. It proliferates "reals", or what I call worlds, and establishes the groundwork for potential oppositional counterpublics.

Simile, as a formal structure, mirrors this disidentificatory movement. Within classical epic, the subject of the simile momentarily steps outside their assigned narrative identity, instead entering a space of resemblance that does not demand complete identification but rather allows for slippage, negotiation, and transformation. The function of the simile, marked by *like* rather than *is*, resists the closure of absolute equivalence, offering instead a moment of suspended identity, a resemblance that is always in flux. The role of the simile within epic literature can therefore be re-thought and re-interpreted through such practices. Through the simile, in fact, the self can be renegotiated, disidentified, re-assigned and dis/likened: as queer theorist and writer Preciado says, 'it is fundamental not to recognize oneself. Derecognition,

[70] Muñoz (1999), 30.

disidentification is a condition for the emergence of the political as the possibility of transforming reality'.[71]

The dynamics of emergence and foreclosure that structure the simile also resonate with broader literary strategies of the hypothetical and the counterfactual. As Wohl observes, counterfactual thinking in Greek philosophy and literature operates by momentarily opening the space of what might have been, even when the narrative ultimately reasserts what actually occurred.[72] Such fleeting moments of speculation function much like similes: they gesture toward alternative possibilities only to fold them back into the dominant order, creating a rhythm of imaginative expansion and narrative containment. Similarly, Hall identifies within the *Iliad* what she calls 'flashes of prognostic insight',[73] focusing on visions of environmental trauma that momentarily disrupt the poem's otherwise extractive vision of nature. These instances, like similes, puncture the flow of the epic with glimpses of other futures, brief illuminations that reveal how the form itself accommodates the potential for divergence, reorientation, and resistance. Reading similes within this larger literary economy of the 'what if' highlights their significance for queer interpretation: they stage the possibility of worlds otherwise, even as those worlds remain transient, imagined, or foreclosed.

And yet, even as those alternate realities disappear from view, even after the simile reaches its formal conclusion and the narrative moves forward, the possibilities and dissonances it evokes do not simply vanish: they persist as promissory glimpses in the reader's imagination, generating fleeting openings that continue to echo both within and beyond the diegesis, allowing alternative perspectives, potential worlds, and provisional readings to linger beyond the simile's immediate textual frame. The simile therefore embodies both a disidentificatory and a world-making practice, in its detachment from the main body of the text

[71] Preciado (2008), 397.
[72] Wohl (2014).
[73] Hall (2025).

but also in its opening the window into new ways of being, thinking and feeling through the second term of comparison. Just as Muñoz's disidentificatory performance conjures new ways of being within and against dominant structures, the simile enacts a similar function, inviting an exploration of likeness that remains unsettled, resisting finality, and embracing the possibility of transformation.

Conclusion

As I will show throughout this thesis, the simile possesses a unique capacity to disrupt normativity and temporality within epic poetry. The interest of this thesis in choosing epic comes in part from the canonisation of the simile as a figure of speech characteristic of this genre. It is not an exaggeration to say that similes, and extended and/or Homeric similes in particular (meaning similes that proceed at length well beyond one single line of the poem),[74] are one of the most recognisable features within epic poetry and poetry in general.[75] If one ought to address the simile in classical literature, then, it is almost impossible to do so without confronting the use of the simile in epic poetry. In her 2020 lecture "Interview with Water", which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4 and which broadly addresses issues of likeness and reflection, Alice Oswald refers to the simile as a figure of speech which 'moves in the other direction, instead of reducing one thing to another it reverberates, it proliferates. Where there is a simile, it's as if the poem sprouts another whole poem'.[76] Oswald's notion of proliferation and of the simile as going against reduction contradicts earlier and older appraisals of the simile as performing simply an explanatory function.

[74] The Oxford Dictionary creates an immediate connection between epic similes and Homer as well as other fundamental poets of the Western canon: it defines an epic simile as 'an extended simile which compares one composite action with another, often with a digressive effect; it originates in Homer, and was imitated by Virgil, Dante, and, in English, notably by Milton. It is frequently parodied by Fielding'. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095754492>
[75] See for example Joseph (1997) and Feeney (2014).
[76] Oswald (2020).

Oswald's own work, as noted by Pache in her analysis of both the use of simile in Oswald's *Memorial* (2011) and the Homeric simile more generally, is characterized by extended similes.[77] Pache's exploration highlights how Oswald's use of extended similes prompts a proliferation of meaning, which has led Oswald to reassess the epic genre as a whole, as expressed in her 2020 lecture "Lines", coming after "Interview with Water*"*. Here, Oswald understands epic as a genre where a listener or a reader is needed in order to fill out the lingering silence of poetry: by contrast, as Oswald says, lyric speaks over itself.[78] Oswald thus understands epic as a capacious form, which can be utilised beyond the formal constraints of the epic form as a genre defined by the hexameter. I find Oswald's understanding of epic lines particularly fruitful in a queer theory context: just as the epic genre and its lines require the listener or reader to fill in gaps, drawing them into a wider social context, queer theory similarly operates within a social sphere. Queer poetry often engages in a dialogue and exploration of identity where authors seek to fill out a silence, which is often historical, by untangling the difficulties of their own identities, and equally require for readers to engage in a similar work. In this sense, then, I follow Oswald in the idea of treating epic as quite a broad category, one that brings into discussions ideas of orality, exploration, self-discovery and affirmation in the public sphere: as Martin notes epic is 'on the level of ideology a metonymy for culture itself'.[79]

Following Martin and Oswald, I propose to understand epic as a 'heuristic tool' for interrogation and analysis:[80] one that, at its core, unsettles expectations and demands active interpretive engagement. Epic is not simply a genre of narrative continuity; rather, it is a form that thrives on disruption and the generation of alternative perspectives. As Macintosh and McConnell argue, epic tales 'do not just reflect identity; they create it'.[81] The texts I examine

[77] Pache (2018)
[78] Oswald (2020).
[79] Martin (2005), 18.
[80] Foley (2005), 2.
[81] Macintosh and McConnell (2020), 18.

each engage with the genre's capacity for formal and conceptual transformation, demonstrating its flexibility across time. What remains constant, however, is the way epic generates sites of instability and reconfiguration, particularly through similes. In their capacity to fracture narrative, create unexpected relationalities, and introduce moments of conceptual slippage, similes reveal epic's potential for reconfiguring perception, self-presentation, and identity. This, then, is what motivates my choice of epic: its formal mechanisms of disruption, its embedded structures of estrangement, and its power to generate new possibilities for reading and comparison across literary traditions.

Within the framework of epic's formal disruptions, the simile emerges as a particularly potent site of instability. It operates through a double narrative movement, detaching itself from the main storyline while simultaneously exposing fissures and opening up new interpretive possibilities. As a rhetorical device, the simile not only unsettles narrative continuity but also interrogates the very structures through which identity, including gender identity, is constructed. If we understand the simile as a tool that disrupts the expected, then we must also recognize its capacity to generate new ways of seeing and being. By its very nature, the simile insists on slippage: something is not itself but like something else; what we assume to be A is suddenly reframed as B. It is this destabilizing potential that makes the simile such a powerful mode of expression for exploring gender and sexual identity. Like queerness as a theoretical lens, the simile fractures certainty, expands perception, and gestures toward possible worlds that might otherwise remain obscured.

By comparing epic to contemporary queer poetry, I wish to show how the simile, which has been canonised as a figure of speech as part of a normative tradition, can also provide for queer disidentificatory practices even in canonical texts, and how it has been recently re-thought as a rhetorical tool that is affirming, anti-normative, and explicitly queer. With this in mind, I do not intend to only use the reception of epic texts as my starting point in this analysis,

and therefore will not just work with texts that engage explicitly with epic, but rather also expand into poems that provide new queer ways to utilise the simile in connections to imagery that is also prominent within epic. The simile itself, in this way, becomes not only the object but also the tool and method of comparison: the pairing of modern queer writing and ancient epic through the simile allows for this poetic tool to be the object of study while also facilitating the comparison, allowing a poetic form to be like, but not quite the same, another one.

With this thesis, I therefore aim to reveal the simile as a powerful rhetorical tool that operates at the intersection of similarity and difference, enabling new comparative methodologies in classical reception studies. As a figure that inherently holds multiple meanings in suspension, the simile challenges rigid categorization, resisting both strict identification and complete otherness. This ability to generate resemblance without collapsing distinction is precisely what makes the simile so vital to thinking through queer temporality, relationality, and identity. If, as Muñoz argues, queerness exists as a 'horizon imbued with potentiality' rather than a fixed state of being,[82] then the simile functions in much the same way: always gesturing toward another term, another way of seeing, another way of being, without ever arriving at a single, definitive meaning. By analysing how similes in ancient epic and contemporary queer poetry engage with notions of selfhood, kinship, and temporality, this thesis demonstrates the simile's continued relevance as a site of poetic experimentation and conceptual innovation.

The simile's ability to create alternative modes of meaning-making is especially significant in the broader discourse on classical reception. Traditional models of reception have often relied on a linear, genealogical framework, positioning classical antiquity as an authoritative past that later texts either inherit, imitate, or subvert. However, the simile, as a device that inherently refuses stability, invites a different kind of reception: one that is

[82] Muñoz (2009), 1.

recursive, non-hierarchical, and transformative. Just as the simile refuses to settle into a fixed identification, queer reception of classical texts unsettles received historical narratives, creating new forms of relation across time. Similes not only produce meaning within their immediate textual context but also extend beyond it, forging links between ancient and modern texts, between past and present bodies of knowledge, between historical and speculative modes of thinking. Let's now explore how this interplay of resemblance and differentiation, of continuity and rupture, makes the simile such a productive site for thinking about queerness, not just as a thematic concern, but as a methodology, a way of reading, writing, and imagining otherwise.

Chapter 2: Fantasizing through Simile: Transgressive Desire in Ovid and Beyond

Introduction

'Trans women poets: raise your hands if you have written poems about or in the voice of Tiresias? Although I'm not sure if there are enough trans poets AND trans poets who have written Tiresias poems to call them a commonplace, I will cop to having written a few'.[1] It is with these words that Zoe Tuck opens her review of Trish Salah' *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* (2014), a collection of poetry whose author utilizes various archives, from the fields of sexology, anthropology, and psychology, to illustrate different dynamics of trans identities, connections, and stories. Given that the story of Tiresias (*Met.* 3.316-38) and their (multiple) gender transformations appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* along with comparable myths that similarly hold gender fluidity at the centre of their narrative,[2] the *Metamorphoses*, as a poem on 'forms changed into new bodies',[3] has consistently been a source of inspiration for queer artists across history, and has generated a variety of scholarship on gender transformation, sexual identity and queerness. As such, it should follow that the *Metamorphoses* would present itself as the most obvious epic poem from which to extrapolate the inner workings and characteristic of what I have defined as the queer potentiality of the simile.

And yet, despite the thematic richness of gender fluidity and transformations throughout the *Metamorphoses*, similes are mostly completely absent from those specific myths in Ovid's telling, such as the stories of Iphis and Caenus, on top of Tiresias and

[1] Tuck (2014).
[2] Hermaphroditus (*Met.* 4.285-415), Iphis (*Met.* 9.666-797), and Caenus (*Met.* 21.146-535).
[3] The first line of the *Metamorphoses* states Ovid's intention to sing about transformation: *In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora* (1.1-2). Translation by von Glinski (2012, 2). Von Glinski's translations, when available, focus on highlighting the process of transformation in the *Metamorphoses*, particularly when it comes to simile and the separation between tenor and vehicle.

Hermaphroditus. This absence may be thought to present a challenge to the expected analysis of the queer potentiality of the simile, especially if approaching the text with the intention to establish connections between similes and what could be identified as queer characters in the *Metamorphoses*. Observing the distribution of similes within the text, it instead comes to light that similes abound in the *Metamorphoses* particularly in episodes that pertain to sexual violence and assault. To find the queer potential of the simile in the *Metamorphoses*, then, it is necessary to move away from the common casting of Ovid's epic as a queer text just by value of its topic and focus on transformation. Instead, by analysing selected examples of simile in the *Metamorphoses*, and how they relate to sexual violence and erotic desire within the text, this chapter aims to reveal the simile's role as a tool for phantasmagoric imagination, which allows characters to sustain a level of contrafactual imagination alongside a developing plot. In the *Metamorphoses*, the bipartite nature of the simile allows for the concealing of transgressive desire on the plane of the factual narrative, while making it possible on the plane of erotic fantasy.

An exemplary illustration can be found in the story of Apollo and Daphne, a myth in the *Metamorphoses* not only seminal for its fame,[4] but also as the first episode of sexual violence in the text. In Ovid's version of the myth, Apollo sees Daphne in the woods and immediately burns with desire for her. Ignoring her vow of virginity, Apollo runs after the nymph to force her to have sex with him. Distraught, Daphne prays to her father Peneus to take away the beauty that made Apollo so attracted to her. Listening to her prayers, Peneus transforms Daphne into a laurel tree. Yet even in this condition, Apollo is still infatuated with her. He appropriates the tree as a new symbol for himself, making the myth an aetiological explanation for the

[4] The myth can also be read as programmatic for the rest of the work and as a destabilization of canonical notions of epic (Mader, 2008).

connection between Apollo and the laurel leaves (often used to signify, especially poetic, victory). The following passage describes the moment when Apollo decides to make the laurel his personal symbol (*Met.* 1.553-67):[5]

> *hanc quoque Phoebus amat, positaque in stipite*
> *dextra*
> *sentit adhuc trepidare nouo sub cortice pectus,*
> *complexusque suis ramos, ut membra, lacertis*
> *oscula dat ligno; refugit tamen oscula lignum,*
> *cui deus 'at quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,*
> *arbor eris certe' dixit 'mea; semper habebunt*
> *te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae.*
> *tu ducibus Latiis aderis, cum laeta Triumphum*
> *uox canet et uisent longas Capitolia pompas;*
> *postibus Augustis eadem fidissima custos*
> *ante fores stabis mediamque tuebere quercum.*
> *utque meum intonsis caput est iuuenale capillis,*
> *tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondis honores'.*
> *finierat Paean; factis modo laurea ramis*
> *adnuit utque caput uisa est agitasse cacumen.*

Ovid's account of Apollo and Daphne shows a fundamental ambiguity between narrated and internalised simile. When Apollo seizes the newly transformed Daphne, he clasps the limbs as if they were still flesh (*ut membra*, 1.557-8). The *ut* clause invites the audience to register the comparison explicitly, yet within the fiction it marks Apollo's refusal to recognise the change that has taken place. He acts "as if", a formulation that collapses perception and denial into the same gesture. The simile is therefore embedded in Apollo's delusions, as the poetic voice mediates between Apollo's fantasy and our awareness of its impossibility, turning the simile

[5] 'Tree though she was, Apollo still loved her. Caressing the trunk | with his hand, he could feel the heart still fluttering under the new bark. | Seizing the branches, as though they were limbs, in his arms' embrace, | he pressed his lips to the wood; but the wood still shrank from his kisses. | Phoebus then said to her: 'Since you cannot be mine in wedlock, | you must at least be Apollo's tree. It is you who will always | be twined in my hair, on my tuneful lyre and my quiver of arrows. | The generals of Rome shall be wreathed with you, when the jubilant paean | of triumph is raised and the long procession ascends the Capitol. | On either side of Augustus' gates your trees shall stand sentry, | faithfully guarding the crown of oak-leaves hanging between them. | As I, with my hair that is never cut, am eternally youthful, | so you with your evergreen leaves are for glory and praise everlasting.' | Apollo the Healer had done. With a wave of her new-formed branches | the laurel agreed, and seemed to be nodding her head in the treetop.' Text by Tarrant and translation by Raeburn, unless stated otherwise.

into the hinge between vision and touch, illusion and fact. Later in the scene, when Apollo declares, *utque meum intonsis caput est iuvenale capillis | tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondi honores* (1.664-5), he moves from acting as if Daphne were flesh to speaking as if she could mirror him in arboreal form. Here Apollo himself overtly voices and articulates a simile that binds human and vegetal states through analogy rather than through transformation, becoming a maker of likenesses. Yet his speech also exposes the violence of this creative act: Daphne is compelled to resemble him, to bear perpetual honours that are a sign of his desire. The space the simile opens up here positions transformation as the product of a gaze that insists on resemblance even where none should exist.

Arguably, in fact, Apollo does not succeed in fulfilling his wish in this myth. He does not manage to rape Daphne, who is transformed before he can get to her. Yet in this passage, two similes express the fulfilment of sexual desire: Apollo grabs the branches of the tree as if they were still human arms (*conplexusque suis ramos ut membra lacertis,* 1.555), and then, after his speech, looks at the moving leaves and thinks they are nodding and agreeing with him (*laurea ramis | adnuit utque caput visa est agitasse cacumen,* 1.566-7).[6] Apollo is acting as if Daphne was still a nymph, therefore partially satisfying his sexual urges towards her on a phantasmagoric plane of existence, enacted through simile, where Daphne remains as she was before. Not only that, but his fantasy goes further: the moving laurel leaves are to him a nodding head, and thus Daphne agreeing to his desires. The passive voice, *uisa est* (1.567)*,* only intensifies the imagined nature of Daphne's positive response.[7] Through simile, Apollo actualises his erotic desires, taking control of both Daphne's body and her imagined consent.

[6] Daphne's metamorphosis presents a typical process of transformation where tenor and vehicle of the simile are both in a sense literal. More about the literalisation and reification of language in Ovid can be found in Barkan (1986), Kaufhold (1993), and Matzner (2020).
[7] Humphries' translation (2018) emphasises this side of Apollo's delusions: 'The laurel, stirring, seemed to consent, to be saying, *yes'*.

The text makes clear that what we are reading is Apollo's erotic imagination. At the beginning of the passage, *Phoebus… sentit* (1.553-4) underlines that the episode is seen through Phoebus' eyes, and coloured by his desires. As the second simile (1.566-7) comes likewise right after Apollo's speech, it, too, lends itself to being read as continuing the perspective of Apollo's viewpoint. Thus, even if this part of the myth is narrated in the third person, we can find signs that suggest a focalisation of these similes as, effectively, from Apollo's point of view. Focalised through Apollo's eyes, these similes become a conduit for his erotic desires and their transgressive nature, to the point where his fantasy casts Daphne as consenting to her own violation. The bipartite nature of the simile reveals an affinity to the structure of transgressive desire by way of both keeping transgressive desire hidden on the real (literal) plane of the narrative, while actualising it on the (imagined) plane of erotic fantasy.

This distinctive ability of the simile to hold together both realities and not-(yet)realities not only sheds new light on the sustaining power of the imagination and of erotic fantasies within the *Metamorphoses*, but it also positions the simile as a versatile toolkit for imagining different potentialities. By bridging the gap between the real and the imagined, the simile emerges as a dynamic literary device that transcends mere description, becoming instrumental in the exploration and representation of diverse forms of desire and identity. In the *Metamorphoses*, this imaginative flexibility acquires a distinctly metamorphic charge. It is within this interplay between imagination and change that the *Metamorphoses* locates the full power of resemblance, showing how likeness itself becomes a mode of transformation, a way of rehearsing the possible before it is made real. The simile in fact underlines the text's preoccupation with the tension between resemblance and transformation, between the ephemeral echo of likeness and the permanence of change. As a formal and imaginative mechanism, the simile both participates in and resists this logic of metamorphosis. Each simile

creates a fleeting alignment between unlike things, enabling a momentary suspension of difference that stops short of full transformation, and by doing so, mirrors metamorphosis's process of becoming while also holding it in suspension. If metamorphosis renders change irreversible, the simile then rehearses that change as a temporary reconfiguration of identity through likeness rather than through alteration. Ovid's movement between the figurative and the transformative reveals a poetics of change that is sustained by a poetics of comparison: the *Metamorphoses* thus puts into discussion what it means to be 'like' something else, and whether such likeness is a product of imagination, desire, or perception. The simile, then, becomes a testing ground for transformation itself, a space where resemblance anticipates or even initiates the act of becoming other.

Not all transformations in Ovid's poem are framed by similes, but when they are (as in the case of Daphne) they often act as a precursor to metamorphosis, anticipating in language what is about to be embodied. The capacity to be likened, to be seen, imagined, or spoken as something else can therefore mark a character's susceptibility to transformation. By contrast, figures such as Tiresias, whose identities already hinge upon doubleness and ambiguity, are excluded from simile because they embody the comparative logic that the simile performs. Ovid's investment in likeness thus always shows not just its formal side, but also its affective element. The simile's power to suspend difference and conjure potentiality extends into the realm of desire, where comparison itself becomes charged with longing, projection, and transgression. Moments of resemblance often mark the threshold between vision and violation, between imagining and possessing. As this chapter unfolds, I will closely examine in what capacity the simile can momentarily engage readers with subversive desires and relationships within the context of the *Metamorphoses*. Often, these similes are designed to provoke discomfort, distress, and contemplation in the reader, challenging them to grapple with the concept of transgression and everything that it carries, be it negative or positive, or both. Ovid's

similes are not just stylistic flourishes but deliberate, calculated choices that guide the reader to pause and consider the deeper, often unsettling emotions and desires of the characters. Appreciating and attending to this dynamic allows us to see the simile as more than a literary device that adds vividness to a scene; instead, it becomes a powerful tool for delving into the complex realms of desire and imagination. As I will argue by analysing the episodes of Apollo and Daphne (*Met.* 1.438-567), Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (*Met.* 4.274-388), Tereus and Philomela (*Met.* 6.401-619), and Cinyras and Myrrha (*Met.* 10.298-502) specifically, the *Metamorphoses* brings into focus the simile as a possible conduit for erotic fantasies, especially when they pertain to violent sexual desires. Here, the simile functions as a tool for phantasmagoric imagination, and allows characters to dream about and imagine their transgressive sexual satisfaction, which is often brought to completion through sexual violence.

This analysis of similes and erotic desire in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* allows us to see how the simile's distinctive linguistic structure and conceptual framework is fundamental to its ability to bridge the gap between actuality and possibility. This ability of the simile, I argue, is what distinctly contributes to its pronounced queer potential. Having established the simile as a poetic trope that acts as a conduit for sexual fantasy in the *Metamorphoses*, this chapter aims to analyse how it can be a conduit for politically radical forms of fantasy in contemporary queer writing, particularly if we turn to the so far under-appreciated connection between simile, role-playing/impersonation, and sexual fantasy, which appears to be one of the most appealing affordances that render the simile particularly attractive to contemporary queer artists and writers.[8] To do so, I analyse simile and its connection to impersonation in three works that are inspired by or engage with the *Metamorphoses*: Trish Salah's *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* (2014), Kae Tempest's *Hold Your Own* (2014), and Cassils' *Tiresias* (2013). While in Ovid the simile

[8] The connection between role-playing, performance, and fantasizing has long been noted in queer studies, for example in Muñoz's concept of disidentification as a practice of world making (Muñoz, 1999).

becomes a conduit for transgressive desire over an object, contemporary queer writers, I argue, take simile as impersonation as an opportunity to explore radical fantasies about their own embodied subjectivity, ultimately repurposing it for queer liberation and self-expression, and showing how the simile's capacity for transgressive fantasy carries forward into queer modern poetry as a means of negotiating, reframing, or even inhabiting the ambivalences of desire and harm. When examined as introducing the same movement of dis/similarity as the simile does, the technique of impersonation can reclaim part of the radical edge that identity-based approaches have taken away from queer politics and queer theory, as I have explained in my Introduction. This chapter therefore not only emphasizes the multifaceted role of simile in both classical and contemporary contexts, revealing its capacity to evoke and sustain complex imaginaries, but also underscores its significance as a toolkit for exploring and articulating diverse forms of desire, identity, and queerness within literary texts.

Gazing and Fantasizing through Simile

A crucial distinction for reading Ovid's similes lies in determining whether they belong to the narrator's discourse or to a character's own speech and perception. The poem continually tests the boundary between narrated comparison and spoken or imagined analogy. Some similes are clearly authorial, while others emerge from within the minds of the characters, as projections of desire or attempts to interpret the transformations they witness. This shifting focalisation is essential to understanding how Ovid's similes operate as acts of seeing and moments in which vision and language converge. When a character "speaks" or "thinks" a simile, the poetic function of likeness becomes an affective event. Conversely, when the narrator frames a metamorphosis through simile, the reader is positioned within that unstable imaginative space. The simile in Ovid thus becomes a diagnostic tool for identifying where perception, desire, and narration intersect. Before turning to a more detailed analysis of erotic fantasy and similes in

Ovid, it is therefore first important to explain my conceptual framework in selecting which similes to comment on, and whether those similes are a reflection of authorial intention, or rather a character's internal thoughts and desires. As Libatique suggests, in the *Metamorphoses*, 'a distinction must be drawn between simple narrator-text that focuses on a character and complex narrator-text that depicts a scene through a character's eyes'. [9] This narratological approach is particularly apt for understanding the dynamics of gazing and desiring in Ovid's text, as it allows us to delve into the nuanced interplay between narrative perspective and the portrayal of erotic fantasies and violence. By focusing on complex narrator-text similes, which vividly depict scenes from characters' subjective viewpoints, we gain insight into how desires are constructed, perceived, and expressed within the narrative fabric of the *Metamorphoses*. While predominantly narrated in the third person by the overarching narrator, these focalised similes offer a glimpse into the intricate dynamics of erotic fantasy and desire, and it is through this lens that we can discern what the simile accomplishes as a poetic device.

In selecting focalised similes, the physical act of looking is the main indicator of whose desires are being displayed in the text, and it is also often the first step to introduce the plane of erotic fantasy. As noted by Salzman-Mitchell, in the *Metamorphoses* there are at least three types of gaze at play: [10]

> First, there is the gaze of the characters who literally look. Second, when internal and external readers construct a *phantasia* from a narrative they hear or read, they are endowed with a mental gaze. Third, there is the gaze of the internal and external authors that is previous to the creation of visual images whether in art or text. These gazes are not to be taken only as physical, concrete ways of looking; they also involve metaphoric conceptions of seeing like knowing, realizing, and understanding.

[9] Libatique (2015), 72.

[10] Salzman-Mitchell (2005), 5. Another important discussion on the multiplicity of gazing and visions that the *Metamorphoses* allow is found in Feldherr (2010). Here, Feldherr argues that Ovidian fiction creates a 'double vision', where humans are seen both through a human lens by Ovid as narrator and by other characters, and through the lense of the larger cosmos Ovid created, thus assuming a different standing in comparison to the gods and others. This, as Feldherr notes, is also achieved by an 'emphasis on visual cognition as the mode for human appraisal of themselves and their world' (125).

When it comes to erotic fantasy in the *Metamorphoses*, the 'gaze of the characters who literally look', as my examples will show, often needs to be analysed as part of a gendered dynamic, where 'the male gaze is acting, controlling, and penetrating'.[11] Discussing the gaze in ancient epic, Lovatt also comments on what she calls the 'assaultive gaze', defined as 'looking at someone with the intention of committing violence against them'.[12] Inspired by Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), both Salzman-Mitchell and Lovatt include voyeurism as part of their analysis on the (violent) male gaze. In the *Metamorphoses*, the voyeuristic gaze is important for an analysis of how the act of looking and erotic fantasy operate within the text: often, one must be looking at something before they can fantasize about it or imagine it as something else. This act of looking is not a passive observation but an active engagement that transforms the seen object into a vessel for erotic fantasy. The voyeuristic gaze therefore often serves as a catalyst for the imagination, allowing characters and readers alike to project their desires onto the observed.

This same concept of the voyeuristic gaze has been central to feminist scholarship on Ovid and is foregrounded in Richlin's influential study "Reading Ovid's Rapes" (1992). Richlin's work critically examines the intersection of gender, power, and violence in Ovid's narratives, highlighting the ways in which the act of looking and the resulting erotic fantasies are gendered and often violent. In the article, she cautions against approaches that treat fantasy as detached from social reality, warning that rape should not be read merely as metaphor or aesthetic device. For Richlin, 'reading Ovid's rapes as figures of the artist's predicament dodges the questions of why rape is the figure of choice and what its effects might be on its audience',[13] foregrounding instead issues of complicity, spectatorship, and gendered violence.

[11] Salzman-Mitchell (2005), 23.
[12] Lovatt (2013), 311.
[13] Richlin (1992), 132.

Her insistence on asking 'what of the women in the audience' underscores the extent to which the gaze itself cannot be assumed to be neutral and/or ungendered. [14]

Richlin's reading as well as many other feminist works on Ovid are oriented towards providing a way to resist the violence in the text.[15] While this is a valid, useful, and necessary way of reading the *Metamorphoses*, I want to focus on one subtle but important characteristic of how Ovid discusses violence and sexual violence. Despite how predominant sexual violence is in the *Metamorphoses*, for all of Ovid's interest in abuse and coercion, as Richlin notes, the rapes themselves, that is, the acts of sexual penetration, always happen 'off-screen'.[16] This dual nature of sexual violence in the *Metamorphoses*, characterized by voyeuristic gazing and fantasizing coupled with the titillating omission of concrete acts, leads to the realisation that, in the text, the act of raping and sexual penetration is effectively transferred to the imaginative realm. Understanding whose gaze we are aligning with (the omniscient narrator's or the

[14] Richlin (1992), 132.

[15] Scholarly discussion of sexual violence in Latin literature has changed and evolved throughout the years. While some scholarship on sexual violence and the general treatment of women in Ovid focused on the representation of such violence (see for example Hallett, 1973; Peradotto and Sullivan, 1984; Cahoon, 1988; Nagle, 1988; Wyke, 1989; Wyke, 1995; James, 1997; Segall, 1998; Gibson et al., 2006; Labate, 2006), other and more current studies emphasize more explicitly the political and cultural meaning of such episodes. In 1994, the conference 'Violence and Power: An International Symposium on Rape in Antiquity' sought to examine against whom was rape defined as a crime, and what was the relationship between consent and coercion in the classical world. Studies like Omitowoju's *Rape and the Politics of Consent in Classical Athens* (2002) have attempted to survey and catalogue episodes of sexual violence in classical texts, according to the status of the victim and that of the perpetrator, and more. More current scholarship has moved away from focusing on defining what is and what is not considered rape, and adopted a more contemporary approach to the topic, seeking not to define sexual violence in the ancient world, but rather to analyse violent sex acts in their context. In *Revisiting Rape in Antiquity* (2023), for example, Deacy states her intention to 'move away from the concern […] around determining a typology of "rape" and "sexual violence", […] to explorations of the contexts in which violence can become sexualized'. This discussion has lately taken on a (re)new(ed) urgency due to more and more public and political conversations on consent and sexual violence: see, for example, Salzman-Mitchell (2005), Greene (2010), Glendinning (2013), Gloyn (2013), Fabre-Serris (2018), Freas (2018), and Sharrock (2020), only a few examples of texts explicitly dealing with Ovid's rapes in their actual violence and horror. The challenges of how to teach texts depicting sexual violence have also inflected discussions of how to teach Ovid: see for example Libatique's "Ovid in the #MeToo Era", presented at the 150th SCS Annual Meeting at a panel named "Ovid Studies: The Next Millenium", or Sharon and Sanjaya, both in *From Abortion to Pederasty: Addressing Difficult Topics in the Classics Classroom* (2004).

[16] Richlin (1992), 132.

desiring characters') is therefore vital in unpacking how these fantasies are constructed and whose desires are ultimately being fulfilled, and in uncovering the layers of erotic fantasy woven throughout Ovid's narrative. Sexual violence, then, is both enacted and concealed by the text: it becomes an act which both fashions pleasure and keeps it in an imaginative, undisclosed realm. In the *Metamorphoses*, as I will show, the actualisation of sexual violence, real or imagined, is often not simply realised within the text but is instead conveyed and portrayed through the bipartite nature of the simile.

In analysing this role of simile in the *Metamorphoses*,[17] I am inspired by von Glinski's *Simile and Identity in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (2012), a text which highlights simile as a key that unlocks new interpretative pathways, particularly in the realm of how characters' identities are constructed and perceived, and which provided a shifting point in Ovidian studies.[18] Von Glinski underscores simile as a transformative tool that not only enriches poetic language but also plays a fundamental role in shaping characters' identity and perceptions within the narrative fabric of the text. Claiming that 'it is profitable to look at simile as a key to the poem that opens new avenues of interpretation',[19] von Glinski analyses different episodes from the *Metamorphoses* to question 'how [identity] is construed and undermined, and what role likeness plays in its formation and perception'.[20]

Against the backdrop of previous studies on figurative language in Ovid and classical literature more generally,[21] von Glinski's main thesis hinges on the premise that metaphor,

[17] And the simile more generally, as seen in Chapter 1.
[18] Other studies on Ovid have been more focused on metaphor and metonymy. See Pianezzola (1979), Rosati (1983), Barkan (1986), Lateiner (1990), Schmidt (1991), Tissol (1997), Hardie (1999, 2002, 2004), Kamil (2022).
[19] von Glinksi (2012), 3.
[20] von Glinski (2012), 2.
[21] von Glinski rejects previous models of reading the simile in epic like Lonsdale (1990) and Hansby (1970) as too systematic for a poem as ever-changing as the *Metamorphoses*. She also moves away from previous studies of the simile in Ovid (Brunner, 1966; von Albrecht, 1999) due to their focus on Homeric and Virgilian influences on the poem.

unlike simile, may not allow for as nuanced an exploration of transformation due to its structural focus on sameness. By contrast, simile offers a comparison through an explicit assertion of (only ever approximative) likeness. As von Glinski explains, 'the mismatched outside and inside of a person leads to conflicting emotions, social status, and behaviour, all of them prolonged in perpetuity. The simile's openness offers a way to capture such contradictions and explore their meaning'.[22] While metaphor tends to obscure or confound in its outright identification of tenor and vehicle the many possibilities, uncertainties, and contradictions of transformation, the simile instead yokes the two together but keeps each one discretely visible, thus retaining in plain sight the processes and conflicts of transformation when included as part of Ovid's processes of metamorphosis. Von Glinski's analysis of the difference between metaphor and simile mirrors my preoccupation with the simile as a trope characterized by its openness and deferral of definition, and thus as better suited to describing the contradictions of queerness. As von Glinski states, 'the simile deals in the polyvalence of appearances, with the tension between tenor and vehicle in the simile illuminating the inherently ambiguous state of metamorphosis. Simile, like metamorphosis, connects two shapes by proposing a likeness – while retaining the identity of both'.[23]

Such polyvalence of appearances and of imagining oneself *as* someone else is, as von Glinski notes, one of the simile's significant capacities. To prove this, von Glinski looks at the myth of Pentheus, the king of Thebes who tried and failed to resist Dionysus and whose story is told in the third book of the *Metamorphoses*. According to von Glinski, Pentheus 'is characterized in two similes, the first at the end of his speech to his fellow countrymen […]

[22] von Glinski (2012), 3.
[23] von Glinski (2012), 8.

(*Met*. 3.568-71), the second at the beginning of the final scene (*Met*. 3.704-7)'. Here is the second (*Met.* 3.704-7):[24]

> *ut fremit acer equus, cum bellicus aere canoro*
> *signa dedit tubicen, pugnaeque adsumit amorem*
> *Penthea sic ictus longis ululatibus aether*
> *mouit et audito clamore recanduit ira.*

Von Glinski notes how the simile 'picks up the martial spirit that Pentheus had invoked earlier (*pugnaeque adsumit amorem*, 3.705)'.[25] With references to James' reading of the passage, which insists on the dignity given to the Theban king as he is presented as a warrior, she notes that 'when one looks at the simile more closely, Pentheus does not go as a warrior, but as a war-horse to the mountain'.[26] In likening Pentheus to a horse responding to the war-trumpet, Ovid suggests a primal and instinctual response, rather than rational human decision-making, highlighting Pentheus' loss of rationality and autonomy over himself due to Dionysus' influence. The horse, traditionally a symbol of strength and vigour, is portrayed as reacting with excitement (*fremit*, 3.704) to the war-trumpet's sound, mirroring Pentheus' own enthusiasm for battle. Yet his desire for action is shown as subjugated to Dionysus' own plans and will (*Penthea sic ... aether | movit*, 3.706-7). As von Glinski notes, 'the simile mimics Pentheus' own distorted sense of self, on the one hand replicating his martial fantasy but on the other hand subjugating it under the Bacchic power'.[27]

The simile, therefore, becomes a poignant depiction of Pentheus' internal conflict, where his self-perception is both replicated and manipulated, ultimately revealing the profound impact of Dionysus on his psyche. To her, then, the simile provides an imaginative plane where

[24] 'As an eager horse neighs, when the martial trumpeter has given the signal with the musical bronze, and takes on a lust for battle, so does the aether, struck by long howls, urge on Pentheus, and his wrath grows white hot as he hears the noise'. Text and translation by von Glinski.
[25] von Glinski (2012), 19.
[26] von Glinski (2012), 20.
[27] von Glinski (2012), 20.

the subject can imaginatively gain shape and come into view as and/or like someone else, or something other. This imaginative plane allows for a nuanced exploration of Pentheus' internal state, emphasizing the transformative power of the simile in portraying conflicting perceptions and imaginings, and presenting simile as a dynamic tool that not only mirrors but actively shapes Pentheus' distorted sense of self within the narrative. The simile not only enriches the narrative texture but also serves as a focalising lens, drawing attention to Pentheus' internal conflicts and the transformative power of Dionysian influence on his character.

Von Glinski's analysis spans several episodes in the *Metamorphoses*, exploring issues of identity, genre, and fictionality. The connection between simile and personhood perceived by von Glinski sheds light on its important role within the text, which can lead us to wider thematic explorations. As von Glinski notes when talking about Pentheus, the simile is the vehicle through which his sense of self and identity is opened up for discussion. Most importantly, the plane upon which identity is discussed is one of fantasy and imagination: it is through the distinction between tenor and vehicle, textual reality and fiction, that Pentheus' self-perception *and* his actual internal state can be kept in plain sight.

Starting from her examination, I wish to push von Glinski's argument into the erotic sphere. Taking her analysis further, I am interested in analysing how the simile functions as a tool to explore not only someone's self and identity, but also their expression of erotic desire. Specifically, I am also interested in exploring how this desire, depicted on the imaginative plane of the simile, influences the involvement, appearance, and willingness of their desired object to engage. Through this analytical framework on gazing and the simile, I aim to reveal how the simile functions as a tool for erotic fantasy in the *Metamorphoses*, and how the potential of the simile as an instrument for imagination can be extrapolated and re-purposed in contemporary queer literature. As we have briefly seen, the myth of Apollo and Daphne

constitutes a first example of this. In what follows, I shall demonstrate how Daphne's myth (*Met*. 1.438-567), as well as the episodes of Philomela (*Met.* 6.401-619), Hermaphroditus (*Met.* 4.274-388), and Myrrha (*Met*. 10.298-355), display these characteristics, yet also further complicate the relationship between simile and (imaginative) transgressive desire.

Similes as Conduits for Transgressive Desires in the *Metamorphoses*

Analysing the episode of Apollo and Daphne in detail will shed more light on how the simile creates a phantasmagoric plane of desire. To fully appreciate this, it is important first to note just how consistently the episode is focalised, quite literally, through Apollo's eyes, in order to then explore the imaginative plane of simile as Apollo's own fantasy. Apollo loves Daphne at first sight (*amat uisaeque,* 1.490), and then, when he sees her again, dreams of her at the same time (1.497-500):[28]

> *spectat inornatos collo pendere capillos,*
> *et 'quid si comantur?' ait; uidet igne micantes*
> *sideribus similes oculos; uidet oscula, quae non est*
> *uidisse satis.*

The repetition of verbs of seeing with variatio (*spectat*, 1.497; *uidet*, 1.498; *uidet*, 1.499; *uidisse*, 1.500) highlights the voyeuristic desire Apollo feels for Daphne, pushed forward by his sexual imagination (*siqua latent meliora putat,* 1.502).[29] The focus on Apollo's eyes burning like stars (*igne micantes* | *sideribus similes oculos,* 1.498-9) and the accumulation of

[28] 'He eyes the hair hanging loosely over her neck, and murmurs, | 'What if that hair were neatly arranged!' He looks at her bright eyes | burning and twinkling like stars; he studies her lips, so teasingly tempting'. Raeburn here translates 'quae non | est vidisse satis' as 'teasingly tempting', instead of opting for a more literal rendition. Humphries' translation better emphasises the function of seeing and imagining in the episode: 'He gazes at her lips, and knows that gazing | is not enough'.

[29] 'What's hidden he thinks must be even better'. Again Humpries' translation better emphasises the role of gazing and imagining: 'and what he does not see he thinks is better'.

verbs of seeing underlines how, even before the focalisation of 1.533-40, Apollo's gaze and what he is seeing and imagining are made central in the episode.

Apollo's desires are also spoken in the first person. In fact, a first simile that centres his sexual urges appears as Daphne runs away from him, and establishes a prey/predator dynamic between them,[30] as an approximation of conventional courtship. By his own description, the dynamic between him and Daphne is similar to, if not identical with that of predator and prey (*Met.* 1.505-7):[31]

> *sic agna lupum, sic cerua leonem,*
> *sic aquilam penna fugiunt trepidante columbae,*
> *hostes quaeque suos; amor est mihi causa sequendi.*

Apollo then later imagines himself as a hound (*ut canis,* 1.532) and calls Daphne *praedam* (1.533). He links together human and animal urges, yet sees a difference in their purposes (*hostes quaeque suos; amor est mihi causa sequendi*, 1.507): he is therefore aware of both similarities and differences between him chasing Daphne and a predator running towards his prey, yet he decides to ignore them in favour of a transgressive fulfilment and justification of his sexual fantasies. This is achieved through simile: *sic… lupum, sic…leonem*, *sic aquilam penna fugiunt trepidante columbae* (1.505-7). While the first two similes highlight the chase, the third announces plainly his desire for capture, as he compares himself to an eagle pouncing on doves: the simile allows Apollo to already envision the final (successful) result of the chase and eventual fulfilment of his sexual urges. Against this backdrop, we can read the subsequent

[30] This type of simile is particularly common in Homeric epic, as observed in the below chapters on Homeric similes. The use of *iam iamque tenere* is also a reference to *Aen*. 12.754, when Turnus is running after Aeneas on the battlefield. As Anderson notes (1998), the violence of battle is transported to a context of sexual violence (198).

[31] 'You would think I'm a wolf pursuing a lamb | or a lion hunting a deer or an eagle pouncing on fluttering | doves in mid-air, but I'm not! It is love that impels me to follow you' . As Bömer (1969) notes, the lack of capitalization for the term *amor* is here significant in distinguishing Cupid's effect over Apollo from a successful expression of love to a curse. Even in this, Apollo's passion is similar, but not the same as, Cupid's usual effects.

simile at 1.533-40 as a further fleshing out of Apollo's sexual fantasies, permitting their imaginative fulfilment (*Met.* 1.533-40):[32]

> *ut canis in uacuo leporem cum Gallicus*
> *aruo uidit, et hie praedam pedibus petit, ille salutem,*
> *alter inhaesuro similis iam iamque tenere*
> *sperat et extento stringit uestigia rostro,*
> *alter in ambiguo est an sit comprensus et ipsis*
> *morsibus eripitur tangentiaque ora relinquit;*
> *sic deus et uirgo est, hie spe celer, ilia timore.*

The simile hinges on the verb *uidit* (1.533), centring the perspective it unfolds as that of Apollo's eyes, imagining Daphne like a prey he wants to clutch, bite, devour.[33] Propelled by an inescapable feeling of hunger,[34] Apollo imagines himself as part of a world where a prey will inevitably and always run from its matching counterpart, its natural predator. This simile, then, as focalised through Apollo's eyes, does not only allow him to justify and foretell his

[32] 'Imagine a greyhound, imagine a hare it has sighted in open | country: one running to capture his prey, the other for safety. | The hound is about to close in with his jaws; he believes he is almost | there; he is grazing the back of her heels with the tip of muzzle. | The hare isn't sure if her hunter has caught her, but leaps into freedom, | clear of the menacing jaws and the mouth which keeps brushing against her. So with Apollo and Daphne, the one of them racing in hope | and the other in fear'. Raeburn's use of 'imagine' to introduce the simile clearly distinguishes the plane of reality from that of imagination.

[33] Among the many verbs of touch in the simile, *inhaereo* is particularly significant, as it can also be used to describe the embrace of a lover, thus blurring within it the differentiating line between Apollo as hound running after its prey and Apollo embracing and possessing Daphne. Other examples in the *Metamorphoses* are 4.369-70, another episode of sexual violence, where Salmacis clings to Hermaphroditus 'as though she is conjoined to his whole body' (*illa premit commissaque corpore toto | sicut inhaerebat*); and 9.51-54, where Achelous wrestling with Hercules takes the form of an ambiguous embrace. Both *haereo* and *inhaereo* are mentioned by Adams (1982) in *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*: 'an obvious concomitant of intercourse is holding or embracing, and verbs from these semantic fields are often used euphemistically. [...] *Haereo* has a wide range of attested sexual uses: of copulation at Prop. 2.15.25 "atque utinam haerentis sic nos uincire catena / uelles", Petron. 79.8 "haesimus calentes" (cf. Lucr. 4.1113, 1205, and *cohaereo* at Plin. *Nat*. 10.173), of manual stimulation at Juv. 6.024 "saepius in teneris haerebit dextera lumbis", and of cunnilinctio at Mart. 11.61.11 "tumenti mersus haeret in uolua". Cf. Mart. 2.61.7 "haereat inguinibus potius tam noxia lingua", Sen. N.Q. 1.16.4 "inguinibusque alienis obhaeserat", Min. Fel. *Oct*. 28.10 "libidinoso ore inguinibus inhaerescunt", where the complements leave no doubt concerning the type of "clinging" in question' (181-2).

[34] Apollo fashioning himself as a hound about to eat a hare is also testament to his violent desires, when taking Taylor's analysis of meat consumption as 'an overly virile aesthetics of the self that does not account for the pleasures of the other and is also a product of discipline' (2010, p. 8).

sexual urges, but lets him re-model the object of his desires, bending the plane of reality to his own sexual fantasies.

As already noted, this comes into focus more starkly in the simile that follows Daphne's transformation (1.552-66). He hugs the plant thinking it is Daphne's body (*conplexusque suis ramos ut membra lacertis,* 1.555), and then claims Daphne, despite her transformation, if not as wife, then as his own tree (*arbor eris certe […] mea semper habebunt*, 1.558). Caught in the delusion of his own desire, Apollo looks at the leaves swaying and takes their movement as Daphne's willing agreement to his words (*laurea ramis | adnuit utque caput visa est agitasse cacumen*, 1.566-7). Anderson notes that while Apollo has tried to violate Daphne when she was a nymph, he now speaks to her following the pattern of hymns and prayers, thus showing her more respect in her tree form.[35] However, while the repetition of *te… te… te… tu* (1.559-60) is a common feature of ancient hymns that are directed from mortals to deities,[36] in this context it appears to reinforce Apollo's control over Daphne. By repeatedly expressing what Daphne's role is and will be, Apollo changes the power dynamics of invocation: the hymn becomes command, the prayer becomes imposition. While at first aspects of Daphne's human body were turned into botanical features, the simile now inverts this: it is not Daphne who is approximated (through comparison) to a tree, but the tree is thought of as if it were (still) a human. The sustained comparisons between human and plant qualities in the simile suggest that, at least in Apollo's erotic fantasy, Daphne is still a nymph, and that he is in this way touching and possessing her body.

Nevertheless, Apollo does seem to recognise, at least partially, that his fantasy is irreconcilable with reality: *coniunx mea non potes esse* (1.557). Yet, while Apollo's words seal Daphne's material fate, confirming her altered identity as not his wife but still an arboreal

[35] Amongst others Anderson (1998), Curran (1984), Francese (2004).
[36] Hill (1985-2000), 186.

extension of himself, his fantasies persistently depict Daphne in her original nymph form. Daphne's purported consent, symbolized by her leaves moving 'as if in agreement', is a product of Apollo's fantasy that constitutes a final act of violence. Both Daphne's misconstrued consent and Apollo's realization of his sexual desires, portrayed through simile, allow for a sustained level of sexual fantasy to coexist with the unfolding reality.

Different readings offer an interpretation of Daphne's transformation as an escape. Curran sees Daphne's transformation as correlated to her freedom and escape from Apollo's rape,[37] as it permits her to maintain her vow of virginity. Daphne becoming a plant can also be seen as painting the natural world as protector from the violence of the social world of humans, with nature seen as a sanctuary against violence.[38] Yet the use of the simile from Apollo's viewpoint still allows him to satisfy his sexual desires imaginatively, fabricate Daphne's consent, and downplay the actual reality of her transformation. The use of simile, here, effectively underlines the continuity of Apollo's fantasising, and sustains a vision of the realization (albeit in modified form) of his erotic desire. Daphne's transformation does not give her freedom: rather, it eventually serves Apollo to enact another type of violence onto her. A mere recognition of Daphne's transformation into a plant, stated in literal language (*arbor eris*, 1.558), would not have left any space for the kind of continued fantasizing that the simile facilitates with its continued transferring of human qualities to the plant (*conplexusque suis ramos, ut membra, lacertis*, 1.555).

Instead, as I have shown, it is through simile that Apollo can fashion himself as predator, unconcerned about Daphne's wishes, through simile that he can visualise her nodding and imagine her consent, and only through simile can he pretend that he is, after all, possessing

[37] Curran (1978).
[38] Coates (2018). Eco-critical readings of Ovid such as Payne (2010) and Sissa and Martelli (2022) have placed particular focus on the ways the human and the environment can connect and help each other across the texts.

her like he would have done in her human form. In spite of Daphne's attempted escape, Apollo can not only appropriate her current form as a plant in his honour, but can also satisfy his sexual appetite on the phantasmagoric plane of simile. While Apollo's fantasies and desires reinstate the violence of a male god over a female victim, and therefore cannot lead us to liberatory queer uses of the simile, examining this episode has revealed how erotic fantasy and simile can cooperate. Though the space created by Apollo remains a plane of fantasy that is oppressive rather than liberating, it is instructive for showing us where the simile and its dynamics can lead us.

Just as Apollo's use of simile enables him to reframe Daphne's transformation into an extension of his own possessive fantasy, the simile more broadly operates as a tool that suspends moments of violence, prolonging desire and allowing it to unfold within an alternative, imagistic plane. The trope of flight preceding sexual violence recurs throughout Ovid's narratives, repeatedly reinforcing an unsettling focus on female fear and vulnerability as objects of visual and erotic attention. As Richlin observes in her discussion of Apollo and Daphne, even the moment of pursuit is 'subtly violent', since 'the very air that surrounds the running woman anticipates the violence she fears'. [39] She notes how Ovid repeatedly aestheticizes fear itself, listing further examples: [40]

> Ovid liked this trick; he says of Leucothoë during her rape, "fear itself became her" (*M.* 4.230); of Europa, "and fear itself was a cause of new beauty" (*Fasti* 5.608); of the Sabines, "and fear itself was able to adorn many of them" (*Ars amatoria* 1.126); of Lucretia, spied on by her future rapist, "this itself was becoming; her chaste tears became her" (*Fasti* 2.757).

[39] Richlin (1992), 139.
[40] Richlin (1992), 139.

In these scenes, fear does not merely accompany the threatened body but becomes part of its visual appeal, rendering the woman's vulnerability both legible and desirable. Richlin notes that this logic of display consistently precedes the act of rape, exposing the woman to the gaze of her 'rapist-to-be (and reader)' even before physical violence occurs. [41] These instances then expose how the simile sustains an eroticized display of the woman's body, keeping her suspended in a state of imagined possession before the moment of rape, thus reinforcing the simile as a tool for phantasmagoric imagination.

A similar dynamic is also evident in the episode of Tereus and Philomela. Ovid's similes establish a layered representation of transgressive desire by momentarily arresting the narrative to foreground the predator-prey dynamic. Tereus, immediately after abducting Philomela, is likened to an eagle clutching a hare (*Met.* 6.511-18):[42]

> *Vt semel imposita est pictae Philomela carinae*
> *admotumque fretum remis tellusque repulsa est,*
> *'uicimus!' exclamat 'mecum mea uota feruntur'*
> *[exultatque et uix animo sua gaudia differt]*
> *barbarus et nusquam lumen detorquet ab ilia, non*
> *aliter quam cum pedibus praedator obuncis*
> *deposuit nido leporem louis ales in alto;*
> *nulla fuga est capto, spectat sua praemia raptor,*

Tereus is called, without ambivalence, a *praedator* (6.516): the comparison with the animal here is disturbing in its focus on looking, observing the prey at his mercy (*nusquam lumen detorquet,* 6.515; *spectat*, 6.518). Here the flight has already happened and failed: the hooks of the eagle are already in the victim's body. By staging Philomela as a captive hare, the simile

[41] Richlin (1992), 139.

[42] 'As soon as Philomela was on board of the colorful painted ship, and the sea was being churned by the oars, and the land left behind them, the barbarian king shouted: 'I have won! I carry with me what I so desired!'. He rejoices, and his passion can scarcely wait for its satisfaction. He never looks away from her, no different from when Jupiter's eagle leaves a hare on the ground, that he caught with its the curved talons, in its high sky: there is no escape for the captive, and the raptor just looks at its prize'.

not only describes but constructs an eroticized moment where desire is fully realized within the phantasmagoric realm, even as the literal narrative delays its consummation.

This is also highlighted in another simile following shortly after, focused on Philomela's fear and terror after the rape (6.527-30):[43]

> *ilia tremit uelut agna pauens quae saucia cani*
> *ore excussa lupi nondum sibi tuta uidetur,*
> *utque columba suo madefactis sanguine plumis*
> *horret adhuc auidosque timet quibus haeserat ungues.*

As Anderson notes,[44] these two similes are in continuation with each other, showing first the prey being caught, and then hurt as Tereus looks on (*spectat*, 6.518). By describing Philomela as a wounded lamb and a bleeding dove, the simile aestheticizes her suffering, framing it within a spectacle of vulnerability that continues to sustain a form of eroticized terror. However, the power of the simile to hold competing realities together is conspicuously absent when irreversible transformation occurs. In the case of Philomela, the violence reaches its peak with the mutilation of her tongue, stripping her of the ability to articulate her trauma. Ovid's description of her metamorphosis is notably abrupt (*Met.* 6.666-74):[45]

> *corpora Cecropidum pennis pendere putares;*
> *pendebant pennis! quarum petit altera siluas,*
> *altera tecta subit; neque adhuc de pectore caedis*
> *excessere notae, signataque sanguine pluma est.*
> *ille dolore suo poenaeque cupidine uelox*
> *uertitur in uolucrem, cui stant in uertice cristae,*
> *prominet immodicum praelonga cuspide rostrum,*
> *[nomen epops uolucri, facies armata uidetur.]*

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[43] 'She tremble like a scared lamb, that fails to realize it is free, hurt and then discarded by a grey wolf, or like a dove shaking, its feathers dirty with its blood, still fearing the terrible claws that gripped it'.
[44] Anderson (1998), 220.
[45] 'You might think the Athenian women have gotten wing: they have indeed gotten wings. One of them, a nightingale, Procne, goes towards woods. The other, a swallow, Philomela, flies to the edges of the palace, and even now her throat has not lost the stain of that violence, and it bears witness to the blood. Tereus is quick in his grief and desire for revenge, and is himself changed to a bird, with a feathered crest on its head. An infinite, elongated, beak juts out, like a long spear. The name of the bird is the hoopoe, and it looks as though it is armed'.

As Richlin notes, the cutting out of Philomela's tongue is 'a transformative point' in the myth, as she turns 'from object of violence to perpetrator'.[46] Richlin further discusses how while her 'literal metamorphosis at the end is abrupt and relatively unstressed',[47] Philomela's mutilation is consistent with the metamorphoses suffered by many women in the poem: 'all lose the ability to speak with a human voice; if they have been turned into animals, their efforts to speak, resulting in grunts, and their horror at this, are recounted'.[48] Unlike the simile, which allows for the coexistence of multiple realities, the metamorphosis is final, foreclosing further possibility.

This contrast between simile and metamorphosis is then particularly evident in the episode of Tereus and Philomela. While simile suspends moments of violence, allowing desire to unfold on the plane of the image, metamorphosis enacts a final transformation that forecloses agency. The predator-prey dynamic in Philomela's rape exemplifies how similes prolong the moment of violation, shaping it into a spectacle of power and submission. Yet, once the violence reaches its peak, the simile's ability to sustain multiple realities collapses, giving way to the irreversible loss of voice and selfhood through metamorphosis.

A similar dynamic is at play in the episode of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, one of the rare moments in the *Metamorphoses* where gender non-conformity is explicitly depicted and where similes are again used to frame sexual violence. Here, too, simile serves to stage desire visually and imagistically, filtering the encounter through the gaze of the aggressor. The narrative is

[46] Richlin (1992), 145.
[47] Richlin (1992), 145.
[48] Richlin (1992), 145. The victims mentioned by Richlin are 'for example, Daphne [being turned] into laurel, Io into a cow, Callisto into a bear, Actaeon into a stag, Arachne into a spider, and many into trees (Phaethon's sisters, Dryope, Myrrha), pools (Cyane, Arethusa, Byblis), and statues (Phineus's men, Niobe)'.

overtaken by Salmacis' impression of Hermaphroditus, shaped through a series of similes that make her desire palpable (*Met*. 4.329-33):[49]

> *pueri rubor ora notauit*
> *(nescit enim quid amor), sed et erubuisse decebat.*
> *hie color aprica pendentibus arbore pomis*
> *aut ebori tincto est aut sub candore rubenti,*
> *cum frustra resonant aera auxiliaria, lunae.*

While not a simile, we can read this passage as occupying a similar role in terms of comparisons as expression of desire. Hermaphroditus' body becomes, under Salmacis' gaze, an object of desire that is not just their own: instead, Salmacis' comparisons and views of it are projected onto and read into it, and further, it is her own words and gazing over Hermaphroditus that arouse in them the particular blush she so likes. This stands in particular contrast to the first description of Hermaphroditus (*Met*. 4.288-91):[50]

> *Mercuric puerum diua Cythereide natum*
> *Naides Idaeis enutriuere sub antris,*
> *cuius erat facies, in qua materque paterque*
> *cognosci possent; nomen quoque traxit ab illis.*

This recounting of Hermaphroditus' physical attributes seems quite factual, and their androgyny is not stressed to fetishizing degrees: instead, we know that Hermaphroditus looks like both their mother and father (*cuius erat facies in qua materque paterque | cognosci possent,* 4.290-1), a feature that will be, of course, exaggerated following Hermaphroditus' transformation, after which it is not mother and father that can be witnessed on their face, but rather both genders, or neither (*neutrumque et utrumque videntur,* 4.379). Androgyny, then, is

[49] 'The boy flushes red. He did not know what love was, but the blush suited him. With this color apples shine, hanging from a tree under the sun, or such is marble painted with red, or the moon, hidden and blushing in her brightness, while bronze shields try to recuperate her'.
[50] 'The naiads took care of a child born from Hermes and the goddess Cytherean Aphrodite, in the caves of Mount Ida. The child's features were such that both mother and father were reflected there, and from them came the name Hermaphroditus'.

a feature from the start, yet the focus on it becomes increasingly voyeuristic as we move from the simple narration of the myth to Salmacis' own focalisation and her desire for Hermaphroditus.

Commentators have suggested that initial descriptions of Hermaphroditus are used to pre-announce their transformation. Ormand, for example, has suggested that these qualifiers, along with Salmacis' own subversions of her role as nymph (she refuses to go hunting and otherwise join Diana in any manner), pre-announce the gender non-conformity of Hermaphroditus' final metamorphosis.[51] He also states that the continued use of terms like *puerum* to describe Hermaphroditus, and allusions to his *mollia corpore* (4.344),[52] are all ways for Ovid to play within the normative Roman sex/gender system. While it is true that Hermaphroditus does not take on a masculine role before their encounter with Salmacis, and that their gender nonconformity is hinted at or preannounced in multiple ways, I argue that there is a marked difference between how Hermaphroditus is described before Salmacis enters the plot, and after. Their face carrying features of both their mother and father is described in a fairly objective manner: even as he is described reaching the lake where Salmacis attacks him, there is no mention of his body. Instead, his delicate features, his *mollia corpore*, and his flush are all characteristics introduced to describe him after Salmacis sees him and addresses him: up until then, the only description we have of Hermaphroditus is how they resemble both parents. So while narratively speaking we can in fact associate these descriptions as pre-announcements of their transformation,[53] they are all introduced (and cast) through the eyes and mind of Salmacis, as we gaze with her at Hermaphroditus as sexual object.

[51] Ormand (2022).
[52] On this concept see also see Robinson (1999), Williams (2001), Brisson (2002), Matzner (2015).
[53] As well as the very start of the story, where Alcithoe tells us we will get to know why Salmacis' lake is known for 'weakening and softening the limbs' (*enervet tactosque remolliat artu*s, 4.286).

This is further confirmed by the first simile we encounter in the passage, again through Salmacis' gaze. Salmacis is here voyeuristically observing Hermaphroditus, [54] as he is getting undressed and swimming in the lake (*Met*. 4.347-9):[55]

> *Salmacis exarsit; flagrant quoque lumina nymphae,*
> *non aliter quam cum puro nitidissimus orbe*
> *opposita speculi referitur imagine Phoebus.*

While not the same, the comparison here brings Salmacis close to Apollo, linking them in both voyeuristic desire and transgressive thirst for sexual violence.[56] Her voyeuristic fantasy is also reinstated in *Met*. 4.354-55, where Salmacis compares Hermaphroditus to a marble statue (*ut eburnea si quis | signa tegat*), again an object for her to impose herself on: in the *Metamorphoses* in particular, the status of marbles as objects of sexual desires is confirmed, most notably, by the episode of Pygmalion in Book 10.[57] To further stress the intensity of Salmacis' desire over a non-reciprocating object, as Anderson notes, 'the mirror-comparison does not signify that the boy's heat is reflected as is the sun's. Rather, the interposed mirror suggests the frustration of contact between nymph and the object of her eager gaze'.[58] Salmacis' fantasies are reflected back to her, as an expression of her subjectivity rather than the object's actual qualities.

Regardless, like Tereus, Salmacis is successful in accomplishing her desires, grabbing Hermaphroditus after pretending to have left him alone (*Met*. 4.361-7):[59]

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[54] This is also observed in Salzman-Mitchell (2005).
[55] 'Salmacis' eyes were burning with passion, not differently than when Phoebus' reflects his face into a mirror that is opposite the sun'.
[56] Richlin (1992), 166.
[57] For a deeper investigation on the connections and comparisons between Pygmalion and Galatea and Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, see Groves (2016).
[58] Anderson (1998), 449.
[59] 'Finally, she entwines herself face to face with his beauty, like a snake, lifted by an eagle and caught up in air, as Hermaphroditus tries to move way. But hanging tight she hugs his head and feet, and entangles his spreading wings in her coils. Or as ivy often grows around tall tree trunks. Or as the octopus grabs the enemy it has spied underwater, wrapping tentacles everywhere'.

denique nitentem contra elabique uolentem
implicat, ut serpens, quam regia sustinet ales
sublimemque rapit (pendens caput ilia pedesque
alligat et cauda spatiantes implicat alas),
utue solent hederae longos intexere truncos,
utque sub aequoribus deprensum polypus hostem
continet ex omni dimissis parte flagellis.

Just as with Tereus, her success is visualized through the use of simile and the established dynamic of predator and prey. Salmacis as snake (*serpens,* 4.362) has been grabbed by an eagle (*regia… ales*, 4.362): Hermaphroditus' comparison to the bird serves, rather than to subvert the predator-prey binary of the simile, to show the futility of their struggles. Salmacis' coils are too strong as she wraps herself around him. It is as if, through the escalation of three similes, one right after the other (*ut serpens*, *utve… hederae*, *utque…polypus,* 4.362-6), Salmacis confirms herself as predator more and more, until she is finally inextricably wrapped around Hermaphroditus, who until the end is described as enemy (*hostem*) rather than prey. As Ormand observes, what is striking about this sequence is the way Ovid reimagines rape by describing 'the act of forced sex […] not in terms of penetration, but in terms of surrounding, enveloping, wrapping around'. [60] In each comparison, enclosure replaces entry as the dominant mode of violence. The first image destabilises agency, as the snake appears initially subdued before revealing its constricting power; the second, drawing on vegetal imagery, suggests a seemingly symbiotic but nonetheless asymmetrical attachment, in which the ivy does the encircling; the third, drawn from the aquatic world, makes the aggression unmistakable, as the squid seizes its prey with tentacles figured as instruments of force. Across the sequence, the images move from struggle to containment, charting what Ormand describes as a 'clearer and clearer victory of Salmacis, over Hermaphroditus', [61] until escape is no longer possible. The three similes wrap around Hermaphroditus, rendering them more and more a helpless object of Salmacis' desires:

[60] Ormand (2022), 91.
[61] Ormand (2022), 92.

Salmacis' comparison to a snake prefigures this even when the snake is seemingly the victim, as snakes are, in addition, attested as frequent personifications of the penis across both Latin and Greek literature.[62]

A final simile closes the episode to confirm Hermaphroditus' transformation. After Salmacis asks for Hermaphroditus to never escape her, her consciousness is subsumed by theirs in Hermaphroditus' physical transformation (4.373-9):[63]

> *nam mixta duorum*
> *corpora iunguntur faciesque inducitur illis*
> *una. uelut, si quis conducat cortice ramos,*
> *crescendo iungi pariterque adolescere cernit,*
> *sic, ubi complexu coierunt membra tenaci,*
> *nee duo sunt sed forma duplex, nee femina dici*
> *nee puer ut possit, neutrumque et utrumque*
> *uidentur.*

The simile here focuses on Hermaphroditus' physical transformation: Salmacis' body wraps and sticks and melts into Hermaphroditus' so directly (*conducat,* 4.375*; coierunt*, 4.377) that she almost loses her form, if it wasn't for Hermaphroditus now visibly feminine attributes. Yet it is Hermaphroditus who maintains their consciousness and personality: Salmacis is the twig into their bark, the element which predominantly shows itself in the transformation. It is to my mind notable that across the episode this is the only simile that compares both Salmacis and Hermaphroditus not to animals but to plants: the shift from the animal to the natural world seems to perhaps indicate the end of the physical violence, previously described as a fight between animals; and instead the start of a form of embodiment that is newer and more ambiguous, no longer explicitly divided between prey and predator, but instead relying on its

[62] Adams (1990), 29-31.

[63] 'And now their two entwined bodies were joined together, and one form was both. Just as when someone sticks a twig into a bark, and can then see them both grow together and develop as one, so when they were melting together in a suffocating embrace, they were not two, but rather a two-fold form, so that they could be not be called either male or female, and seemed neither or either'.

similarity to elements of the natural world, where form and gender are more ambiguous. In terms of the *locus eroticus* where Hermaphroditus and Salmacis find each other, perhaps the last simile being related to the natural world firmly places both Hermaphroditus' body as coming from and belonging to their spring, as a place that will continue to induce and cause more transformations, according to the last prayer. However, to some, the myth actually establishes the gender binary even more strongly: according to Brisson, 'the fusion of Salmacis with Hermaphroditus establishes a state of indifferentiation that blocks all activity, hence all generation, and arrests everything in a union that is permanent and so, perforce, sterile. The very notion of sex disappears, for to have both sexes is to have neither'.[64]

At the same time, this episode is singular within the *Metamorphoses* in that simile does not merely act as a conduit for transgressive desire but also makes space for the representation of a gender nonconforming body. Unlike other instances in the poem, where simile primarily functions to sustain erotic fantasy on a separate, imaginative plane, here it articulates the lived reality of Hermaphroditus' transformation. As a victim of sexual violence, Hermaphroditus already occupies a unique position in the *Metamorphoses*, not only because of their gender nonconformity but also because of the inversion of conventional gender roles in the assault. Unlike other victims, Hermaphroditus does not become subsumed by their attacker; rather, it is Salmacis who loses autonomy as she is absorbed into Hermaphroditus' altered form.

This complicates the function of simile in the episode. While it remains a vehicle for transgressive desire, in this instance satisfying Salmacis' erotic fixation on Hermaphroditus, it also gestures toward a non-normative form of embodiment. That queerness can be both the object of desire and a vehicle for self-expression highlights the dual function of simile: it simultaneously enables the articulation of non-normative identity and remains entangled in the coercive dynamics of desire. The question, then, is to what extent this is a positive or agentic

[64] Brisson (2002), 50.

transformation for Hermaphroditus. Their gender nonconformity remains inextricable from Salmacis' desire; their body and her erotic fixation merge into one. If simile sustains the possibility of queerness, it does so through the framework of phantasmagoric imagination, where gender fluidity is at once expressed and compromised by the coercive gaze that conjures it.

The intertwining of simile with erotic fantasy therefore does not only illustrates its capacity to shape imaginative scenarios, but also highlights its transformative potential in manifesting those fantasies into reality. In addition to being a conduit for erotic fantasy as transgression, the simile can also serve as a vehicle for the actualisation of such fantasies, facilitating and reifying a sexual transgression that was previously only imagined. This shift from imagined to enacted transgression is starkly apparent in the story of Myrrha. The story of Myrrha, presented in Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, is narrated as part of Orpheus' song and contains the origin myth for the birth of Adonis.[65] Myrrha is the daughter of King Cinyras of Cyprus.[66] Struggling against incestuous desire for her father, she attempts, but fails, to commit suicide and is eventually helped by her nurse to trick her father into having sex with her, by being presented to him as a concubine in love with the king.

The episode is filled with sustained ambiguities that play with the possibilities contained in the simile's imaginary, until the pretence or desire to be like someone else collapse into factual reality: the roles Myrrha and her father imaginatively adopt for themselves end up aligning with their real selves. This is signalled right at the start of the episode, when, at her father's questioning about whom she would like to marry, Myrrha replies: *similem tibi* (*Met.*

[65] For more on the difference between how Orpheus' song presents an incestuous narrative and how Ovid as narrator does, see Nagle (1983).
[66] The location of Cyprus is of note. As many have noted, the myth condemns incest as a non-Roman, non-Greek practice coming from the barbarous east. For more on this, see Capomacchia (1984), Archibald (2001), Resinski (2014)

10.364). While not a simile, explicit comparison between two dis/similar entities is in the myth used to explicitly capture the truth of Myrrha's incestuous desires, while also serving as a conduit for expressing such desire indirectly, hiding them in plain sight by invoking a hypothetical object of desire that is similar to, but not the same as, the real one. Similarity, then, becomes both fantasy and reality.

The same applies to Myrrha's father, Cinyras. Having learned about Myrrha's true desires, the nurse decides to help her and presents her to her father under *nomine mentito* (*Met.* 10.439) as a girl who can provide relief for him while his wife is abstaining from sex due to her participation in rites for Ceres. When Cinyras asks more about the girl, the nurse continues to deceive him by presenting him with the fiction of someone who is the same (age) as, but not the same (person) as Myrrha: *quaesitis uirginis annis | "par" ait "est Myrrhae"* (*Met.* 10.440-1).[67] As Anderson notes, 'Ovid implies that tampering with words and the abstract values or fact that they represent is like a disguise, if one does it consciously; like a dream or hallucination, if one does it subconsciously'.[68] The girl is so much *like* Myrrha as to *be* Myrrha. Simile here implies likeness to such an extent that it can be stretched right up to the point of identity: the erotic fantasy of role-playing enacted by Cinyras becomes a conduit for reality. This becomes evident during Myrrha and Cinyras' sexual encounter (*Met.* 10.465-8):[69]

> *Accipit obsceno genitor sua uiscera lecto*
> *uirgineosque metus leuat hortaturque timentem.*
> *forsitan aetatis quoque nomine "filia" dixit,*
> *dixit et ilia "pater", sceleri ne nomina desint.*

[67] 'When asked the age of the girl, "The same as Myrrha's," she answered'.
[68] Anderson (1998), 512.
[69] 'The father takes his daughter welcomed his flesh and blood to that bed of uncleanness, | gently calming her virginal fears with words of assurance. | Perhaps, because of her age, he even called her "my daughter" | and she said "father", to put the finish touch to their incest'. Humphries translates *sceleri ne nomina desint* as 'so the names were right and proper | to suit the guilty deed'. I believe this translation better underlines the act of, as it were, speaking the so far hidden and/or imagined incest into reality.

Here, the roles Myrrha and Cinyras are playing in their transgressive erotic fantasies are not roles anymore. The (inadvertent) naming of their identity lets the previous use of simile collapse in on itself: there is no more role-playing, or exploration of sexual fantasy, only the utterance of the incest taboo in the very moment of breaking it. As Lowrie notes, 'the verbal transgression of Myrrha and her father calling each other by their family names in bed underscores the sexual transgression of their incest. [...] The layering of sexual transgression with a peculiar reversal of language, where an extended meaning turns out to have a devastating literal reality, is made yet more complex by the religious violation'.[70] If before Myrrha was presented and acted as non-Myrrha to explore her erotic desires, in this passage there is no more pretence of similarity, but full identity.

This poignant use of simile and its subsequent collapse has also been noted by Hardie, who comments on how 'Ovid pretends to a literal-mindedness in noting the way in which a simile in fact falls short of identity, and suggests how the conditions of a 'just as' might actually be fulfilled'.[71] Calling these similes 'approximative', Hardie also goes on to suggest that it is common to find in Ovid a 'close link between the confusion of linguistic and sexual boundaries'.[72] In the tale of Myrrha, similes act as translucent veils, inviting projected fantasies while depicting realities, thereby both approximating and obfuscating reality, and inadvertently end up pushing actual boundaries. The myth culminates in a chilling alignment of sexual transgression and linguistic ambiguity. Language and reality here collapse into one, bringing the realisation of this incestuous desire to a close and explicitly showcasing the connection between simile, linguistic expression, and the actualisation of desire in the *Metamorphoses*.

[70] Lowrie (1993), 50-2.
[71] Hardie (2004), 1.
[72] Hardie (2004), 11.

A close look at the similes in the episodes of Apollo and Daphne (*Met.* 1.438-567), Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (*Met.* 4.274-388), Tereus and Philomela (*Met.* 6.401-619), and Cinyras and Myrrha (*Met.* 10.298-502) offers a new understanding of the importance of simile in exploring complex desires and identities within the *Metamorphoses*, as a literary device that can delve deep into the realm of erotic fantasy and transgression. In the case of Apollo and Daphne and Tereus and Philomela, Apollo's and Tereus' predatory behaviour, depicted through simile, highlights the unsettling dynamics of power and consent, showcasing how the simile can be used to envision and enact violent fantasies. In the episode of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, simile not only conveys Salmacis' coercive desire but also becomes the means through which Hermaphroditus' gender transformation is articulated. Unlike other victims in the *Metamorphoses*, Hermaphroditus retains their identity, while Salmacis is subsumed into their altered form. This reversal complicates the function of simile, as it simultaneously sustains transgressive desire and enables the expression of a non-normative body. Finally, the episode of Myrrha and Cinyras reveals how similes act as veils, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, linguistic ambiguity and sexual transgression. Myrrha's transformation from role-play to full identity within the narrative exposes the collapse of simulated desires into devastating actualities, showcasing the interplay between language, simile and the exploration of transgressive desires and erotic fantasy within the *Metamorphoses*. Ultimately, this reading of the simile invites us to reconsider the nuanced ways in which Ovid employs literary devices to probe into the complexities of desire and identity.

The shift from the plane of imagined fantasy to reality showcased by Myrrha and Cinyras also prompt us to question the value of simile in itself. If reading simile in the *Metamorphoses* has allowed us to see the power of this literary device in allowing for the exploration of desire, such desires still remain predominantly disturbing both as fantasy and actualised reality in the Ovidian text. But can this transference from the plane of imagined

fantasy to that of reality permitted by simile happen not just for perturbing transgression, but also for more positive, liberatory forces? The progression from simile to reality, evident in these narratives of transgressive desire, raises intriguing questions about the potential of simile not only to articulate forbidden fantasies but also to facilitate the manifestation of liberatory experiences and embodiments. In what follows, I will analyse whether the simile can indeed be employed as a tool for liberatory practices, particularly in the expression of queer identities. Can we extract the potential of the simile to transform fantasy into reality and thereby make queerness not only imaginable but achievable?

Simile-as-Impersonation: The Case of Tiresias

In the episodes analysed, I noted how similes seem to be conduits for fantasies of transgressive sexual desires. At the same time, similes can also collapse in on themselves when the fantasy being role-played is not a fantasy anymore, but slides into reality, turning the approximation of simile from the plane of fantasy to that of reality. The many possibilities opened up by the simile thus range from the spelling out of sexual fantasies to their realisations, from the expression of sexual transgressions to queer forms of embodiment.

In the *Metamorphoses*, these transgressive and non-normative expressions of desire, in their connection to sexual violence, rape, and incest, clearly show us how the realm of the erotic is not and ought not to be exempt from critical reflection. The *Metamorphoses* has also made us aware of how the simile in particular functions as an instrument for the imagining and/or realisation of fantasy. The simile can offer unique opportunities by allowing engagement with reality-as-is while overlaying it with readings and perspectives that redefine that reality, without erasing that immediate reality, or necessarily assuming sameness between planes of existence and self-exploration, as would occur in the case of metaphor. Can the exploration of different planes of existence offered by simile be pursued not just as a simple realisation of

fantasy, but in particular as a radical and queer avenue for the imaginative exploration and experience of alternative or further, concomitant realities? And what residue, if any, remains of the comparison between similes as avenues for transgressive desire and similes as tools for radical imagination?

This inquiry gains further depth when we acknowledge the explicit interest among contemporary queer artists and writers in harnessing poetry's suggestive qualities for redefining language, performance, and identity, and when we consider that the so far under-appreciated connection between simile, role-playing/impersonation and sexual fantasy. The connection between role-playing, performance, and fantasizing has long been noted in queer studies: as we have seen in Chapter 1, Muñoz's theory of disidentification relies on the process of 'crafting and performing the self',[73] and is therefore distinguished from the more simple process of identification, which relies on the identity, and not dis/similarity, between two subjects. Drawing on connections between simile, disidentifcation and phantasmagoric imagination, in what follows I expand on the simile's potential to act on what Butler defines as the critical promise of fantasy, namely as a tool that, like simile, allows us to imagine ourselves and others as something similar-but-different. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler suggests that fantasy can indeed be employed radically. Rather than standing in opposition to reality, fantasy 'is part of the articulation of the possible', carrying thought beyond what is immediately present into realms that are 'not yet actualized or not actualizable'.[74] It thus functions as reality's 'constitutive outside', meaning that which reality forecloses, yet upon which it nevertheless depends in order to define its own limits. It is precisely here that fantasy's critical promise lies.[75] By challenging 'the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality', [76]

[73] Muñoz (1999), 8.
[74] Butler (2004), 28-9.
[75] Butler (2004), 28-9.
[76] Butler (2004), 28-9.

fantasy opens space for reimagining both the self and social relations. As Butler puts it, fantasy 'allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise': [77] it gestures toward an 'elsewhere' beyond the given, and, when embodied, has the capacity to bring that elsewhere into lived experience.

Butler's analysis raises fundamental points about what the expression of fantasy can achieve politically and socially. While in Ovid the fantasies captured through similes are predominantly fantasies of transgressive desires that mostly remain within the realm of achieving sexual satisfaction over an unwilling object, for queer people the pursuit of sexual satisfaction, pleasure, joy, and more is a radical act in itself, which, as Butler suggests, involves a strategy of resistance from censorship as well as oppression. To be able to fantasize, to imagine a world beyond the one we presently inhabit, provides a radical space for self-expression and actualisation. Language, not least poetic language, helps create that space: let's now explore how the simile's method of approximation through imagined fantasy enables 'the articulation of the possible' for many queer writers in their re-interpretation of the *Metamorphoses* and its open and latent queer potential.

In Trish Salah's *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* (2014), Kae Tempest's *Hold Your Own* (2014) , and Cassils' *Tiresias* (2013), fantasy emerges as a means of self-articulation, originating from and centring on the subject-author. This marks a shift from the similes we have previously examined, where desire and fantasy were projected outward onto an object. Perhaps this distinction underscores a broader contrast: between queer as an observable deviation from given norms and queer as an expression of a non-normative sense of self. As Sedgwick reminds us, 'there are important senses in which "queer" can signify only *when attached to the first*

[77] Butler (2004), 28-9.

person',[78] a consideration to keep in mind even when dealing with non-identity-based approaches to queerness. In this context, fantasy functions as a radical form of self-expression, resisting normative constraints, and working 'to posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy when we understand fantasy as taking the body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as it is'.[79]

If simile has enabled queer imagination by opening space for similarity-with-difference, then, impersonation similarly enables an embodied negotiation of identity, where the self is not fixed but constantly in flux. Both simile and impersonation, as I read them, participate in 'practices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone'.[80] In its movement of dis/similarity between the lyrical I of the author and that of character, the technique of impersonation avoids falling into complete identification and instead consciously constructs the self through radical imagination, like simile does at a level of poetic language. With this in mind, let us now turn to the case of impersonating Tiresias.

The inclusion of Tiresias in my discussion, despite their absence from the selection of Ovid's similes previously considered, extends the chapter's argument about likeness and transformation into the realm of embodiment. As I have explained, Ovid's similes are moments of suspended likeness, brief gestures of connection that generate meaning precisely through their finiteness. They invite comparison, yet always resolve or dissolve before identity can take hold. Tiresias, by contrast, embodies that same structural tension between closure and

[78] Sedgwick (1993), 8.
[79] Butler (2004), 28.
[80] Butler (2004), 29.

instability not as a fleeting figure of speech, but as an ongoing condition of being. Having lived as both man and woman, they literalises the comparative logic that animates Ovid's similes. Their embodied experience materialises what the simile can only suggest: a sustained oscillation between likeness and non-identity, sameness and change.

In this sense, Tiresias does not receive or utter similes because their body enacts the very grammar of comparison and the movement between terms that defines Ovidian figuration. The fleeting relationality of the simile finds an embodied analogue in Tiresias, transforming rhetorical comparison into lived metamorphosis. If the simile's momentary likeness always threatens to resolve into closure, Tiresias stretches that moment indefinitely, rendering the "as if" of Ovidian poetics into an ongoing experiential mode. Their reversible transformation (unique within the *Metamorphoses*) thus becomes an interpretive key to the poem's wider meditation on mutability. Where other metamorphoses fix their subjects into new forms, Tiresias alone moves between them, sustaining the dynamic of difference that the simile momentarily enacts.

Reading Tiresias alongside its contemporary reception allows this chapter to trace how the Ovidian logic of the simile migrates from text to embodiment, from linguistic transformation to performative impersonation. Salah, Tempest, and Cassils all translate Ovid's fleeting "as if" into a sustained practice of becoming otherwise, reconfiguring identity through acts of physical and poetic impersonation. In this sense, Tiresias makes visible what remains implicit in Ovid's poetics of comparison. Tiresias thus stands at the intersection of simile and metamorphosis, embodying the instability that Ovid's comparisons gesture toward but cannot sustain.

Tiresias, then, is a figure through whom Ovid's ephemeral poetics of likeness becomes a living, performative, and enduring mode of queer transformation. Their success as a figure impersonated by many queer writers is particularly noteworthy: arguably, they are one of the

most explicitly queer figures we find in classical myth, and in Ovid specifically.[81] Stories about Tiresias' physical transformation are varied: in Ovid, he appears in Book 3 of the *Metamorphoses*, summoned by Juno and Jupiter (*Met.* 3.316-38). Tiresias' help is needed to decide whether it is more pleasurable to have sex as a man, or as a woman, something they themselves experienced. Tiresias' transformation is here explained as part of a curse, a punishment they earned after separating two mating snakes for no apparent reason. In other words, they are subjected to metamorphosis because of their abuse of others' sexual pleasures.[82] In spite of thus being connected to a form of sexual violence, like in the other examples discussed above, Tiresias' transformation and change of *forma* and *imago* (*Met.* 3.331) stands out in the *Metamorphoses* as not just the only one between genders, but also the only one that is reversible. They turn from man to woman and back to man without any consequences for their individuality, consciousness, or ability to communicate. It is therefore quite evident why they would be such an appealing figure for queer readers and writers alike: traveling between genders, they get to have different experiences, including a sex life great enough for Juno and Jupiter to consider them the appropriate *arbiter* for their quarrel.

Tiresias has been reclaimed and re-established as an autonomous queer figure more frequently and more explicitly than Hermaphroditus, another evidently gender non-conforming figure in the *Metamorphoses*. Despite the more prolific use of similes in the myth of Hermaphroditus, which contrasts with the absence of any similes in the story of Tiresias, my focus is here on Tiresias because of their greater and continued popularity in LGBTQ+ culture. If we are talking about fantasy, there seems to be a lot more fantasizing to be like Tiresias than to be like Hermaphroditus, particularly in writing. In visual culture, Hermaphroditus seems to be more popular, perhaps also due to their being intersex, and thus not always with the best

[81] Recent discussions on Tiresias' queerness can be found in Liveley (2003) and Giusti (2018).
[82] Anderson (1998), 370.

intentions: bad faith obsession with and over-medicalisation of gender non-confirming bodies, and how they are portrayed in visual culture, has a long history that still continues today. Be it voluntarily or under the threat of violence, the gender non-confirming body is almost always put on display as a spectacle.[83] If we were to take our cue from this bifurcation of which figures resonate in literary and visual reception, we could go back to the myth of Salmacis and recognise that, from the *Metamorphoses* to now, Hermaphroditus has been considered as an *object* of sexual desire, curiosity, and more; while Tiresias has more often been taken as a *subject* by queer artists to explore, fantasize and imagine new ways of sexual and gender expression.

In Trish Salah's *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* (2014), Tiresias is taken as conduit for the poet's own desires through a movement of dis/similarity allowed through impersonation. The collection itself, according to Kay Gabriel, 'mobilizes a polemical poetics of the lyric to formalize conditions, structures of feeling, and reflections on the social and historical situations that she takes as the content of her poems'.[84] As noted by Tuck in her review of Salah's work, Tiresias is a popular character, often regarded and mythologised as the first testimony of gender non-conforming individuals. The problematic search for the a mythical origin of queerness and queer identity in ancient Greece and Rome is a very current issue in the study of intersections between queer theory and the classics, and something Salah problematizes as well. Yet Salah does not shy away from addressing and inhabiting the character of Tiresias. Her poem

[83] A further discussion on the focus on the monstrous and the medical in queer bodies can be found in Malatino (2019). As Malatino says 'concurrent with the centuries-long thread of mythification, clinical detachment, and social and scientific abhorrence that has shaped typical perceptions of intersex bodies is the possibility of an illicit attraction, a passionate attachment, a reading of them as positively queer rather than interstitial and lacking' (148).
[84] Gabriel (2016), 526.

"Tiresias, Impersonated" resonates strongly with my notion of impersonation as the conscious and voluntary taking on of a role:[85]

> Impersonation doesn't mean what you think. This is the introduction to this book, my introduction, my lyrical sexology. *Lyric Sexology*. This is one of the things you need to get straight. This is another, you there in your later age, your so-called 21st century: I am not a transsexual. Or an intersexual, or a hermaphrodite. (Hermaphroditus can write her own damn book.) I am not any of those things you have words for now. You don't have words for what I am. What I was was this:
> I was a dude.
> Then I was a chick.
> Then I was a dude again.
> Hah. You didn't think we said "dude" or "chick" in what you call ancient Greece, Hellas of the Hellenes, etc. Think again.
> Here is what you don't have words for: What is a seer? What is beyond knowing? How can I write you now, a now impossibly out of joint with your own, knowing you will read this? Knowing you? Or what is a sex in time? Without?
> You do not have a word for snakes or gods or sexes. You only think you do.
> You do not have a word for the meeting of snake sex god in one word's divided knowing, a knowing one divided word.
>
> Seven years is what I was as beyond, a beyond, and inside too. So, impersonation doesn't begin to describe it, but suppose it did. Suppose
> I began to describe you.

The process of impersonation is here clearly stated and described. Most importantly, the process of impersonation is exactly what allows Salah to find new ways of gender expression: to imagine her own self as something similar, but also other. Like simile, impersonation remains vague and open. Denotative statements do not allow for the possibility of radical, fantastical possibility and are only adduced in the negative: 'I am not a transsexual. Or an intersexual, or a hermaphrodite'. Hermaphroditus is pointedly disavowed as possible figure to inhabit, perhaps for the reasons I have listed above. Instead, by impersonating Tiresias, Salah escapes the clutches of definition. Impersonation is 'what you don't have words for': it explores, like the simile, a realm of possibility that does not find form in reality, that is 'beyond', that explores a radical fantasy of self-expression and affirmation against the

[85] Salah (2014), 11.

normative, where the self-mutates, changes, inhabits role temporarily or permanently. Going back to Butler: 'fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home'.[86] Salah's fantasy-as-impersonation, here, allows her to embody different ways of being that move across time and space, allowing for an exploration of the self that would not otherwise be possible.

Across the collection, Salah continues to impersonate Tiresias by utilizing various modes of address throughout. The first-person voice of Tiresias is intermittently adopted, while Salah also employs third-person references to the character and directly addresses them as 'you' at other times, assuming multiple perspectives through a dynamic lyrical voice. "Tiresias Impersonated" is already a good example of her continuous and fluid switching between voices: 'this is the introduction to this book, my introduction, my lyrical sexology. *Lyric Sexology*' is clearly Salah speaking, while later, the sentence 'you didn't think we said "dude" or "chick" in what you call ancient Greece' belongs to Tiresias. Other poems open immediately with Tiresias' voice, like "Tiresias, Again. Up Close and Personal": 'Mythology is cheap as foil for soulful at a time when it is not soul we are looking | forward to. I can't pretend to know the first thing about your age—I would never do that | to a woman, having been for seven years, by what awry I find extraordinary is the fuss'.[87] Yet before all of this, Tiresias is introduced in the first person in the collection's second poem, "Origin in the Place Of", the first poem citing Tiresias and introducing them as characters from the very first line: 'Tiresias was a boy, before he was a man. A man before he was a woman. A woman | at the pleasure of the snakes, of knowledge, of the whims of the Gods".[88] This continuous oscillation of Salah's lyrical I is noted by Gabriel as well: '*Lyric Sexology* opens with an I—but not only the lyric I, the default

[86] Butler (2004), 29.
[87] Salah (2014), 30.
[88] Salah (2014), 30.

and often all but autobiographical person of the genre. This I is also, at least potentially, Tiresias, or an impersonation of Tiresias'.[89] The negotiation of Salah-as-poet and Salah-as-Tiresias, I believe, confirms the similarities between the process of impersonation and that of simile, as both become negotiations between being ourselves and being someone (un-)*like* ourselves.

Salah herself states that 'for many trans writers, both memoirists and creative writers, Tiresias does provide a touchstone, perhaps demonstrating what queer medievalist Caroline Dinshaw describes as a desire for 'touching across time, which we might think of as an affective performance (or performative) of recognition within/across trans-historical durations of reading trans erasure'.[90] It is particularly of note that Salah describes the figure of Tiresias as 'demonstrating [...] a desire', again confirming the role of impersonation as a mode of self-expression and self-fulfilment: though Salah problematizes this desire and the role of Tiresias across trans poetic and politics in her collection, using Tiresias to demonstrate such desire confirms the role of impersonation as not only a possibility for fantasy, but also the enactment of critical fantasy.

While simile as used in the *Metamorphoses* expresses desires upon objects, impersonation in this case allows for an investigation in the first person of our own fantasies and desires in a way that is not only radical and useful for queer self-expression, but also takes into account that the space of fantasy is one that is not exempt from critical reflection. This is fundamental for the expression of queer politics: as Rodríguez says, 'to deny our fantasies because they are too complicated, too painful, or too perverse, to erase their presence or censor their articulation in public life, constitutes a particular kind of insidious violence that threatens to undermine our ability to explore the contours of our psychic lives, and the imaginary

[89] Gabriel (2018), 531.
[90] Salah (2017), 24.

possibilities of the social worlds in which we exist. [...] Fantasy, even in its most painful and dystopic forms, is thus inherently embedded in queer understanding of utopian longings'.[91] Impersonation, then, like simile, allows us to explore problematic desires and their meanings, to inhabit fantasies that are sometimes unsavoury. The expression of such desires in the first person and onto our own subjectivity as opposed to objects like in Ovid, then, allows impersonation-as-simile to not only explore queer desires, but also, perhaps more importantly, their function, their limits, their issues and their radical possibilities.

While not entirely written in the first person, Kae Tempest' collection of poems *Hold Your Own* (2014), also focused on Tiresias, opens with a quote from Tiresias themselves, thus implying that the voice of the seer should pervade the entirety of their collection: [92]

> TIRESIAS: I will go, once I have said what I came here to say.
>
> – Sophocles, Oedipus Rex

Hold Your Own is constituted, in a similar way to *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1*, by two intertwining narratives: an autobiographical one and Tiresias' story, the mysterious prophet of Greek mythology who was a man and a woman, who was punished by the gods with blindness and inner vision and who lived both in the world of the living and in the world of the dead. The poems that make up the central body of *Hold Your Own* are divided into four chapters, preceded by a first introductory poem that narrates the death of Tiresias according to Tempest. The opening section presents Tiresias as a disenchanted 15-year-old boy wandering around London on his way to high school. The second section, titled "Childhood", opens again with Tiresias' voice: [93]

> TIRESIAS: You long for knowledge;

[91] Rodríguez (2011), 343.
[92] Tempest (2014), 9.
[93] Tempest (2014), 41.

you will soon long for ignorance.

– Euripides, *The Phoenician Women*

From "Childhood" onwards, Tempest's poems are mainly in the first person: 'I hold you in my arms' is the opening line of the poem "For my niece",[94] the first poem in the "Childhood" section. Constituted of eleven poems, five of them open with the first pronoun singular or plural, and only one of them is not written in the first person. Yet in the closing of the section, "The Boy Tiresias", Tempest' lyrical I seems opposed to Tiresias', as they ask the reader to 'watch him, kicking a tennis ball, | keeping it up, | the boy on the street in his sister's old jumper'.[95] Here, the lyrical I and Tiresias are not the same: their relationship is further complicated by the third section of the poem, "Womanhood", which focuses on "The woman the boy became".[96] Here, Tiresias presents as a woman and is addressed with feminine pronouns, yet at the same time Tempest's lyrical I negates their womanhood in this section, while also grippling with it: 'I giggled as if I was a beautiful girl'.[97] The section closes with Tiresias going through the same process in the poem "The woman Tiresias": 'the boy in her is strong some days | […] the girl in her is full of rage'.[98] Similarly, the last section of the poem "Manhood" presents several poems in the first person, and yet opens and closes with two poems that are explicitly about Tiresias and do not conflate the author with the character, keeping the two entities separate ("The Man Tiresias", "Man Down").[99] The final section, "Blind Profit", follows a similar circular structure.

In *Hold Your Own*, Tempest's engagement with Tiresias therefore oscillates between a clear separation of themselves and Tiresias as a character, and the use of Tiresias as a central

[94] Tempest (2014), 27.
[95] Tempest (2014), 40.
[96] Tempest (2014), 44-5.
[97] Tempest (2014), 53.
[98] Tempest (2014), 64.
[99] Tempest (2014), 67-86.

figure to introduce their own struggle with gender and desire. Impersonation once again leads Tempest's exploration and self-reflection, with the figure of Tiresias standing as a character the poet can negotiate their identity against. This process of impersonation when it comes to Tiresias is so common in queer re-interpretations of the myth happens visually as well as textually. In 2013, artist and bodybuilder Cassils set up a performance named *Tiresias*. This was a durational performance in which Cassils melted a neoclassical Greek male ice sculpture with pure body heat. The performance lasted hours, and viewers could see Cassils' body changing in front of them. The lighting on stage was minimal, to maintain that it was indeed body heat melting the ice, and an irregular sound was played over the theatre to simulate drops melting. According to Cassils' own website, 'by pressing their body against the ice torso, Cassils demonstrates both the instability of the body and desire for a certain unsustainable physique. Recasting the myth of Tiresias as a story of endurance and transformation, Cassils performs the resolve required to persist at the point of contact between masculine and feminine'.[100] The performance is therefore a reflection on gender identity, transformation and transitioning, as well as gender non-conforming bodies, something which brings Tiresias closer to the figure of Hermaphroditus thanks to the embodied dimension of the performance.

The highly stylized, durational, and hyper-visible nature of *Tiresias* invites an ambivalent reading, particularly in relation to the risks of reinscribing a specular logic. The aestheticization of endurance and the sculpted body may seem to echo the voyeuristic gaze so often found in Ovid as well as in everyday structures of visual consumption that so often frame and fix trans and queer bodies. Yet what ultimately grounds the piece is not the viewer's gaze but Cassils' own embodied labour: rather than presenting a passive spectacle, *Tiresias* becomes a site of lived negotiation, where Cassils' body enacts and experiences transformation in real time. The performance can then be read as reclaiming visibility as an active, resistant gesture,

[100] Cassils (2010), "Tiresias", <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-tiresias>.

reorienting attention away from consumption and toward the visceral, unstable, and self-determined dimensions of queer embodiment. Through his bodily experience, Cassils is in a sense Tiresias, and therefore takes the figure of Tiresias as first person, as Cassils' own body is the focus in their performance. And yet, there is an element of disjunction: Cassils' body is like, but not identical to, the torso in front of them. Using their own body as the medium, they explore connections of similarity and difference in visual terms, literally embodying the myth of Tiresias and the struggles, expectations, and constant embodied changes of queerness. As Corfman says: 'Cassils intermittently stages what we might variously call a struggle, conversation, or relationship with the torso, its ephemerality, and the gendered expectations and materialities it invokes'.[101] This idea of Cassils' trans identity as a condition of work-in-progress and oscillation between different forms of expression is echoed by Cassils themselves: 'I perform trans not as something about a crossing from one sex to another but as a continual becoming, a process-oriented way of being that works in a space of indeterminacy, spasm and slipperiness'.[102]

[101] Corfman (2020), 6.
[102] Cassils (2013). Available at: < https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bashing-binaries-along-with-2000-pounds-of-clay_b_3861322>.

Fig. 1: Cassils performing *Tiresias*. Image: Cassils.

Cassils's expression of gender and their impersonation of Tiresias therefore mirrors, like their embodied performance of Tiresias, the movement of being like, but not quite the same as, something else. This is an experience which is vastly documented in queer studies: 'the labor of making transgender identity is handmade […] a process, unfinished yet enough (process, *not* progress)'.[103] Visually as well as textually, then, impersonating the figure of Tiresias stands for a process of dis/similarity and becoming that allows the author to express, create and imagine their own queerness. Fantasy as a radical tool for imagination and impersonation allows for the exploration and construction of queerness.

[103] Vaccaro (2014), 2.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the multifaceted role of simile in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its afterlives in contemporary queer writing, tracing how simile operates as a conduit for both transgressive fantasy and radical self-articulation. In Ovid, similes often sustain a phantasmagoric plane where desire, particularly illicit and violent desire, can be enacted, allowing transgressive impulses to be expressed while maintaining their separation from the literal plane of the narrative. This dual function of simile, of holding together realities and not-(yet)-realities, becomes particularly relevant when we consider how queer writers have harnessed its potential, not as a means of sublimating desire, but as a strategy for exploring fluid identities, embodiment, and transformation.

While the episodes analysed from the *Metamorphoses* foreground the way simile enables the articulation of sexual fantasies, sometimes collapsing when fantasy turns into reality, the queer works examined in this chapter reveal a shift in how simile is deployed. In works like Trish Salah' *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* (2014), Kae Tempest's *Hold Your Own* (2014), and Cassils' *Tiresias* (2013), simile and impersonation function not merely as tools of erotic imagination, but as techniques of self-fashioning and identity construction. Here, impersonation is not about mimicry but about inhabiting multiple subjectivities at once, much like simile's ability to hold two states together in tension. These contemporary works repurpose the simile's ability to mediate between realms as a method of enacting non-binary and fluid forms of selfhood, demonstrating how poetic language can provide a space for re-imagining gender, identity, and embodiment.

This inquiry has also illuminated a broader theoretical question: how does simile, as a poetic device, intersect with the politics of fantasy? Butler's assertion that fantasy enables the articulation of the possible offers a framework for understanding how the literary and poetic imagination can be a site of resistance and world-making. If, in Ovid, similes facilitate fantasies

of domination, conquest, and the control of another's body, in contemporary queer writing, they become a means of exploring selfhood beyond rigid binaries, opening up alternative realities that resist the constraints of the normative. Simile's ability to stage approximation without collapsing difference (unlike metaphor, which assumes equivalence) makes it particularly suited to queer expression, allowing for the articulation of identities that are fluid, emergent, and in flux. The enduring relevance of Tiresias across these texts underscores this shift. In Ovid, Tiresias embodies transformation, between genders and between realms of life and death, yet remains a largely externalized figure of divine punishment and knowledge. In the hands of contemporary queer writers, however, Tiresias becomes a figure through which authors can explore their own processes of self-discovery, using impersonation and poetic figuration to navigate the complexities of gender and identity. The Tiresian myth, then, serves as a bridge between classical and contemporary narratives of metamorphosis, offering a mythic precedent for the articulation of queer and trans identities. This chapter has therefore sought to demonstrate how the simile, by holding together what is and what might be, enacts a mode of queer world-building, one that allows for the imaginative articulation of selves and futures not yet fully realized. The radical potential of simile lies in its ability to create spaces where identity is not fixed but continually becoming, where fantasy is not an escape from reality, but a means of rewriting it.

Chapter 3: Similes, Diaspora, and Familial Dynamics in Homer's Odyssey and Ocean Vuong

Introduction

If the *Metamorphoses* invited readers to think about likeness through bodily transformation, the *Odyssey* compels us to consider likeness through displacement. As we transition from the exploration of similes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and their afterlives in contemporary queer writing to another foundational classical epic, the *Odyssey*, it is important to consider the steps that bring us to such an analysis. The preceding chapter examined how similes in the *Metamorphoses* functioned as conduits for transgressive fantasy and identity articulation, particularly in queer contemporary reinterpretations. This inquiry into the fluidity of selfhood and desire through simile now leads us to the *Odyssey*, where similes play a pivotal role in shaping familial roles and relationships. While in the *Metamorphoses* similes address issues of selfhood and desire, and sustain a phantasmagoric realm where transformation is both imagined and enacted, the *Odyssey* deploys similes to imagine new ways of engaging and interacting with social roles in the familial sphere. However, much like in Ovid, while these similes can offer moments that are able to destabilise and re-imagine the familial sphere, exposing its tensions and contradictions, they also often end up re-establishing the norms they are challenging in the first place. Having explored how similes mediate between realities and possibilities of desire in Ovid's epic, this chapter will therefore now turn to how similes engage with themes of family, belonging, and identity in the *Odyssey*, suggesting and yet never fully realising alternative modes of father-son relationships across the diasporic experience in particular.

The *Odyssey*'s central concern with return, estrangement, and recognition situates its similes within a framework of diasporic movement, where likeness is remembered,

manufactured, or utilised to allow for moments of physical and emotional recognition. In the *Odyssey*, to compare is to connect what is scattered, to reimagine relation across spatial and temporal gaps. The simile here enables temporary bridges between divided bodies, times, and selves. My argument in this chapter develops from the insight that the *Odyssey*'s similes mediate not only familial intimacy but also the feelings of estrangement, mis/recognition and displacement that are tied to it. In doing so, I will analyse how similes in the *Odyssey* model affective continuity across absence: likeness becomes an imaginative way of keeping connection alive when bodies are apart. This diasporic logic of resemblance will then find resonance in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, where similes also perform the work of bridging temporal and generational exile. In both texts, the "as if" of comparison therefore sustains belonging across separation.

Homeric epic has long been central to diasporic literary traditions, particularly for writers of the African and Asian diasporas who reimagine the *Odyssey* not as a narrative of triumphant return but as one of enduring displacement. Much has been written on how the *Odyssey* has often been a privileged point of reference for postcolonial writers precisely because its structures of wandering, delayed recognition, and unstable *nostos* resist imperial teleology.[1] Rather than resolving exile into political or territorial settlement, these receptions emphasize fractured homecomings, relational vulnerability, and the persistence of distance. Poems such as Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) rewrite Homeric motifs to articulate histories of forced migration and cultural rupture, mobilizing the mythology of the *Odyssey* to articulate the unresolved nature of diaspora and cultural loss.

[1] Accounts of the *Odyssey*'s centrality to postcolonial and diasporic literary traditions can be found in Greenwood (2005; 2010; 2011), for a focus on Caribbean receptions; McConnell (2013) for African and African diasporic rewritings of the poem; and Rankine (2006) for African American engagements with Odyssean paradigms. Analyses of fractured, deferred, or unresolved *nostos* in postcolonial receptions include Davis (2007) and Dougherty (1997). For broader overviews of postcolonial and global receptions of the *Odyssey*, see Greenwood (2020) and Graziosi and Greenwood (2007).

Themes of displacement, familial and cultural disruption, and exile constitute the core of the *Odyssey* not just at the level of plot, but also through the poem's formal devices and similes in particular. Attending to simile in the *Odyssey* therefore allows a shift from the epic's large-scale structures of exile and return to the intimate, relational work through which diaspora is lived and negotiated. Here, similes become devices that at once connect and hold apart, playing a crucial role in shaping relationships within and beyond the household. The bonds between Odysseus and Penelope, and between Odysseus and Telemachus, are repeatedly negotiated through simile, which becomes a means of imagining intimacy across distance and time. Reading these moments alongside the poem's broader diasporic logic highlights how similes not only represent familial attachment but actively produce it, offering provisional structures through which estranged figures may re-encounter one another.

Starting from how simile articulates displacement and familial relationship in the *Odyssey*, I then turn to how similes perform a similar role in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), a text offering a queer reworking of the *Odyssey*'s narrative of return. Here, Telemachus becomes a figure navigating both the weight of paternal inheritance and the uncertainties of queer self-making. In Vuong's poems, similes function as points of classical reception precisely because of their capacity to hold multiple, even conflicting, meanings: they mediate between past and present, belonging and otherness, connection and disconnection. By drawing an intertextual web that spans classical epic and modern diasporic experience, Vuong explicitly addresses issues of tradition and inheritance, using simile as a device that both retrieves the past and gestures toward new futures.

Homecoming and the Poetics of Likeness Across Distance

If the *Odyssey* provides a grammar for thinking likeness across separation, it is because the poem itself has long been read through the lens of diaspora. Its central narrative is that of a

family scattered and suspended in uncertainty, thus making the *Odyssey* a foundational text not only in classical studies but in diasporic literary traditions across African and Asian receptions in particular. As McConnell notes, the *Odyssey*'s 'homecoming trope and quest for identity have inspired writers who are simultaneously struggling against, and appropriating, the very forms that had been used to oppress them'. [2] Diaspora theorists have repeatedly turned to the epic not because it resolves exile, but because it metabolises its contradictions: the home sought is never identical to the home remembered, and reunion is shadowed by loss. Difference is then key to the diasporic experience, just as much as similarity and connection is, as stated by Hall when defining hybridity: to him, what is necessary is 'the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; […] a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference'.[3] In this sense, the simile therefore mimics the diasporic movement of mis/recognition, the fractured path to a different home.

The *Odyssey* dramatizes misrecognition, memory, and almost-missed familial encounters most acutely through the emotional topography of father-son separation. Long before Odysseus and Telemachus meet, their relationship is mediated through acts of comparison staged by others. In Pylos, Nestor marks Telemachus' likeness to Odysseus not in bodily presence but in speech (*Od*. 3.120-5): [4]

> ἔνθ' οὔ τίς ποτε μῆτιν ὁμοιωθήμεναι ἄντην
> ἤθελ', ἐπεὶ μάλα πολλὸν ἐνίκα δῖος Ὀδυσσεὺς
> παντοίοισι δόλοισι, πατὴρ τεός, εἰ ἐτεόν γε
> κείνου ἔκγονός ἐσσι· σέβας μ' ἔχει εἰσορόωντα.
> ἦ τοι γὰρ μῦθοί γε ἐοικότες, οὐδέ κε φαίης
> ἄνδρα νεώτερον ὧδε ἐοικότα μυθήσασθαι.

[2] McConnell (2013).
[3] Hall (1989), 220.
[4] "Odysseus, | your father, if you really are his son—| well, no one dared to try to equal him | in cleverness. That man was always best | at every kind of trick. And seeing you, | I am amazed at how you talk like him. | One would not think so young a man could do it".

Nestor remarks that no one ever wished to rival Odysseus in counsel, and that Telemachus' manner of speaking is surprisingly similar to his father's. Telemachus is thus recognised as like Odysseus because Odysseus himself is incomparable: likeness, then, here depends on dis/similarity. The recognition secures filiation while simultaneously underscoring absence, as Telemachus' identity is legible only through a father who is no longer present to confirm it.

A similar logic governs the recognition scene in Sparta. Helen's response to Telemachus is framed as stunned disbelief, as she claims never to have seen anyone who so resembles Odysseus (*Od*. 4.141-6): [5]

> οὐ γάρ πώ τινά φημι ἐοικότα ὧδε ἰδέσθαι
> οὔτ᾽ ἄνδρ᾽ οὔτε γυναῖκα, σέβας μ᾽ ἔχει εἰσορόωσαν,
> ὡς ὅδ᾽ Ὀδυσσῆος μεγαλήτορος υἷι ἔοικε,
> Τηλεμάχωι, τὸν ἔλειπε νέον γεγαῶτ᾽ ἐνὶ οἴκωι
> κεῖνος ἀνήρ, ὅτ᾽ ἐμεῖο κυνώπιδος εἵνεκ᾽ Ἀχαιοὶ
> ἤλθεθ᾽ ὑπὸ Τροίην πόλεμον θρασὺν ὀρμαίνοντες.

Menelaus's agreement itemizes the precise correspondences between Odysseus' and Telemachus' bodies (*Od*. 4.148-50):[6]

> οὕτω νῦν καὶ ἐγὼ νοέω, γύναι, ὡς σὺ εἰσκεις·
> κείνου γὰρ τοιοίδε πόδες τοιαίδε τε χεῖρες
> ὀφθαλμῶν τε βολαὶ κεφαλή τ᾽ ἐφύπερθέ τε χαῖται.

Here too likeness is mediated through distance, as Telemachus is seen *as* Odysseus precisely because Odysseus is not there, and is instead preserved only in recollection and comparison. In both scenes, then, father and son are bound by likeness in absence: identity emerges not as

[5] "I never saw two people so alike | as this boy and Telemachus, the son | of spirited Odysseus, the child | he left behind, a little newborn baby, | the day the Greeks marched off to Troy, their minds | fixated on the war and violence".
[6] "Wife, | I saw the likeness too. Odysseus | had hands like those, those legs, | that hair, that head, | that glancing gaze".

inherited certainty but as something inferred, imagined, and precariously assembled across distance.

Simile and comparison thus become the poem's primary mechanisms for sustaining the father-son bond across space and time, allowing the relationship to be conjured before it can be lived. This structure helps explain why the *Odyssey*'s father-son plot has proven so fertile for writers engaging experiences of diaspora that echo the epic's emotional logic. As McConnell has observed, whereas Odysseus once dominated postcolonial receptions, 'works will continue to emerge in the coming years […] pursuing a route akin to [the] Telemachean perspective'.[7] This shift toward the son and thus toward the figure left behind reorients the *Odyssey* away from heroic return and toward the lived realities of generational displacement: the poem becomes not the story of a returning hero but of those whose lives are organized around waiting, imagining, and compensating for paternal absence, where the father no longer guarantees stability or home but instead marks a site of rupture around which identity must be continually renegotiated.

The reception history of the *Odyssey* across diasporas helps explain why this poem, rather than the *Aeneid*, stands at the centre of this dissertation. This choice is not because the *Aeneid* lacks a diasporic imagination (after all, Aeneas is permanently displaced and never returns home), but because the *Odyssey* makes the problem of familial reunion and likeness between father and son structurally and affectively central. In Virgil's epic, Aeneas has to deal with his grief for both his father and his wife alongside the imperative to protect his son. The family unit is thus split between what has been lost and left behind, and what promises a future yet to come: the deaths of Anchises and Creusa transform Aeneas' and Ascanius' displacement into a teleological narrative of imperial futurity, in which forward movement becomes not only necessary but inevitable. By contrast, the *Odyssey* centres on Odysseus' repeated efforts to

[7] McConnell (2013), 252.

reunite (and thus move back, not forward) with his father, wife, and son, while also lingering in a condition of diasporic instability that is never fully resolved into political foundation. Its narrative repeatedly stages the fragile work of recognition: father and son must reassemble resemblance across distance, loss, and time, and that resemblance is repeatedly tested, deferred, or mediated through others' perceptions. This difference shapes my rationale for privileging the *Odyssey* and its later receptions in my study. While Aeneas continues in his travels assured and secure in his lineage, the *Odyssey* focuses on the relational vulnerability of diaspora. The epic simile further mirrors this same labour of resemblance and recognition, showing likeness as contingent, provisional, and imaginative rather than guaranteed.

Ocean Vuong's use of the *Odyssey* in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* emerges from and extends this reception history. Vuong approaches Homer by inhabiting the Telemachean position, where the father is simultaneously absent, mythologised, feared, and yearned for. Vuong's relationship to the *Odyssey* is often mediated through simile: he does not retell the epic but uses comparison to signal his distance from (and partial belonging to) the classical tradition. In Vuong, then, simile becomes a diasporic technology: his analogies frequently hinge on the tension between presence and absence, gesture and disappearance. The emphasis on imagined or mis/remembered likeness employs similes as an important tool through which Odysseus and Telemachus can be made to resemble each other before they meet, making likeness reach across distance and through sites of relational speculation.

Likeness in fact carries a particular affective weight in the *Odyssey*: when a simile appears, it almost always actively shapes the emotional and relational landscape of the poem. Unlike the *Iliad*, where similes frequently serve to discuss experiences on the battlefield, the *Odyssey*'s similes often centre on individuals and their emotions (most notably Odysseus, but also Penelope, Telemachus, and the suitors). This shift from the collective to the personal mirrors

the poem's broader preoccupations: rather than immersing us in the chaos of war, the *Odyssey* explores themes of homecoming, recognition, and relational tension**.** Given this, the role of similes in shaping familial dynamics becomes even more crucial. When the *Odyssey* does employ similes, they frequently mediate between moments of connection and alienation, longing and recognition**,** underscoring the role of the simile as a tool for conceptualizing identity, belonging, and emotional resonance within the epic's intimate world of family bonds.

This scarcity of similes in the *Odyssey* therefore becomes especially evident when put side by side with the *Iliad*.[8] As Saïd says, 'it is well known that the *Odyssey* contains far fewer similes than the *Iliad* – the proportion is nearly 1/3 or 1/4. Moreover, whereas the developed similes (with a verb) are significantly more numerous than the short ones (without a verb expressed) in the *Iliad* (197 against 153), in the *Odyssey* the proportion is reversed (43 against 87)'.[9] Of these similes, most of them refer to Odysseus (26 of 43) and his emotional state.[10] The others are mostly divided between the suitors, Penelope, and Telemachus; and therefore also predominantly attributed to individual characters rather than groups. By contrast, as both Saïd and Beck have noted, similes in the *Iliad* are mostly attributed to collective entities: since the *Iliad* is a war poem, similes are often found on the battlefield, and often refer to the throng of soldiers on both sides of the conflict. According to Beck, 'the large number of similes in the *Iliad*, and in its battle scenes in particular, helps to create this universalizing tone […]. Battle scenes in the *Iliad* use similes to show the likenesses between Greek and Trojan warriors, creating a unity of "fighting men" even as each warrior burns with the desire to kill his enemies.

[8] Much has been written on Homeric similes in the Odyssey and elsewhere. For more comprehensive studies, see Fränkel (1921), Shipp (1953), Scott (1974), Moulton (1977), Nimis (1987), Scott (2009), Saïd (2011), and most recently Beck (2023). More contemporary comparative approaches to the Homeric similes can be found in Ready (2018) and Minchin (2001).
[9] Saïd (2011), 347.
[10] Beck (2023), 56. Nearly two-thirds of the similes in the *Odyssey* refer to Odysseus. Five different similes describe the suitors (4.335-9, 17.126-30, 22.299-301, 22.302-6, 22.384-8, 24.6-8); four describe Penelope (4.79102, 19.109-14, 19.205-7, 23.233-8); and three (16.17-19, 16.216-8, and 22.468-70) describe Telemachus.

No matter how heated the fighting becomes, the similes remind us of the commonalities that both sides share'.[11]

The universalizing tone mentioned by Beck is mostly missing in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus' travels are in fact focused on the many differences between places, people, customs. That the two poems employ the figure of the simile differently should then not be surprising: after all, while they are connected in storyline and characters, they are certainly different in their main themes and focus. Broadly speaking, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the use of similes serves distinct purposes, reflecting the thematic differences between the two epic poems. In the *Iliad*, similes often emphasize the brutal and primal nature of war. The similes frequently depict the warriors in battle, highlighting their ferocity and the gruesome realities of combat. They focus on the visceral and immediate aspects of warfare, contributing to the overall portrayal of the universal grandeur and sorrow of war. On the other hand, the *Odyssey* employs similes that emphasize more private relationships and connections.

Despite the differences, there are also commonalities in how the two epics employ simile. Animals and animal similes, in fact, play a prominent role in both poems. As we will see, in the *Iliad* animal similes often, if not always, present a predator/prey dynamic. In the *Odyssey*, such similes show a specific emphasis on families and interactions within the animal kingdom, and mostly refer to animal parents expressing grief for their young, drawing parallels to the familial bonds depicted between Odysseus and his immediate family. While this use of simile is prominent in the *Iliad* as well, it is somewhat overshadowed by the use of animal similes on the battlefield, emphasizing the relationships forged through war and portraying the brutal and bestial aspects of human conflict. The *Odyssey*, instead, more explicitly places familial relationships at the heart of the narrative, with Odysseus's journey back home

[11] Beck (2023), 62.

highlighting the emotional bonds between family members and the challenges faced in reuniting with loved ones.

The animal similes in each epic therefore contribute to their distinct thematic emphases, portraying the varied facets of human experience within the context of war and the journey home. As Beck notes, for example, 'the types of animal groups that are represented in the *Odyssey* both reflect and depict its interests in how human beings relate to each other'.[12] Many common animal similes present in the *Iliad* that bring together the human and the animal world, such as the figure of the shepherd caring for a flock or a herd,[13] as Beck explains, are mostly conspicuously absent in the *Odyssey*. To her, this is a sign that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* focus on different types of relationships. As she notes: [14]

> The tie between Odysseus and his comrades is the closest the *Odyssey* comes to the kind of mutually supportive hierarchical relationship described by shepherding similes in battle scenes in other epics, yet their bond is expressed in the simile world with animal families rather than a human who has the responsibility of caring for animals. In both the story and simile worlds, the most important emotional bonds in the *Odyssey* are found within the family, not among biologically unrelated comrades or social groups.

Beck's observation highlights how the *Odyssey*'s similes reveal a thematic concern with familial and intimate bonds rather than hierarchical or martial relationships. This difference in focus between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and in how they employ simile to describe collective entities or individuals and their private relationships is already reflected in the *Odyssey*'s very first simile (*Od*. 4.335-40):[15]

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[12] Beck (2023), 33.

[13] There are four similes with groups of domestic animals, all describing cows unless otherwise specified: *Od.* 6.130-4 (cows or sheep), *Od.* 10.216-17 (dogs, whose master is also mentioned), *Od.* 10.410-14, and *Od.* 22.299-301.

[14] Beck (2023), 33.

[15] 'As when a deer lays down two newborn fawns, | still sucklings, in the lair of some strong lion, | and goes to look for pasture, over slopes | and grassy valleys; when the lion comes back | to his own bed, he brings down doom on them— | so will Odysseus upon those men'. Text from Murray and translation from Wilson, unless stated otherwise.

ὡς δ᾽ ὁπότ᾽ ἐν ξυλόχωι ἔλαφος κρατεροῖο λέοντος
νεβροὺς κοιμήσασα νεηγενέας γαλαθηνοὺς
κνημοὺς ἐξερέηισι καὶ ἄγκεα ποιήεντα
βοσκομένη, ὁ δ᾽ ἔπειτα ἐὴν εἰσήλυθεν εὐνήν,
ἀμφοτέροισι δὲ τοῖσιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐφῆκεν,
ὣς Ὀδυσεὺς κείνοισιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐφήσει.

This simile appears as part of Menelaus's speech as he anticipates Odysseus's future retaliation against the suitors. Its later repetition when Telemachus reports his meeting with Menelaus to his mother (*Od*. 17.124-31) is especially significant, given the relatively small number of similes overall. In this simile, Odysseus is likened to a lion: [16] this positions him as the main threat and aggressors to the doe, who leaves her fawns vulnerable in the lion's den (εὐνήν, 4.338), an act that underscores the inherent risks of safeguarding family, even in this bizarre situation. As Heubeck notes, 'the situation is in itself incredible, since lions have a strong and distinctive odour, while deer are nervous creatures with an extremely keen sense of smell and an instinctive fear of lions'.[17] The image thus draws attention to the unnaturalness of the situation: the lion's den, like Odysseus's home, has been invaded by creatures who do not belong there, in a way that defies common sense and nature alike. The simile introduces not only the tension of an invaded space, but also the disturbing paradox of a protective act that endangers the very lives it seeks to safeguard. The doe, in seeking refuge, endangers her fawns by placing them in the heart of danger: this is an unsettling parallel to the state of Odysseus's household, where Penelope, in trying to maintain order and protect her family, must engage with the very suitors who threaten its future. The precariousness within Odysseus's home is thus mirrored in the simile's bizarre logic, presenting a distorted domestic arrangement that sets the stage for inevitable destruction. By aligning Odysseus with the lion, the simile conveys the suitors' doom while emphasizing their absurd and unnatural intrusion. As the first simile in

[16] Lions appear frequently in Homeric similes. See Schnapp-Gourbeillon (1981), Friedrich (1981). The lion symbolises strength, while the deer is often presented as its opposite (cf. *Il*. 11.113).
[17] Heubeck (1988), 213.

the *Odyssey*, it foreshadows the epic's central conflict: Odysseus's prolonged absence has disrupted the natural and political order of Ithaca, leaving Penelope in a paradoxical role where her attempts at preservation are themselves fraught with danger. The simile, then, encapsulates the twisted reality of the *Odyssey*'s domestic space, where protection, invasion, and destruction all blur together in unsettling ways.

The central focus of the *Odyssey*, encompassing all its plots and diverse elements, therefore revolves around the hero's reconnection with his family and the just retribution for the suitors' overtaking of Ithaca. This theme of reunion is crucial, as it underscores the hierarchies within the family and the societal implications of Odysseus's return. The imagery in the simile captures not just the imminent threat posed by Odysseus but also the deep-seated familial bonds that motivate his actions, as well as his inevitable reclaiming of the island. The narrative emphasizes that reclaiming his home is not merely a matter of restoring order but of re-establishing familial hierarchies that have been disrupted by the suitors: each of Odysseus' familial relationships, as well as the ones with the men under his command both on the way to Ithaca and while there, shape his journey, his heroism, and the direction of his narrative. The simile therefore encapsulates the duality of Odysseus's role: he is both a fierce protector of his family and a formidable force against those who threaten it. This interplay between familial relationships and the struggle for power highlights the *Odyssey*'s thematic focus, tied to family, community, and identity. Yet this focus on reunion also exposes the fragility of home itself, foregrounding how migration and prolonged absence reshape the very structures that Odysseus seeks to reclaim. The poem's logic of return is inseparable from displacement: home becomes something that must be reconstituted after estrangement, rather than simply restored. Similes, in this sense, reveal how recognition and belonging must be renegotiated after long-term migration.

In what follows, then, I argue that simile functions as a model for diasporic relationality: a linguistic way of rendering connection possible when bodies are apart, when identities are unstable, and when recognition is uncertain. It is precisely this diasporic function of simile that enables the epic to resonate so strongly with postcolonial and queer writers, thanks to its ability to sustain connection in the absence of identity. By foregrounding this diasporic logic of simile, the following sections of the chapter will examine how specific Homeric comparisons construct, strain, and reimagine familial relationships. I will show how the *Odyssey*'s similes articulate the instability of father-son bonds, the vulnerability of home, and the tension between recognition and estrangement. These dynamics illuminate not only the ancient text but also its contemporary receptions, demonstrating how the simile continues to serve as a linguistic and affective bridge across time, space, and difference. I will also examine what kind of insight similes in the *Odyssey* can give us about familial relationships and inter-personal struggles in the epic. In particular, in the next section, I aim to show how, in the *Odyssey*, lion similes as well as what Foley defines as 'reverse similes' not only place importance on familial relationship, but also often appear to bring forth a subversion of traditional gender roles. [18] This assessment is fundamental for my later analysis of Telemachus' and Odysseus' relationship, which is also shaped by Odysseus' role as patriarch. While it would be going too far to say that similes in the *Odyssey* queer the concept of family, they certainly advance an important discussion on roles within the familial unit, opening up valuable avenues for reimagining and re-evaluating the concept of family itself.

Odysseus' Tears and Reverse Similes

Before delving into how similes can disrupt familial and parental relationships in the *Odyssey* it is first important to look at how similes in the poem comment on gender more broadly, as

[18] Foley (1978).

the familial unit in the text does rely on a gendered division of roles and responsibilities. In this section, I will examine how similes in the *Odyssey* comment on and complicate gender roles, reflecting the ways in which the familial unit is deeply intertwined with gendered divisions of labour and responsibility. Similes can often serve to reinforce traditional gender roles by aligning characters with archetypal images of masculinity and femininity; and yet, similes also often introduce a level of ambiguity, that tease out, if only for a moment, other possible expressions of masculine and feminine portrayals. These moments of subtle ambiguity reveal how similes can simultaneously uphold and challenge societal norms, offering space for rethinking gendered behaviour even as they often reassert conventional expectations.[19] This duality is a recurring feature of the *Odyssey's* similes: they provide glimpses into more nuanced gender dynamics but ultimately tend to realign characters within the established order. By blurring the lines between rigid gender roles and opening the door to alternative readings, similes in the *Odyssey* emerge as a complex narrative device that reflect on gender norms within the epic's broader exploration of familial relationships. At the same time, these gendered negotiations cannot be separated from the poem's broader preoccupation with displacement: the strains placed on household structures are produced by Odysseus' long absence and the instability it generates. Moments of gendered ambiguity in similes thus register the pressures that migration exerts on the very categories that sustain the *oikos*.

As already mentioned in previous chapters, this feature of the simile in the *Odyssey* has already been noted in Foley's seminal essay "'Reverse Similes' and Sex Roles in the *Odyssey*" (1978). Here, she analyses how some similes in the text compare a man to a woman, or vice versa. [20] As she says, 'these "reverse similes" [….] seem to suggest both a sense of identity

[19] Ambiguity and indeterminacy in the *Odyssey* has been noted by many critics, such as Peradotto (1990), Felson (1994), Katz (1991), and Van Nortwick (2009).
[20] *Od*. 19.108-14, *Od*. 8.523-31. Foley also comments on similes that more widely evoke an inversion of social roles, such as *Od*. 23.233-40, *Od*. 5.394-8, and *Od*. 16.216-8.

between people in different social and sexual roles and a loss of stability, an inversion of the normal' within the context of epic.[21] 'Why are there so many similes with this consistent change of perspective or reversal of social role in the comparison in particular, what is the meaning of the elaborate images of sexual inversion? How do these reverse-sex similes clarify the overall structure and meaning of the relations between man and wife?',[22] she asks. To her, such similes, particularly because they refer to Odysseus and Penelope, indicate a like-mindedness between the two (which is, to Foley, connected to the lack of contradiction in the poem between the household and the state), and also point at Odysseus' growing sense of sexual desire and emotional connection to Penelope. Foley further notes that these similes do not serve as a critique of so-called male and female roles, but rather point at a particular set of relations between Odysseus and his wife. In this section, I will therefore analyse how such particular relations open the door for further exploration and destabilisation of gender roles, while also re-affirming their value in the text.

One of Foley's main examples is the description of Odysseus at Alcinous' palace, while hearing the story of the sack of Troy as narrated by the poet Demodocus. Here, Odysseus' tears listening to Demodocus' song are compared to those of a woman weeping for her husband (*Od*. 8.523-31):[23]

> ὡς δὲ γυνὴ κλαίησι φίλον πόσιν ἀμφιπεσοῦσα,
> ὅς τε ἑῆς πρόσθεν πόλιος λαῶν τε πέσησιν,
> ἄστεϊ καὶ τεκέεσσιν ἀμύνων νηλεὲς ἦμαρ·
> ἡ μὲν τὸν θνήσκοντα καὶ ἀσπαίροντα ἰδοῦσα
> ἀμφ᾽ αὐτῷι χυμένη λίγα κωκύει· οἱ δέ τ᾽ ὄπισθε
> κόπτοντες δούρεσσι μετάφρενον ἠδὲ καὶ ὤμους
> εἴρερον εἰσανάγουσι, πόνον τ᾽ ἐχέμεν καὶ ὀιζύν·
> τῆς δ᾽ ἐλεεινοτάτωι ἄχεϊ φθινύθουσι παρειαί·

[21] Foley (1978), 8.
[22] Foley (1978), 8.
[23] 'Odysseus was melting into tears; | his cheeks were wet with weeping, as a woman | weeps, as she falls to wrap her arms around | her husband, fallen fighting for his home | and children. She is watching as he gasps | and dies. She shrieks, a clear high wail, collapsing | upon his corpse. The men are right behind. | They hit her shoulders with their spears and lead her | to slavery, hard labour, and a life of pain. | Her face is marked with her despair. | In that same desperate way, Odysseus | was crying'.

ὣς Ὀδυσεὺς ἐλεεινὸν ὑπ᾽ ὀφρύσι δάκρυον εἶβεν.

As de Jong notes, 'in addition to illustrating Odysseus' assessment of what the war has brought him, the simile may also be taken to reflect his perception of the Trojan victims, and of the sorrows which [Odysseus], as the man who defeated them, has brought them'.[24] Yet the simile does not simply explicate Odysseus' feelings of bereavement. By aligning Odysseus with a woman in such a vulnerable position, the simile not only subverts conventional masculinity but also comments on the emotional and relational upheavals experienced when key protective bonds are severed, as her husband and protector of her very self, her children, and her household falls in battle (ὡς δὲ γυνὴ κλαίῃσι φίλον πόσιν ἀμφιπεσοῦσα | ὅς τε ἑῆς πρόσθεν πόλιος λαῶν τε πέσῃσιν, 8.523-4). In comparing Odysseus to a woman grieving the loss of the protective relationship with her husband and children, the simile goes beyond merely humanizing him through tears, and underscores the gravity of losing familial and social security.[25] This moment therefore reflects not just personal sorrow but the broader loss of stability and security for the woman, a parallel to Odysseus' displacement from his home and family. As Foley notes, this comparison 'perhaps suggests how close Odysseus has come in the course of his travels, and in particular on Calypso's island, to the complete loss of normal social and emotional function which is the due of women enslaved in war'.[26] The simile, then, highlights Odysseus' growing recognition of the emotional and protective relationships that have been disrupted by his long absence. As a reverse simile, it thus serves as a narrative tool that destabilizes traditional gender roles, if only for a moment, while reinforcing the importance of familial bonds in the *Odyssey*, offering a lens through which to examine the hero's journey,

[24] De Jong (2001), 217.
[25] As Heubeck (1988) comments, while such moments of weeping and pathos can be found across both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, this simile stands out in its amplification of this moment. As he notes, 'most pathetic moments arise from the play of conventional moments and are made inconspicuous by the speed of narrative' (381). Here, instead, Odysseus' emotions and tears become the central moment of the narrative.
[26] Foley (1978), 20.

his relationship with Penelope, and his relationship with his household in a more emotional and empathetic way. This moment also demonstrates how displacement reshapes emotional expression: Odysseus' exile strips him of the protective frameworks of the *oikos*, rendering him vulnerable in ways that allow traditionally feminine emotional scripts to surface. In this sense, the simile does not merely invert gender roles but shows how migration itself unsettles the emotional hierarchies that structure those roles.

While this simile has the potential to open a wider door to destabilizing and rethinking gender roles, this potential remains largely unexplored within the epic itself. The simile can be read as hinting at a broader commentary on gendered expressions of emotions and feelings (such as grief, protection, and emotional exposure) that never fully materializes in the *Odyssey*'s broader narrative. The poem tends to return characters to their conventional roles, particularly in terms of the household and social order, and never fully embraces the possibility of radically redefining gender norms. Yet, the very existence of these moments of inversion suggests an underlying tension in the text, where the boundaries of masculinity and femininity are subtly disturbed, even if the opportunity to fully destabilize these roles is left unrealized.

A similar example is presented in one of the similes comparing Odysseus to a lion, as he presents himself to Nausicaa (*Od*. 6.130-6):[27]

> βῆ δ᾽ ἴμεν ὥς τε λέων ὀρεσίτροφος ἀλκὶ πεποιθώς,
> ὅς τ᾽ εἶσ᾽ ὑόμενος καὶ ἀήμενος, ἐν δέ οἱ ὄσσε
> δαίεται· αὐτὰρ ὁ βουσὶ μετέρχεται ἢ ὀίεσσιν
> ἠὲ μετ᾽ ἀγροτέρας ἐλάφους· κέλεται δέ ἑ γαστὴρ
> μήλων πειρήσοντα καὶ ἐς πυκινὸν δόμον ἐλθεῖν·
> ὣς Ὀδυσεὺς κούρῃσιν ἐυπλοκάμοισιν ἔμελλε
> μίξεσθαι, γυμνός περ ἐών· χρειὼ γὰρ ἵκανε.

[27] 'Just as a mountain lion trusts its strength | and beaten by the rain and wind, its eyes | burn bright as it attacks the cows or sheep, | or wild deer, and hunger drives it on | to try the sturdy pens of sheep - so need | impelled Odysseus to come upon | the girls with pretty hair, though he was naked'.

The simile comparing Odysseus to a mountain lion may serve as an ostensible depiction of masculinity and apparent strength, but it also reveals a deeper layer of vulnerability and desperation: it is not by accident that this passage has been read as ludicrous in its transference of heroic qualities to an unusual situation, affected, or even mocking.[28] The scholarly attention to the perceived oddness of this simile is telling. Here, the lion unsettles the clear image of masculine heroism, rather than reinforcing it. The fact that a comparison traditionally associated with power and dominance should instead evoke weakness and necessity suggests an inherent tension in how Odysseus is framed in this moment. The simile therefore resists a straightforward reading of heroism: as Heubeck notes, 'the point of the simile is seen principally in χρειώ (need, 6.136)'.[29] The image of the lion 'beaten by the rain and wind' (ὑόμενος καὶ ἀήμενος, 6.131) emphasizes its weakened state, and the sheer necessity and urgency of Odysseus's situation. While the lion's instinct may drive it to attack prey, Odysseus's perceived attack is motivated by securing basic survival. The lion, battered by wind and rain, is driven by hunger to approach its prey, which parallels Odysseus's plight as he approaches Nausicaa and her companions naked and in need of protection, clothing, and food. This comparison, while seemingly highlighting Odysseus's strength through the familiar comparison to a predator, therefore mostly conveys his desperation and the precariousness of his situation.

The simile, then, subtly plays on the tension between Odysseus's strength and his vulnerability, his masculinity and his need for help, which he seeks from the young girls in front of him (κούρῃσιν ἐυπλοκάμοισιν, 6.135). He must approach the young maidens with care, balancing his need for help with the potential threat he represents as a powerful and unknown

[28] Shipp (1972) finds this simile almost ridiculous in its use of a heroic animal to comment on Odysseus' pathetic appearance (220), while Marzullo (1971) believes that the passage is exaggerated in its attempt to inspire compassion. Garvie (1994) finds the tone 'mock-heroic' and purposefully ironic (116).
[29] Heubeck (1988), 302.

man. While the text hints at an underlying sexual tension (the lion's pursuit could be metaphorically linked to conquest),[30] the primary focus of the simile is on Odysseus' need for help. Through a comparison often used to signify strength, what is displayed instead is Odysseus' vulnerability. Yet his masculinity is still on full display, through his nudity and desire to mingle (μίξεσθαι, 6.136), which gives a sexual tone to the scene. The simile, then, strikes a balance between the possibility of re-thinking Odysseus' strength through his vulnerability, and still maintains his masculine status through the implication of a sexual threat. This is again exemplary of a wider trend in the *Odyssey*'s similes: they leave enough ambiguity that they could be read as potentially re-thinking gender roles, and yet they re-impose those roles at the same time. This tension is also inseparable from Odysseus' condition as a displaced figure whose authority has been suspended by his wandering: his masculinity, usually anchored in status, lineage, and household mastery, becomes contingent and performative in exile, making the lion simile a reflection of how migration exposes the instability of his self-presentation.

Other similes likewise comment on Odysseus' heroic masculinity and performance. In particular, in Book 22 Odysseus' masculinity is reaffirmed while also being discussed as performative within wider social constructions. This is the case in the final fight between Odysseus and the suitors (*Od*. 22.299-308):[31]

[30] There are other elements of the overall encounter which can be read as presenting Odysseus as a sexual threat. As Karakantza (2003) notes, 'physically, he can be compared to a menacing god rising from the waters of the sea; his total nakedness, with only a branch to cover his genitalia, points to one of those lustful creatures of the wild who endanger young girls. Upon seeing him the young girls, with the exception of Nausikaa, flee in terror. This is a classic topos of scenes of rape in iconography and literature' (2003, 11). To her, 'there is nothing passive about the lion of the simile which, with determination, driven by desperation, is likely to ravage any livestock it encounters' (19-20). More on Odysseus' and Nausicaa' first encounter can be found in Vallille (1955), Woodhouse (1969), Lattimore (1969), Forsyth (1979).

[31] 'The frightened suitors bolted through the hall | like cattle, roused and driven by a gadfly | in springtime, when the days are getting longer. | As vultures with their crooked beaks and talons | swoop from the hills and pounce on smaller birds | that fly across the fields beneath the clouds; | the victims have no help and no way out, | as their attackers slaughter them, and men | watch and enjoy the violence. So these | four fighters sprang and struck, and drove the suitors | in all directions'.

οἱ δ᾽ ἐφέβοντο κατὰ μέγαρον βόες ὣς ἀγελαῖαι·
τὰς μέν τ᾽ αἰόλος οἶστρος ἐφορμηθεὶς ἐδόνησεν
ὥρηι ἐν εἰαρινῆι, ὅτε τ᾽ ἤματα μακρὰ πέλονται.
οἱ δ᾽ ὥς τ᾽ αἰγυπιοὶ γαμψώνυχες ἀγκυλοχεῖλαι,
ἐξ ὀρέων ἐλθόντες ἐπ᾽ ὀρνίθεσσι θόρωσι·
ταὶ μέν τ᾽ ἐν πεδίωι νέφεα πτώσσουσαι ἵενται,
οἱ δέ τε τὰς ὀλέκουσιν ἐπάλμενοι, οὐδέ τις ἀλκὴ
γίγνεται οὐδὲ φυγή· χαίρουσι δέ τ᾽ ἀνέρες ἄγρηι·
ὣς ἄρα τοὶ μνηστῆρας ἐπεσσύμενοι κατὰ δῶμα
τύπτον ἐπιστροφάδην· τῶν δὲ στόνος ὤρνυτ᾽ ἀεικὴς
κράτων τυπτομένων, δάπεδον δ᾽ ἅπαν αἵματι θῦε.

Here, in the final battle between Odysseus and the suitors, the simile once again reinforces a prey/predator dynamic, but with notable shifts and layers that complicate the straightforward reaffirmation of Odysseus' masculinity.[32] Odysseus and his allies are likened to vultures (αἰγυπιοὶ γαμψώνυχες, 22.232), a group of hook-beaked birds descending upon defenceless prey. The shift from Odysseus as a single, lone figure to a collective force of predators is significant, suggesting that Odysseus' victory is not purely an individual feat of masculine prowess but a coordinated group effort. Further to Odysseus and his men against the suitors, the simile considers yet another group of men, those watching the spectacle with enjoyment (χαίρουσι δέ τ᾽ ἀνέρες ἄγρῃ, 22.305). These spectators, who take pleasure in the violent subjugation of the suitors, further complicate the scene by reinforcing a social context where masculinity is affirmed through the collective appreciation of bloodshed. The men's enjoyment highlights the cultural reinforcement of power through violence, and the spectacle itself becomes a performance of traditional masculine strength. The inclusion of this group as onlookers, however, creates a sense of shared, communal masculinity that goes beyond the individual heroism of Odysseus, suggesting that the societal gaze both shapes and validates these gendered performances. In this sense, the simile operates on multiple levels: it reaffirms

[32] As de Jong (2001) notes, this is the 'only instance of the successive simile technique in the Odyssey', where the 'combination of similes' marks this moment as important (537).

Odysseus' masculine dominance, aligns him and his group with predatory birds, and underscores the collective reinforcement of gender norms through the spectators' approval. But this reassertion of masculine dominance also marks the end of a long period in which Odysseus' exile has disrupted the social structures that support masculine power. His return from displacement is thus staged as a restoration not only of order but of gendered hierarchy, revealing how the gendered foundations of the *oikos* have been disrupted. Odysseus is not the lone, invincible hero but part of a larger, collective effort: the violent spectacle suggests that masculinity, here, is as much about public approval and shared violence as it is about individual prowess. The simile then both upholds and complicates traditional gender roles, offering glimpses of a more complex, socially reinforced model of masculinity that requires both action and communal validation.

Odysseus' role of the archetypal male hero, occasionally exhibiting emotional responses that challenge conventional depictions of masculinity in epic literature, is also reinforced through the use of simile when it comes to Penelope. Exemplary is the simile in Book 4 where it is now Penelope who is compared to a lion. Here, Penelope is seemingly positioned, by way of the lion comparison, on the same plane as Odysseus, also compared to a lion (*Od*. 6.130-6): the hierarchy between a husband and his wife is seemingly forgotten and their affinity and similarity are emphasised. Yet, this simile simultaneously reminds us of Penelope's actual role and precarious situation within the household as a woman and wife (*Od.* 4.790-3):[33]

> ὅσσα δὲ μερμήριξε λέων ἀνδρῶν ἐν ὁμίλωι
> δείσας, ὁππότε μιν δόλιον περὶ κύκλον ἄγωσι,
> τόσσα μιν ὁρμαίνουσαν ἐπήλυθε νήδυμος ὕπνος·
> εὗδε δ᾽ ἀνακλινθεῖσα, λύθεν δέ οἱ ἄψεα πάντα.

[33] 'Her mind was like a lion, caught by humans, | when they are clustering round him in a circle, | trying to trap him; so sweet drowsiness | subdued her and she slept, her limbs relaxed.'

The simile captures how the hero's exile also affects those left behind, whose gendered positions become newly vulnerable. Penelope's anxious mind is likened to a lion surrounded by a circle of hunters. The comparison to the lion, as an animal characterised by strength and vigilance, mirrors Penelope's mental state, filled with tension and alertness as she contemplates her precarious situation among the suitors. Penelope's mind is restless (μερμήριξε, 4.791), much like a lion fearing an attack and trapped in a dangerous, confining situation. As the lion succumbs to the hunters, Penelope is eventually overwhelmed by exhaustion: the description of her sweet sleep (νήδυμος ὕπνος, 4.792), offering a moment of relaxation for Penelope, provides a moment of relief as she finally relaxes and lets go of her anxieties, contrasting with the lion's imminent defeat at the hand of the hunters. Scholars have pointed out the connection between this simile and Odysseus' lion simile at *Od*. 6.130-6,[34] noting that lion similes 'are normally reserved for men'.[35] Saïd further notes that 'it is striking that Penelope should receive a lion-simile usually reserved for men in martial context. Indeed, it is accurate to link it to the use of lion-similes for Odysseus and point out […] that it creates a symmetry between husband and wife. However such an explanation fails to take into account the oddity of this pondering lion, since Penelope's deliberation […] does not lead to any decision'.[36]

The simile therefore seemingly juxtaposes a traditionally masculine symbol of strength with a moment of feminine vulnerability. Penelope's depiction as a lion briefly aligns her with the male heroism usually embodied by Odysseus, blurring the lines between gendered expressions of power. Yet what is highlighted in the simile is the lion's fear when encircled by hunters, paralleling Penelope's own situation, surrounded by the suitors' persistent threats. While the comparison to a lion gestures towards masculine heroism, Penelope's mental state and her eventual repose re-affirm instead her fear and vulnerable position amongst the suitors.

[34] Podlecki (1971), 84; Moulton (1977), 123; Magrath (1982), 207.
[35] Heubeck (1988), 242.
[36] Saïd (2011), 365.

This tension underscores the complexity of gender roles in the *Odyssey's* similes: they offer moments that destabilize traditional categories of masculine and feminine, yet ultimately return characters to their expected social roles, reinforcing the poem's broader exploration of the intersections between gender and familial duties. The *Odyssey*'s similes thus trace how displacement unsettles the social scripts of the household before ultimately reabsorbing them, showing how displacement can be the narrative pressure point that makes gender trouble possible and/or visible, even if temporarily.

The juxtaposition of similes about Odysseus' and Penelope's roles and emotional states in the *Odyssey* thus creates a nuanced exploration of familial and marital dynamics, while seemingly (and yet ultimately not) challenging traditional gender roles. By doing so, the simile opens a door, if only briefly, to rethinking gender roles: however, this potential to fully destabilize gender norms remains largely unexplored in the epic, as Odysseus and Penelope eventually return to their conventional roles within the household and social order. Through reverse similes, both Odysseus and Penelope seem to briefly transcend their prescribed roles, but the text ultimately stops short of fully dismantling these gender boundaries. Their shared experiences of vulnerability and strength reinforce their like-mindedness and the emotional depth of their marital bond. The *Odyssey* therefore hints at a potential rethinking of gender roles through these similes, but it never fully realizes this destabilization. Instead, the poem reaffirms the importance of traditional familial roles, while allowing for brief moments of ambiguity and complexity: the simile thus continues to offer moments that allow for a more nuanced view of gender and familial relationships, reflecting the text's tension between upholding societal norms and quietly subverting them.

Similes and Parental Relationships

Having analysed how similes in the *Odyssey* subtly re-instate and readdress gender roles, I now turn to explore how these same mechanisms shape and complicate familial relationships, particularly within the nuclear family unit. Just as similes navigate the boundaries of gendered identities, they also influence how the family is portrayed, revealing tensions between societal expectations of duty, loyalty, and hierarchy. The father-son dynamic between Odysseus and Telemachus in particular is emblematic of this complexity. While the *Odyssey* often presents the family as a stable foundation for legacy and continuity, similes offer moments of ambiguity, where familial bonds are tested and reframed, especially against the weight of patriarchal authority and filial duty.

Much like the way similes address the fluidity of gender roles, they similarly open the door to rethinking paternal relationships, yet this potential is often left unrealized as the epic ultimately returns to more conventional portrayals of family structure. The ambiguity in how similes relate to masculinity, violence, and paternal affection has been noted by other scholars. As Pavlidis says:[37]

> Similes […] show two opposite aspects of Odysseus' character. First, some of the similes reflect Odysseus' exceptionally kind personality and his loving care and intimacy towards his companions, his relatives and his close friends. These similes also show that this loving care and intimacy is mutual, corresponding to the image each of them has formed about Odysseus as a relative or friend. […] Some of the other similes, contrary to the afore-mentioned similes, portray Odysseus as a violent and merciless man, who feels hostility against his enemies, namely the Cyclops, the Suitors and the maid servants.

I want to explore this tension further, moving from how Odysseus occupies these different roles within various similes, to how dualities of his character as head of the household manifest within a single simile, reflecting the complexity of paternal identities in the epic. By focusing

[37] Pavlidis (1985), 47.

on this, I aim to uncover how similes are employed in the *Odyssey* to reflect on father-son relationships in particular, and to expose the broader complexities of fatherhood in the epic, where paternal affection is often tied to the protection of one's household and thus to a degree of violence and power. As I will show, Telemachus' relationship with not just Odysseus but other paternal figures in the text show a potential for reimaging such patriarchal relations, while re-instating normative dynamics at the same time. These oscillations between stability and disruption mirror the broader diasporic logic of the poem, where the experience of migration repeatedly unsettles the foundations of familial authority before pushing the narrative back toward restoration.

In Odysseus' interactions with Telemachus, emotional expression is closely bound to the reassertion of paternal authority. The similes that frame their reunion suggest not just affection or relief, but a complex negotiation of power, vulnerability, and recognition after a long absence. The emotional charge of the simile does not so much destabilize patriarchal hierarchy as briefly expose its underlying tensions: the difficulty of reconciling vulnerability with authority, and the awkward fit between emotional reunion and the resumption of control. As with gender roles elsewhere in the *Odyssey*, the poem allows a fleeting glimpse of instability of a relationship shaped as much by absence and fragility as by structure, but ultimately reaffirms traditional hierarchies. The emotional weight of the simile is not opposed to patriarchal restoration; rather, it functions as part of it, helping to re-secure bonds of loyalty and identity at the very moment they seem most at risk. This tension reflects a broader truth of the Odyssey: migration produces emotional structures that must later be disciplined back into

the hierarchies disrupted by displacement. The simile here in question occurs when Odysseus and Telemachus are reunited after years of separation (*Od*. 16.215-9):[38]

> ἀμφοτέροισι δὲ τοῖσιν ὑφ᾽ ἵμερος ὦρτο γόοιο·
> κλαῖον δὲ λιγέως, ἀδινώτερον ἤ τ᾽ οἰωνοί,
> φῆναι ἢ αἰγυπιοὶ γαμψώνυχες, οἷσί τε τέκνα
> ἀγρόται ἐξείλοντο πάρος πετεηνὰ γενέσθαι·
> ὣς ἄρα τοί γ᾽ ἐλεεινὸν ὑπ᾽ ὀφρύσι δάκρυον εἶβον.

This simile compares their reunion to vultures (αἰγυπιοὶ γαμψώνυχες, 16.217) whose fledglings have been taken by farmers before they could fly. The emotional intensity shared by father and son, expressed through their weeping, defies the usual expectations of hierarchical, patriarchal roles by blurring generational boundaries, as the roles of Odysseus and Telemachus seem to collapse into one another: are they both the mourning parent birds, or a parent and chick grieving in unison? The ambiguity unsettles the clear hierarchical division between father and son, suggesting a momentary dissolution of authority into mutual vulnerability and loss. This moment of shared lamentation underscores the emotional consequences of Odysseus' migratory absence: both father and son inhabit the same position of grief precisely because displacement has levelled their experiences of loss. This lamentation further finds an echo in Odysseus' meeting with Penelope, where she mourns the fact that the gods decided to not let them enjoy their youth together:[39] likewise, as de Jong notes, the image of the mourning vultures implies how 'father and son presumably deplore the years of separation, during which Telemachus grew up virtually an orphan, and Odysseus was deprived of the joy of seeing his child grow up'.[40] This levelling of the father-son dynamic suggests a familial narrative where the patriarch's time away from home has impacted the entire household in similar affective

[38] 'They both felt deep desire for lamentation, | and wailed with cries as shrill as birds, like eagles | or vultures, when the hunters have deprived them | of fledglings who have not yet learned to fly. | That was how bitterly they wept.'
[39] *Od*. 23.210-2.
[40] de Jong (2001), 397.

ways: by equating them with the same grieving animals, the simile underscores an emotional egalitarianism, where father and son are portrayed as equals in their shared sorrow, blurring the lines of their respective positions in the family.

Grief and sorrow take on a similar value in *Il.* 24.468-561, when Priam and Achilles weep together. Priam begs Achilles to think of his own father when asking for Hector's body, repeating the invocation multiple times: μνῆσαι πατρὸς σοῖο θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ᾽ Ἀχιλλεῦ | τηλίκου ὥς περ ἐγών (24.486-7), μνησάμενος σοῦ πατρός (24.504).[41] Priam's repeated plea is then not simply a request for mercy but an appeal to a shared experience of filial devotion and inevitable loss. Achilles, moved by these words, finds himself drawn into the moment through his own connection to Peleus. Achilles' personal grief, which has been largely channelled into rage, momentarily transforms into an experience of shared lamentation (*Il.* 24.509-12):[42]

> τὼ δὲ μνησαμένω ὁ μὲν Ἕκτορος ἀνδροφόνοιο
> κλαῖ᾽ ἀδινὰ προπάροιθε ποδῶν Ἀχιλῆος ἐλυσθείς,
> αὐτὰρ Ἀχιλλεὺς κλαῖεν ἑὸν πατέρ᾽, ἄλλοτε δ᾽ αὖτε
> Πάτροκλον· τῶν δὲ στοναχὴ κατὰ δώματ᾽ ὀρώρει.

In this scene, grief functions as an emotional force that temporarily dissolves battlefield divisions, much like how Odysseus' and Telemachus' reunion in Book 16 of the *Odyssey* momentarily destabilizes patriarchal hierarchies. Yet, just as the weeping of Odysseus and Telemachus ultimately reinforces their respective roles within the household, the interaction between Priam and Achilles does not dismantle the broader structures of warfare. The scene can only gestures toward elective affinities: Achilles, in mourning alongside Priam, briefly assumes the role of a son to him, despite being responsible for his suffering. However, this moment of affective kinship is overshadowed by the spectre of death, as Achilles' fate is sealed,

[41] 'Godlike Achilles, think of your own father, who is as old as I am', 'remembering your own father'.
[42] 'Curled in a ball beside Achille's feet | Priam sobbed desperately for murderous Hector. | Achilles wept, at times for his own father | and sometimes for Patroclous. So their wailing | suffused the house'.

and Troy's fall is imminent. Priam's mourning for Hector mirrors Peleus' future grief for Achilles, creating a cyclical pattern of paternal loss that Achilles himself recognizes The passage thus acknowledges the potential for emotional connection across enemy lines, but only within the tragic framework of loss and impermanence. Just as the vulture simile in *Od.* 16.215-19 suggests an egalitarian emotional experience between Odysseus and Telemachus before reasserting traditional familial structures, the meeting of Priam and Achilles presents a brief, fragile moment of recognition before reaffirming the inevitability of the violence and hierarchy brought on by warfare.

In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, therefore, shared sorrow serves as a means of emotional connection, yet ultimately reinforces the structures it momentarily disrupts. Odysseus' and Telemachus' fleeting moment of equality does not serve as a direct critique of familial hierarchies, but instead reflects the particular relational dynamics within the family at a moment of transition. While the simile introduces an egalitarian element into the father-son relationship, it simultaneously reinforces the importance of familial bonds and the eventual reintegration of traditional structures. Telemachus' maturity is now undeniable: he is no longer a child, and the emotional intensity of the reunion marks him as his father's equal in experience and feeling. Yet this equality does not dismantle hierarchy; rather, it draws attention to the tension that arises from Odysseus' return at a point when Telemachus might otherwise assume control. Their reunion marks the beginning of Odysseus' reestablishment as head of the household, and Telemachus takes his place as his grown son, but still within the familial hierarchy. The shared grief, expressed through the image of the vultures, highlights their mutual suffering and vulnerability, yet it also underscores the inevitability of their roles being reinstated.

The simile also carries undertones of violence and scavenging, qualities often associated with the vulture, and thus hints at the indiscriminate violence to come, particularly

as Odysseus and Telemachus prepare to take revenge on the suitors. The birds' shrieking due to the loss they have experienced foreshadows the brutal reassertion of Odysseus' authority and the death it will carry, as confirmed by *Od*. 22.299-308, where Odysseus and his allies slaughtering the suitors are also compared to vultures, this time highlighting their macabre nature. The unsettling of generational roles reflects a broader instability in the household: Odysseus has returned, but his authority is not yet fully reinstated; Telemachus, meanwhile, has begun to inhabit the responsibilities of adulthood in his father's absence. The comparison to vultures grieving captures this liminal state, where familial roles momentarily blur and vulnerability is shared across generations: in its liminality, the vulture simile thus marks the threshold between displacement and homecoming, a space where familial identities are pliable before being disciplined back into order.

This emotional reciprocity is not directionless. Rather, it marks a turning point in Telemachus' development. As Valle Salazar says:[43]

> Indeed, Telemachus' education will proceed in a traditional Greek manner, that is, through the observation of exempla. He will have different kinds of examples: his own peers (Orestes and Nestor's son, Peisistratus), his father's comrades-in-arms (Nestor and Menelaus), and ultimately his own father, from the tales he will listen to. In this way, Telemachus will build his own personality in compliance with the model of a heroic basileus, and particularly his identity will come to match his father's.

This model of education through imitation highlights the *Odyssey*'s narrative of generational continuity: Telemachus is not only shaped by his exposure to these figures but is guided into an identity that is constructed by an inherited masculine ideal. In this context, the emotional parity suggested by the simile does not challenge the authority of Odysseus, but rather prepares the ground for its reinstitution, highlighting Odysseus' influence over the household. Odysseus' and Telemachus' shared grief becomes a rite of passage in which Telemachus'

[43] Valle Salazar (2023), 297.

emotional depth affirms his maturity and eligibility to stand alongside his father, not against him.

Yet while the reunion between Odysseus and Telemachus reinforces the primacy of the biological father-son bond, the *Odyssey* also complicates this model in subtle but significant ways. At various points, the poem gestures toward a broader conception of paternal relationships, expanding them beyond biological kinship. Let's for example look at the simile when Telemachus is greeted by Eumaeus in his hut (*Od*. 16.15-19):[44]

> ὡς δὲ πατὴρ ὃν παῖδα φίλα φρονέων ἀγαπάζηι
> ἐλθόντ᾽ ἐξ ἀπίης γαίης δεκάτωι ἐνιαυτῶι,
> μοῦνον τηλύγετον, τῶι ἔπ᾽ ἄλγεα πολλὰ μογήσηι,
> ὣς τότε Τηλέμαχον θεοειδέα δῖος ὑφορβὸς
> πάντα κύσεν περιφύς, ὡς ἐκ θανάτοιο φυγόντα·

In this simile, Eumaeus' greeting of Telemachus is likened to a father welcoming a dear son who has returned after many years of hardship.[45] The simile creates a parallel between the biological father-son bond and the emotional closeness between Telemachus and Eumaeus, suggesting that familial relationships in the *Odyssey* extend beyond mere blood ties and into chosen affinities. The description of Eumaeus embracing Telemachus as a father who cherishes his son (ὡς δὲ πατὴρ ὃν παῖδα φίλα φρονέων, 16.215) is here significant, as it highlights the deep affection Eumaeus holds for Telemachus, portraying him as a surrogate father figure in Odysseus' absence. The depiction of Telemachus as a vulnerable child being cherished by Eumaeus complicates understandings of fatherhood and challenges conventional hierarchies within the household, precisely because displacement has created space for alternative paternal

[44] 'Just as a father, when he sees | his own dear son, his only son, his dear | most precious boy, returned from foreign lands | after ten years of grieving for his loss, | welcomes him; so the swineherd wrapped his arms | around godlike Telemachus and kissed him, | as if he were returning from the dead.'

[45] To de Jong (2001), this is a 'role reversal simile', which 'underscores the similarity between the experiences of Odysseus and Telemachus', as 'the son in the simile is cast in the role of Odysseus, who has wandered for ten years on his way home from a faraway country, while the distresses which the father in the simile has suffered on account of his son correspond to those of Telemachus during the absence of his father' (389).

structures to emerge, revealing how migration reconfigures the distribution of care within the household. Eumaeus, despite his role as a servant, assumes a quasi-paternal position, one of nurturing and protection typically reserved for the biological father in the Homeric world. This dynamic opens a potential avenue for rethinking familial roles, suggesting that bonds of care and loyalty can almost transcend the strict boundaries of blood relations.

The simile, however, while expanding the scope of father-son bonds, ultimately serves to reassert the importance of biological and patriarchal authority. Eumaeus is not a father, he is *like* a father. While the simile between Telemachus and Eumaeus gestures towards a broader conception of family based on loyalty and affection, the importance of biological bonds is indeed re-instated not long after, as already preannounced by the simile's narrative presenting a reunion between father and son. As Pavlidis notes, 'Telemachus is presented as a man who returns home from his voyage after ten years, which corresponds to the ten years that it took Odysseus to return home under extreme hardship and adversity'.[46] The detail of the son coming back from a decade-long journey (ἐλθόντ᾽ ἐξ ἀπίης γαίης δεκάτῳ ἐνιαυτῷ, 16.16) effectively mirrors and inverts Odysseus' own journey, temporarily blurring the boundaries between father and son. This role reversal is part of a broader pattern throughout the final books of the *Odyssey*, in which Telemachus and Odysseus repeatedly exchange or mirror each other's positions. Yet even as these inversions are acknowledged, the poem ultimately works to restore Odysseus to his central paternal role. The simile, then, does not overturn the traditional hierarchy of the household but subtly destabilizes it, using inversion and emotional resonance to build pathos for the eventual re-establishment of normative order in the father-son reunion.

The poem's tendency to maintain a nuclear, patriarchal family unit ultimately limits the extent to which such similes can subvert father-song relationships. However, the tension between biological and emotional fatherhood that the simile evokes invites broader reflection

[46] Pavlidis (1985), 60-1.

on the complexities of familial bonds in the *Odyssey* and on how these relationships may both challenge and uphold societal expectations. A similar instance happens during Telemachus' recounting of his meeting with Nestor (*Od*. 17.110-3):[47]

> δεξάμενος δέ με κεῖνος ἐν ὑψηλοῖσι δόμοισιν
> ἐνδυκέως ἐφίλει, ὡς εἴ τε πατὴρ ἑὸν υἱὸν
> ἐλθόντα χρόνιον νέον ἄλλοθεν· ὣς ἐμὲ κεῖνος
> ἐνδυκέως ἐκόμιζε σὺν υἱάσι κυδαλίμοισιν.

Telemachus' reflection on Nestor's warm reception shows a potential for challenging familial roles which remains unfulfilled. Telemachus, in the prolonged absence of his father, Odysseus, finds himself seeking paternal guidance and protection from surrogate figures, as shown by his comparing Nestor to a father figure in the simile. Telemachus' account positions Nestor as a stand-in for Odysseus, offering the emotional and paternal support that his biological father, still absent, cannot provide. The encounter evokes a broader theme of reconstituting the family unit in the absence of blood ties, mirroring Odysseus' own efforts to restore familial bonds upon his return.

The simile therefore projects a potential reshaping of paternal roles without fully embracing a lasting redefinition. Telemachus does find temporary refuge in Nestor's paternal care, but his eventual departure from this surrogate father figure underscores the limits of such familial substitutions. His journey toward maturity involves learning how to sever these ties and avoid over-reliance on surrogate fathers like Nestor and Eumaeus. Telemachus' success on his journey depends not just on finding these father figures but on learning how to navigate their guidance without becoming dependent, signalling his transition into adulthood. Unlike the more elaborate similes traditionally used by the narrator, this simile also emerges from

[47] 'We went to Pylos, visiting King Nestor. | He made me very welcome in his palace, | under his roof, as if I were his son | returning after many years away. | He cared for me like one of his own sons.'

direct speech, adding a layer of personal reflection.[48] It is Telemachus himself who frames Nestor as a father figure, revealing his own internalization of familial dynamics. Yet, the simile remains brief and tentative, reflecting Telemachus' growing awareness of the impermanence of such relationships. While Telemachus briefly envisions Nestor as a surrogate father, the epic ultimately returns him to his biological family, reinstating the importance of the paternal bond with Odysseus. Yet, the momentary inversion of familial roles offers a glimpse into the fluidity of these relationships, even if the poem never fully embraces the potential to radically reshape them.[49] Alternative bonds remain temporary, dissolving once the displaced father returns and the household is recentred on biological lineage.

Similes in the *Odyssey* therefore both shape and reflect the complexities of familial relationships, especially within the father-son dynamic. In particular, the interactions between Telemachus and Odysseus as well as other father figures like Eumaeus offer a deeper exploration of paternal bonds, where similes serve to complicate notions of recognition, connection, and unfulfilled needs. While moments of inversion and destabilization are opened up by the simile both in terms of gender roles and familial relationships, the *Odyssey* reinstates traditional familial hierarchies by the narrative's end. Telemachus' evolving relationship with Odysseus mirrors the epic's tendency to play with, yet ultimately return to, conventional family

[48] As Sedgwick reminds us: 'there are important senses in which "queer" can signify only *when attached to the first person*'. (1993, 8)

[49] Athena's role in Telemachus' journey adds yet another layer to this exploration of familial structures. She assumes a protective and guiding position that mirrors and extends traditional paternal influence, appearing in the guise of Mentes to offer both practical advice and the encouragement necessary for Telemachus' maturation. While she does not replace Odysseus as a father figure, her interventions shape Telemachus' development in ways that suggest an alternative model of guidance and authority. Her role in urging Telemachus toward action, particularly in his search for Odysseus and in asserting himself against the suitors, positions Athena as a facilitator of growth rather than a didactic mentor. Through this dynamic, the *Odyssey* not only examines paternal relationships within human families but also considers how divine intervention can supplement and even complicate these bonds. For more on Athena's and Telemachus' relationship and particularly her role as Telemachus' mentor see Belmont (1969), Murrin (2007), Wissmann (2009).

structures. The simile functions as a tool for exploring these roles, briefly opening a door to the fluidity of relational dynamics within the paternal framework, but stopping short of radically destabilizing them. The poem's investment in homecoming ensures that any destabilisation produced by displacement is ultimately recuperated into a narrative of return.

The connection between Telemachus and Odysseus, as we have seen, emphasizes the importance of lineage and authority within the traditional patriarchal family, even as the similes offer moments where these roles appear malleable. Nevertheless, the *Odyssey* reaffirms the heteronormative and patriarchal structure that underpins ancient Greek society. The relationship between Telemachus and Odysseus, while potentially expansive in its emotional depth, returns to a familiar order, with Telemachus assuming his place as heir, and Odysseus reclaiming his role as father and ruler. Thus, while similes in the text suggest a broader exploration of familial dynamics, the potential to fully dismantle or rethink these roles remains unrealized within the epic itself. Yet the ambiguity and emotional complexity embedded in these similes has opened up interpretive space for later reimaginings. It is precisely the friction generated by displacement, between absence and authority, substitution and lineage, that makes the *Odyssey* fertile ground for modern queer and diasporic reinterpretations. In the next section, I turn to how this latent potential is activated in the work of Ocean Vuong, where the *Odyssey*'s father-son dynamic is not only reinterpreted, but queered, allowing for a more expansive exploration of kinship, identity, and belonging.

Father and Sons: Ocean Vuong's Telemachus

Across different historical and cultural contexts, both the *Odyssey* and Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) mobilize likeness as a way of finding and/or re-inscribing relationality into the spaces opened by exile. Vuong's similes negotiate the distance between Vietnam and America, between ancestral violence and queer self-invention: reading Vuong

after Homer therefore demonstrates how the simile's formal economy and its temporary reconciliation of difference can articulate the emotional conditions of diaspora. The simile becomes a shared instrument through which both Homer and Vuong articulate estrangement, longing, and the fragile bridges that bind generations together despite rupture.

The *Odyssey* and its similes, as I have shown, emerge as a lens through which we may be able to scrutinize the complexities of gendered, familial, and in particular father-son dynamics. While the epic itself does not commit to queer portrayals of these relationships, its duplicity when presenting such relations can become a catalyst for queer examinations of familial connections. This influence is prominent in the works of the contemporary poet Ocean Vuong, whose collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* shows the potential of the simile in its exploration of father-son relationships, and which Nguyen describes as a queering of the Homeric *Odyssey* more generally.[50] Ocean Vuong is a Vietnamese American poet and novelist, whose work and debut collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* explores themes of identity, war, displacement, and queerness. The collection draws on mythology, war, and intimate family relationships, often reworking traditional narratives to interrogate identity and belonging. Vuong's use of intertextual references, particularly to the *Odyssey*, allows him to navigate the complexities of father-son relationships, along with his own queerness. Through this intertextual practice, Vuong positions himself as both inheritor and challenger of the Western canon, using Homer not as a static authority but as a framework through which to rewrite the boundaries of kinship, masculinity, and queer subjectivity.

The character of Telemachus appears frequently through the collection as a conduit for Vuong's expression of queerness and of family dynamics. In this section, I will examine his role and how similes are employed to convey it, focusing in particular on the poems "Telemachus," "Trojan," and "Odysseus Redux," where the intertextual reception of the

[50] Nguyen (2021).

Odyssey is made explicit. This comparative approach will allow me to examine how these texts intersect in their exploration of identity and familial ties through the use of the simile. As Vuong himself says:[51]

> A lot of the poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* attempts to navigate history through a rewriting or, rather, a recasting of history into a mythology, much in the tradition of our poetic forebears, like Homer, Dante, Milton. And I was interested in writing the history of the Vietnam War and also the history of a queer body, a queer *American* body, as a mythology because it... has not yet been done before. What that offered me is that I got to tell these stories that perhaps I have not witnessed myself through a poetical reimagination without claiming witness as my own, without appropriating the witness and the stories of some of the survivors of this war, a war that I did not live through.

Vuong's intent is thus to use works of the Western canon to reimagine his own narratives of history and identity, weaving them into a poetic mythology that resonates with the complexities of his own experiences. His intertextual use of the *Odyssey* approaches father-son relationships through a queer lens, paralleling Telemachus' journey of self-discovery. By utilizing similes that evoke both intimacy and distance, Vuong articulates the struggles of navigating familial love and trauma in a contemporary context. In what follows, then, I will closely examine how the character of Telemachus serves as a conduit for Vuong's expression of queerness and of family dynamics, exploring the ways in which the original epic inspires nuanced interpretations and connections, which are often and especially articulated through the evocative use of simile.

To understand Vuong's use of the *Odyssey* it is important to recognise his general investment in reckoning and engaging with the Western canon more generally. When asked about his future projects after the publication of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong replied that he was 'writing a novel composed of woven inter-genre fragments'.[52] To him, as he explains, 'a book

[51] Vuong (2018). Available at: < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE>.
[52] Vuong in Literary Hub (November 2017). He is here referring to his first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), which brings together different genres, such as poetry and epistolary forms.

made entirely out of unbridged fractures feels most faithful to the physical and psychological displacement I experience as a human being': [53] in other words, he is drawn to forms that consciously reject the idea that a story must be seamless or whole to be complete. Vuong goes on to interrogate the standard metrics of literary success, especially those rooted in Western canonization, observing that traditional fiction often privileges congruency and balance, but that for those writing from 'colonized, plundered, and erased histories and diasporas' producing a smooth and cohesive narrative can amount to perpetuating a lie. [54] He is thus interested in works that refuse the authority of 'patriarchal predecessors' in order to embrace fissured and fragmented identities: his final suggestion is that resisting 'dominant conventions is not the sole responsibility of marginalized writers; rather, all writers—"perhaps especially white writers"—can benefit from questioning how our valuations of art may inadvertently reinforce the oppressive legacies we seek to dismantle'. [55]

Vuong's central critique is that traditional Western literary structures often fail to capture the fragmented and disjointed realities of identity, particularly for marginalized communities. The Western literary canon is criticised not just in terms of its content but in its very formal conventions and ideas of what is considered a 'successful literary work' where conflicts are 'resolved': in particular, Vuong's resistance to the idea that a story must be whole and cohesive is deeply tied to his own experience of displacement, as well as his broader critique of colonial and patriarchal histories. At the heart of Vuong's argument is the recognition that the Western canon, which, to him, prizes order, symmetry, and narrative closure, does not accommodate the realities of diasporic life. For individuals shaped by histories of colonization, migration, and erasure, there is often no simple or linear path to

Available at: < https://lithub.com/ocean-vuong-interrogating-the-canon-and-literally-riding-a-bicycle-with-no-hands/>.
[53] Vuong in Literary Hub (November 2017).
[54] Vuong in Literary Hub (November 2017).
[55] Vuong in Literary Hub (November 2017).

identity. The personal and collective histories they carry are marked by rupture, fragmentation, and incompleteness. For Vuong, then, writing a 'smooth and cohesive' narrative in this context would feel like a denial of those experiences: to him, such a narrative would be a lie, a falsehood that erases the ruptures and absences that define many people's lives, particularly those from colonized, marginalized, or diasporic communities. The idea that a work must have neatly tied-up themes, resolved conflicts, and a linear plot reflects a desire for control, order, and completeness; traits often linked with white, patriarchal dominance. Vuong's rejection of these values aligns with his larger critique of the canon: by adhering to such conventions, literature not only reinforces hegemonic norms but also perpetuates the very systems of oppression that marginalized groups seek to dismantle.

Through this lens, Vuong sees his work not merely as a rebellion against artistic conventions, but as a reclamation of space for stories that are often suppressed or ignored. By rejecting its patriarchal predecessors, Vuong's writing refuses to conform to a system that has historically sought to erase or silence him. Instead, he embraces the brokenness, the gaps, and the fractures that reflect a more truthful and painful experience of identity. This strategy is not just a critique of Western literary tradition but also a form of resistance: his fragmented narrative becomes not a weakness but a more authentic representation of lived experience, particularly for those whose histories have been marked by violence, erasure, and displacement. His challenge to the notion of a 'whole' story is a political act that resists the dominance of patriarchal and colonial structures.

This is evident in his use of the *Odyssey* in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds.* As Haghighi states, in the collection, 'as he unpacks Western canonical epics, he ties common threads in his variegated poetic patchwork of personal and cultural identity. […] By reframing and inhabiting Western works with the use of poetic license, Vuong is also able to broach cultural barriers between him and his Western audience; ultimately, he constructs his own quasi-epic, drawing

from and preserving experiences since time immemorial'.[56] This 'quasi-epic' that Vuong constructs allows him to weave together disparate voices into a broader narrative, not only challenging the Western canon but redefining what it means to belong to it, asserting that these ancient epics can and should speak to the experiences of all people, particularly those who have been historically excluded or silenced. By reframing it through his own lens of queerness, displacement, and trauma, Vuong transforms Western mythology into a tool for personal and collective storytelling, one that can encompass experiences that have been side-lined in traditional narratives.

In this context, Vuong's struggle to define his own identity as an immigrant is central to his literary project. His work embodies the difficulty of reconciling the complex realities of being displaced, of living in a world where there is no clear or simple origin. As Vuong notes, he had 'always [been] asking who's my father. Like Homer, I felt I'd better make it up'.[57] Vuong's statement echoes a broader diasporic challenge: the yearning for a homeland and a coherent, unbroken narrative, coupled with the simultaneous understanding that such a story is fractured, lost, or even deliberately erased. The immigrant experience is here marked by a constant negotiation between inherited legacies and the harsh realities of displacement. For Vuong, this is a double-edged sword, as the canonical works of the West, such as the *Odyssey*, which traditionally offer a sense of origin and homecoming, become, in his hands, a lens through which he can both reclaim and transform his own fractured sense of belonging. The absence of his father, a key figure in his personal history, further amplifies this sense of rupture: his absence is both literal and symbolic, and further underlines Vuong's complicated relationship with his desire for a parent, a history, or a homeland. Vuong's literary engagement with classical myths therefore becomes a way of navigating his own struggle to find a cohesive

[56] Haghighi (2021).
[57] Vuong in Armitstead (2017).

story amid the disjointed realities of his life: his work is an attempt to stitch together the fragmented pieces of his identity, creating a new narrative that both honours the old and speaks to the complex realities of contemporary displacement, confronting not only the limitations of Western literary tradition but the painful, often invisible histories of immigration, loss, and the struggle to find one's place in a world that does not always welcome or make room for such stories.

This is particularly evident in the opening poem to the collection, "Telemachus", which serves as an entry point into the collection's broader thematic concerns, immediately immersing the reader in a meditation on loss, inheritance, and the complexities of father-son relationships. By situating this poem at the forefront of his work, Vuong signals the foundational role of classical mythology in shaping his poetic exploration of identity, trauma, and queerness, establishing Telemachus as both a personal and literary touchstone for his reimagining of familial bonds. The poem itself immediately starts with a comparison or simile:[58]

> Like any good son, I pull my father out
> of the water, drag him by his hair
>
> through white sand, his knuckles carving a trail
> the waves rush in to erase. Because the city
>
> beyond the shore is no longer
> where we left it. Because the bombed
>
> cathedral is now a cathedral
> of trees. I kneel beside him to show how far
>
> I might sink. Do you know who I am,
> Ba? But the answer never comes. The answer
>
> is the bullet hole in his back, brimming
> with seawater. He is so still I think

[58] Vuong (2016), 7.

he could be anyone's father, found
the way a green bottle might appear

at a boy's feet containing a year
he has never touched. I touch

his ears. No use. I turn him
over. To face it. The cathedral

in his sea-black eyes. The face
not mine — but one I will wear

to kiss all my lovers good-night:
the way I seal my father's lips

with my own & begin
the faithful work of drowning.

The opening line of the poem, 'like any good son', already creates friction between the speaker and the titular character Telemachus, as well as complicating Telemachus' role as Odysseus' faithful heir. Vuong's Telemachus struggles from the beginning with his relationship with his father, as his role as a good son is immediately put into discussion by the presence of the simile. Here, the father does not return home: rather, he is dragged out of the sea by the speaker. The moment of recognition between the two is prohibited, even if attempted by the only words spoken out loud in the poem: 'Do you know who I am, Ba?'. Yet, despite the explicit question, 'the answer never comes'. The simile at *Od.* 16.215-9 will never happen, as it is made impossible by the death of the father. The hug won't be reciprocated, despite Telemachus' subsequent attempts at tactile intimacy: 'I touch | his ears. No use. I turn him | over. To face it'. The most explicit attempt appears at the end of the poem, where Vuong-Telemachus 'seal(s) [his] father's lips' with his own. Yet perhaps the most intimate act in the poem is Vuong-as-Telemachus taking on the face of his father-as-Odysseus: 'the face | not mine – but one I will wear | to kiss all my lovers good-night'. As Nguyen notes, 'as the Homeric Telemachus encounters his father's old friends on his journey to learn of his father's whereabouts, he is

constantly told that he resembles his father'.[59] Yet Vuong does not stop at the resemblance, at the likeness as a symbol of parental lineage. Instead he pushes this further, recognising the connection between the desire for a moment of recognition, of paternal affection, and how it becomes conflated with his own queer desire as he wears his father's face to kiss his lovers.

Deviating from the traditional recognition scene in the epic, Vuong's poem then depicts the son beside his father's corpse, reflecting on the erasure of identity and memories. Telemachus' quest for his father's legacy leaves him in a limbo, and his resemblance to Odysseus in terms of physical traits does not bridge the gap in what has been missed. Instead, that resemblance is also put in danger before Vuong-as-Telemachus turns his father around: 'he could be anyone's father'. After that, the speaker can acknowledge the experience and trauma of war evident on their shared face: 'the cathedral | in his sea's black eyes' which is now 'a cathedral of trees'. The ambiguity surrounding whether the cathedral signifies destruction or growth introduces hope, suggesting the potential for the son to rise above the war's wreckage. And yet he still carries his father's face to kiss his lovers. According to Chavez and Lin, this 'signifier of paternal prohibition […] enables affectionate connections between the son and his lovers' and 'signifies Telemachus' willing acceptance that his life will inevitably be, for better or worse, shaped by continuous deference to the father'.[60] While Vuong's Telemachus acknowledges the lingering presence of his father's face, both as a symbol of paternal prohibition and a site of affection, this inherited identity becomes inseparable from the history of war and displacement. The act of carrying his father's face, even in intimate moments, becomes not just an acceptance of legacy but also a recognition of the ways in which his desires are shaped by the trauma of his past. As Nguyen notes, this moment is used by the poet 'to realize that his queer desire is profoundly entangled with the

[59] Nguyen (2021), 437.
[60] Chavez and Lin (2020), 69.

traumas of war and displacement'.[61] The speaker's desires will emerge from a history marked by loss, displacement, and the legacy of war and violence.

The simile (or comparison) at the beginning of Vuong's "Telemachus", 'like any good son', thus becomes key to understanding the poem's wider exploration of identity, legacy, and emotional inheritance. The comparison between the 'good son' and the speaker is implied yet then not further explicated as it would be in a traditional simile: from the start, therefore, Vuong subtly plays with the form and expectations of simile, using its structure to blur the boundaries between explicit and implicit similarity, already inviting readers to question the roles and inheritances embedded in familial relationships. This opening simile, in fact, sets the stage for a deeper examination of similarity and dissimilarity throughout the poem, introducing a comparison that immediately calls into question what it means to be a 'good son', a notion that echoes throughout both Vuong's poem and the Homeric narrative, and that further reflects Vuong's complex relationship with the Western canon.

Such a relationship is further complicated by Vuong's statement that the body found by the speaker could be 'anyone's father'. In the *Odyssey*, moments of recognition rely on similarities of appearance or behaviour, yet Vuong disrupts this model by emphasizing not just resemblance but also the absence or distortion of recognition, as the father's face in Vuong's poem is not fully identifiable, signalling a break from the traditional epic bond. Yet, the resemblance resurfaces when Vuong's Telemachus wears his father's face as both an inheritance and a burden, signalling a fusion of personal and familial histories. The simile, then, and the theme of dis/similarity more generally become a framework to explore how identity, memory, and desire are shaped by the convergence of familial and historical legacies. The tension between similarity and dissimilarity is central to understanding Vuong's reimagining

[61] Nguyen (2021), 439.

of Telemachus, as the poem navigates what is inherited, what is lost, and how one reconstructs the self in the wake of loss and war.

"Trojan", which immediately follows "Telemachus", extends and complicates the themes explored in the earlier poem by shifting the focus to desire, intimacy, and the body as another site of historical and personal inscription. If "Telemachus" grapples with the inheritance of identity and the complexities of recognition within father-son relationships, "Trojan" deepens this exploration by complicating ideas of masculinity. By positioning these two poems back-to-back, Vuong underscores the tensions between inherited narratives and lived experience, as well as between mythic archetypes and contemporary realities. While "Trojan" does not directly name mythical characters like Telemachus, it still references Homeric myth:[62]

A finger's worth of dark from daybreak, he steps
into a red dress. A flame caught
in a mirror the width of a coffin. Steel
glinting
in the back of his throat. A flash, a white
asterisk. Look
how he dances. The bruise-blue wallpaper
peeling
into hooks as he twirls, his horse
-head shadow thrown on the family
portraits, glass cracking beneath
its stain. He moves like any
other fracture, revealing the briefest doors. The
dress
petaling off him like the skin
of an apple. As if their swords
aren't sharpening
inside him. This horse with its human
face. This belly full of blades
& brutes. As if dancing could stop the
heart
of his murderer from beating
between his ribs. How easily a boy in a dress
the red of shut eyes
vanishes

[62] Vuong (2016), 9.

beneath the sound of his own
galloping. How a horse will run until it breaks
into weather—into wind. How like
the wind, they will see him. They will see him
clearest
when the city burns.

The poem contains more similes than "Telemachus": the speaker 'moves like any | other fracture, revealing the briefest doors. The | dress | petaling off him like the skin | of an apple'. The ending of the poem in particular ends with a strong comparison: 'how like | the wind, they will see him. They will see him | clearest | when the city burns'. And again, the poem explicitly deals with notion of identity construction, similarity, and dissimilarity: Vuong intricately weaves a scene featuring Telemachus cross-dressing in a red dress, merging this image with the symbolism of the Trojan Horse, as something that looks like something, like in a simile, but is in fact something else. Telemachus subverts heteronormative gender roles, using as a reference the subterfuge of the Trojan Horse as a tool to breach established barriers: the conventional narrative is subverted, as Vuong's Telemachus, instead of donning elite attire to assume his father's seat, secretly wears a red dress as a symbolic Trojan Horse to dance alone before a mirror. As Nguyen notes, the speaker's 'queerness, as embodied by the red dress, is his Trojan Horse: his surreptitious device to infiltrate his sexuality and disrupt internalized heteronormativity'.[63] Still, this process is painful: his 'belly is full of blade', he moves 'like a fracture'. This simile in particular portrays Vuong's struggles in accepting and exhibiting his queerness, often presented as something else, like the Trojan Horse, and yet explicit in his cross-dressing and therefore transgression.

Simile in this poem then plays a crucial role in destabilizing traditional gender roles, creating a fluid space where identity is constantly in flux. By comparing Telemachus to

[63] Nguyen (2021), 444.

fractured, shifting images ('moving like any other fracture', the 'dress petaling off him like the skin of an apple') Vuong highlights the instability and vulnerability that accompany the performance of gender. These similes do more than evoke physical movements; they metaphorically suggest a breakdown of rigid gender boundaries. The classical references, particularly the Trojan Horse, further reinforce this destabilization, as the Trojan Horse is a symbol of deception and transformation, something that appears as one thing but is, in reality, something else entirely. Vuong uses this image to draw a parallel with Telemachus's cross-dressing: like the Trojan Horse, the red dress conceals a deeper truth about identity and serves as a tool of subversion. Through the invocation of the Trojan Horse as a metaphorical device, functioning like simile, Vuong queers the traditionally masculine narrative of war and heroism, presenting gender as a performative construct, and as a disguise that can be both an act of resistance and a path to self-discovery. Classical references aid in this destabilization, allowing Vuong to draw on well-known symbols from the *Odyssey* to challenge and rewrite normative ideas about masculinity, heroism, and identity, creating a Telemachus who embodies both the fractured legacies of war and the fluidity of queer identity.

Finally, *"Odysseus Redux"* furthers Vuong's exploration of legacy and identity by revisiting the figure of Odysseus, destabilising the traditional narratives of heroism and homecoming: [64]

> He entered my room like a shepherd
> stepping out of a Caravaggio.
>
> All that remains of the sentence
> is a line
> of black hair stranded
> at my feet.
>
> Back from the wind, he called to me
> with a mouthful of crickets—

[64] Vuong (2016), 78.

smoke & jasmine rising
from his hair. I waited
for the night to wane
into decades—before reaching

for his hands. Then we danced

without knowing it: my shadow
deepening his on the shag.
Outside, the sun kept rising.
One of its red petals fell

through the window—& caught
on his tongue. I tried
to pluck it out
but was stopped
by my own face, the mirror,
its cracking, the crickets, every syllable
spilling through.

Just as in "Telemachus", it is a simile opening the poem: 'He entered my room like a shepherd | stepping out of a Caravaggio'. The themes of recognition and misrecognition present in "Telemachus" also come back, as the speaker looks into the mirror: 'stopped | by my own face, the mirror, | its cracking, the crickets, every syllable | spilling through'. As Nguyen explains, 'the figure who enters the room is never identified, nor is there any attempt at a recognition scene - but one is not needed for there is an implicit understanding that this mysterious figure is the speaker's father. Moreover, the mention of shepherd recalls the shepherd Eumaios in the *Odyssey* who serves as a father figure to Telemachus during Odysseus' absence'.[65] The tension between Odysseus and Eumaeus as father figures is here again expressed through simile. The figure approaches through 'smoke and jasmine', elements recalling the Vietnamese practice of lighting incense for the dead. While the scene is somehow macabre at the start, it then evolves into a scene of resolution. The figure and the speaker dance together: 'then we danced | without

[65] Nguyen (2021), 445.

knowing it: my shadow | deepening his on the shag'. As Nguyen notes again, 'this dance recalls the subversive dance in "Trojan", but this time the speaker is not dancing despite his family, but rather alongside his family. The dance is both exploratory and reconciliatory, as the shadows of the father and the son unite and lengthen each other's impact'.[66] Again, the speaker tries to get close to his father, plucking red petals from his tongue.

In this poem, the desire for parental love and resolution is again conflated with queer desire in contradictory ways that do not seem to reach a full resolution: instead, what comes to a conclusion is the speaker finally recognising himself even in what is his father's appearance. He is stopped 'by my own face, the mirror, | its cracking, the crickets, every syllable | spilling through'. While in "Telemachus" the speaker's face is 'not mine' but one he 'will wear', here as he looks into the mirror Vuong sees his 'own face'. While the poem maintains and deals with different expressions of Vuong's identity (his queerness, his Vietnamese legacy, his status as son of a dead father), after the misrecognition of "Trojan" here the poet can finally see himself as he is.

As the opening of the poem shows, Vuong's discussion of familial relationships and queer desire is shaped through the use of simile, which highlights themes of dis/similarity and mis/recognition, creating a layered and multifaceted portrayal of identity. In Vuong's poems inspired by the *Odyssey*, similes serve as a conduit for exploring the tensions between recognition and similarity within father-son relationships. Through similes and the intertextual references they allow, Vuong introduces elements of ambiguity, allowing these familial relationships to exist in a space that is both familiar and unfamiliar, recognizable yet elusive. The reference to Caravaggio is exemplary of this: Caravaggio's works are known for their chiaroscuro, a technique that contrasts light and dark, which mirrors the emotional contrast in the scene itself. The shepherd emerges from shadow and light, much like the father figure in

[66] Nguyen (2021), 445.

the poem, both appearing from a place of mystery and yet existing within the familiar frame of paternal recognition. The shared face with his father becomes a symbolic connection, prompting Vuong to reconcile memories of war with refugeehood and queerness. It is through Telemachus' journey and the ambiguity of familial relationships in the *Odyssey* that Vuong can express a similar tension and bring it to its full realised potential, utilising similes and themes of familial dis/similarity to discuss his own queerness.

Conclusion

Foregrounding diaspora, displacement, and familial dynamics, this chapter has attempted to show how similes in the *Odyssey* can be read as engines of relational imagination, performing the labour of reconnection that the poem's narrative dramatizes. The simile's double movement of dis/similarity mirrors the diasporic condition itself, in which belonging is experienced through continual acts of comparison between the here and now, and elsewhere. The *Odyssey*'s similes thus reveal how familial intimacy is constructed through distance, how affection depends on imaginative elasticity: the Homer's epic, as well as its later receptions, insist on relation as an act of reaching across space, even as it reinstates the impossibility of belonging outside of the home.

The simile, as a poetic device, emerges here as a point of intersection between the ancient and the contemporary, particularly in the way it facilitates a dialogue about identity, familial roles, and personal transformation. In the *Odyssey*, similes serve to complicate our understanding of familial dynamics, especially the father-son relationship between Odysseus and Telemachus. These comparisons serve to illuminate the tensions between connection and disconnection within the family unit: while they often reinforce traditional roles, they also expose moments of ambiguity, transformation, and rupture; moments that allow for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of identity and belonging, especially in the face of war,

absence, and personal development. In the Homeric text, these similes offer glimpses into the complexities of relationships that are, at times, reified by patriarchal authority and, at others, challenged by the individuals who inhabit these roles. However, the *Odyssey* does not fully explore the possibility of queering these dynamics: the figures of Odysseus and Telemachus are largely confined within the patriarchal structures of ancient Greek society, and while moments of emotional intimacy and recognition occur, they do not break free from the norms of their time. Yet, in this very tension, there is fertile ground for queer reinterpretations, especially in works like Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016). Here, the simile becomes a vehicle for interrogating identity, trauma, and belonging in a context far removed from the ancient world but still deeply connected to it through the echoes of myth. Ultimately, queerness and diaspora both depend on provisional forms of kinship, on likenesses that hold without collapsing difference.

Vuong's treatment of Telemachus serves as an example of how the classical text, particularly through the lens of simile, can be reimagined to express the multifaceted complexities of modern queer identity. By drawing upon the *Odyssey*, Vuong positions his own fractured narrative within the broader historical and literary tradition, using simile to articulate both the intimacy and instability of his relationship with his father and his queerness. Through similes that evoke vulnerability, alienation, and connection, Vuong challenges the notion of fixed familial roles, allowing them to be fluid and porous in ways that reflect the fragmented realities of the diasporic and queer experience. In Vuong's poems, the simile functions not merely to describe but to destabilise, and to express the gaps, absences, and contradictions that define the author's identity and his relationship with history.

The use of simile in Vuong's work, as in the *Odyssey*, therefore serves as an entry point to explore deeper questions of recognition and identity. Yet what makes Vuong's use of simile particularly potent is its capacity to both critique and transform classical ideas of kinship,

masculinity, and legacy. Where the *Odyssey* gestures toward recognition through the simile, it does so within its own patriarchal structures. By contrast, Vuong's similes blur boundaries, collapsing distinctions between past and present, self and other, normal and queer. The absence of his father, coupled with the metaphorical blanks in his poetry, speaks to the disjointed and often painful experience of immigration and diaspora, where histories are not simply lost but actively erased. In this light, Vuong's work does not just retell the *Odyssey*; it revises it, giving voice to experiences of rupture, loss, and longing that the original epic only touches upon in passing.

Vuong's poetry, much like the *Odyssey*, does not offer easy resolutions. Instead, it embraces fragmentation: his refusal to adhere to the conventions of Western literary tradition, where narrative coherence, closure, and balance are prized, aligns with his broader critique of the colonial and patriarchal legacies that shape both the canon and his own identity. In a world marked by displacement, war, and violence, the stories of those who live within the margins of the Western world are often incomplete, disrupted, and fractured. For Vuong, writing these stories authentically means embracing their incompleteness, using the very fragmentation that many see as a weakness to forge a new narrative that honours the brokenness of lived experience. The simile becomes here a critical site for the negotiation of identity, the interrogation of cultural and personal histories, and the re-imagining of familial bonds. It provides a space where the fractured selves of the past and present can collide, creating new understandings of what it means to belong, to love, and to be seen. By intertextually embracing the gaps, absences, and ruptures that shape both the *Odyssey* and Vuong's work, the simile becomes a key tool in offering a new vision of identity, which resists the pressures of conventional narratives and embraces the complexity of the queer diasporic experience.

Chapter 4: Wild Bonds: Animal Similes in the Iliad and Queer Kinships

Introduction

Having analysed how the simile offers a possible space for the restructuring of familial relationships across diaspora, I want to deepen the discussion of kinship and (un)familiar bonds while still remaining with the Homeric world. This chapter, focused on Homer's *Iliad*, will prioritise the simile's engagement with the natural world, specifically through the recurring motif of animal imagery and its echoes in contemporary queer poetry. By disrupting the boundaries between human and animal, civilization and wilderness, and self and other, animal similes create a conceptual space that brims with queer potential. This chapter investigates how these dynamics emerge in the *Iliad* and considers their reverberations in contemporary queer poetry, taking Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* (2016) as a main point of comparison, as a collection that reimagines the animal form as a vehicle for articulating queer identity, kinship, and experience.

To do so, I first analyse give a brief overview of how the animal world can offer a lens for the exploration of queerness. I then move to exploring how similes in the *Iliad* comment on and challenge traditional forms of gender identity and sexuality, analysing how the simile engages with and subverts gender roles within the context of the epic, and again employing Foley's concept of reverse similes to examine the ways in which these figures of speech unsettle the gender binary and offer alternative perspectives on identity. This focus provides a necessary foundation for the exploration of animal similes in the *Iliad*, as it establishes how the simile operates within human social categories before moving into its more expansive disruptions of species and embodiment. I then delve into animal similes and the possibilities they create when the vehicle of the simile not only disturbs gender roles but also problematizes conceptions of the human and its relationships to other forms of being. Through close readings,

I argue that while reverse similes can disrupt traditional understandings of gender, animal similes broaden this subversive potential by destabilizing notions of humanity, its sociality, and its kinship structures. In particular, the figure of Achilles emerges as a crucial site for examining the further destabilization of identity that animal similes make possible. Having established how similes operate to unsettle gendered and sexual norms within human social categories, I turn to Achilles as the figure through whom the poem most forcefully tests the boundaries of humanity and animality, thanks to his volatile position between human, divine, and animal domains. As I will show, animal similes illuminate how the *Iliad* negotiates the porous boundaries between speech and instinct, reason and rage, self and other; ultimately staging an erosion of the categorical distinctions that normally secure human identity.

Finally, I bring these insights into dialogue with Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* (2016), exploring how contemporary queer poetry takes up and reconfigures the themes of animality and transformation present in Homeric similes. Departing from the more explicit modes of classical reception that shaped the ancient/modern comparisons of earlier chapters, this chapter employs thematic juxtapositions to examine how animal similes function across time. By placing Kelly's poetry alongside the *Iliad*, I illuminate both the enduring power of the animal simile as a vehicle for queer expression and the innovative ways contemporary queer poets repurpose animal imagery for new contexts and audiences.

The Potentialities and Dangers of Queer Animality

To begin unpacking how similes in the *Iliad* challenge and reimagine human relations and forms of kinship, it is necessary first to consider the animal not merely as a metaphorical foil to the human, but as a conceptual partner that reveals the instability and porousness of what we consider to be human in the first place, in a way that can be both productive and dangerous. This requires articulating a series of questions. What happens when the second term of

comparison within a simile does not only disturb gender roles, but further problematises conceptions of the human, its sociality, and relations with other forms of being? How does the simile, in staging encounters between the human and the animal, disrupt categorical thinking and open up speculative relationalities? When the comparison facilitated by the simile is not between two human beings constricted by gender roles but instead operates between the human and the animal and/or natural realm, perceptions of what is human can be disturbed, and new forms of kinship between the human and the natural world can be imagined. As Gottschall says, commenting on the brutality of heroes in battles and the animal qualities they display when fighting, 'for Homer, the human animal is the most incongruous crossbreed of all: he is queer, conflicted, inconsistent, godlike, and brute. It is the "in-betweenness" of the human animal that makes him tragic'.[1] While Gottschall focuses on the violence that is produced by the interaction between human and animal in the *Iliad*, I want to analyse instead how the 'in-betweenness' of human/animal relations, brought together by the 'like' of the simile, can reveal new tensions and possibilities for kinship across the poem, moving from the stark divisions of Greek against Trojans into a more complex constellation of different forms of companionship and kinship.

The simile's movement into the animal world invites a rethinking not only of the human but of how embodiment, affect, and sociality might be otherwise configured. The natural and animal world, in fact, offer important potentialities for rethinking identity, desire, subjectivity, and embodiment, not by stepping into a space entirely free of structure, but by shifting focus away from the more rigidly codified social conventions that often govern human relations. These realms allow for alternative forms of relation and embodiment that may unsettle or reconfigure established power dynamics rather than simply affirming them. Queer theorists have often engaged with the animal world as a destabilising force: for instance, wanting to

[1] Gottschall (2001), 279.

understand the connections between what is defined as human and what is considered animal, Mel Chen famously coined the term 'animacy', defining it as 'a flexible rubric that collides with and undoes any rigid understanding'[2] of specific hierarchies and kinds of existence, of being animated. The space of 'animacy' in the *Iliad* thus also offers an exchange between these two worlds, the animal and the human, as a space where power structures are re-arranged and new living modes are made possible, remade and queered by recognising connections between the two realms which were previously denied and left unexplored. By bringing about new modes of understanding the human, animacies interrupt and disturb social assumptions concerning gender, sex, desire: the simile as a poetic tool can then highlight this disturbance, connecting these two worlds through likeness and dissimilarity.

Animal comparisons help us rethink social and human boundaries because they often open up space for an unbounded exploration of desire, liberated from the constraints of the human realm. One plain example of this is among the first similes we encounter in the *Iliad* that connect the human and animal worlds. At the beginning of Book 3, Menelaus rejoices at the sight of Paris in battle (*Il.* 3.21-8): [3]

> τὸν δ᾽ ὡς οὖν ἐνόησεν ἀρηΐφιλος Μενέλαος
> ἐρχόμενον προπάροιθεν ὁμίλου μακρὰ βιβάντα,
> ὥς τε λέων ἐχάρη μεγάλωι ἐπὶ σώματι κύρσας
> εὑρὼν ἢ ἔλαφον κεραὸν ἢ ἄγριον αἶγα
> πεινάων· μάλα γάρ τε κατεσθίει, εἴ περ ἂν αὐτὸν
> σεύωνται ταχέες τε κύνες θαλεροί τ᾽ αἰζηοί·
> ὣς ἐχάρη Μενέλαος Ἀλέξανδρον θεοειδέα
> ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδών·

[2] Chen (2012), 105.

[3] 'When Menelaus, friend of Ares, noticed | Paris come striding out before the crowd, | he was delighted—as a starving lion | is thrilled to come upon a massive carcass— | a stag with antlers, or a mountain goat— | and avidly begins to eat the flesh, | even if eager hunters and quick hounds | attack him—in the same way, Menelaus | was thrilled to set his eyes on godlike Paris'.

Here, a stark division between prey and predator is portrayed: Menelaus is like the lion coming towards his prey, Paris, compared to either a stag or a goat. Through the simile's layered temporal complexity, the prey is even proleptically described as an already dead body, as if the act of killing had already taken place. Menelaus as the lion is feasting on it, tearing it apart with pleasure. The marauding lion, as shown by Lonsdale, is the most common animal simile that can be found in the *Iliad*. According to Gottschall, this particular comparison serves to show how 'the vestments of civilization fit loosely, usually falling away in the pitch and roll of battle',[4] underlining the wildness of the predator when faced with its prey. Pleasure unites Menelaus and the animal predator in a shared moment of instinctual satisfaction. What animacy helps illuminate here is not just a shedding of the civilised self but a movement across ontological registers: a human becoming-animal not to reduce the human, but to expose the latent, unregulated affects that animate both. In the animacy space that the simile opens, Menelaus does not merely imitate the lion; he participates in a kind of affective co-presence with it, where desire, violence, and joy cross species lines and challenge rigid forms of subjectivity.

Writing on animal metamorphosis, Payne argues that encounters between the human and the animal 'interrogate the forms of desire and aversion' that characterize the human.[5] While similes do not depict literal transformation, they operate through a related logic: they enact metamorphosis by folding the animal into the human and vice versa, creating hybrid moments of unstable identity. In this case, Menelaus' comparison to a hungry lion indeed seems to interrogate concepts of desire, even within the binary of prey and predator, re-assessing what kind of pleasure is allowed, and pointing at how restrictions and limitations of pleasure seem to be part of what constitutes the human. As Davidson states, commenting on

[4] Gottschall (2001), 181.
[5] Payne (2010), 122.

Greek society, 'the pleasure of the flesh, eating and drinking and sex, are also animal passions', and the man who gives into them 'is really giving in to desires he shares with the meanest of creatures', as well as 'exhibiting the beastly side of his being'.[6] The simile allows Menelaus to tap into his animal emotions, pleasures, and desires: while the binary division between prey and predator remains stark, Menelaus' connection to the lion and the tapping of human desire into the animal realm opens up and interrogates which forms of desire are available to humans, and how these forms are socially influenced and constructed.

While lion similes are not unusual, many more animals are available in the Homeric repertoire. In fact, 'in his similes, [Homer] ubiquitously imagines Greeks and Trojans as members of different species. The attacking warrior, most often Greek, is envisioned as a predator (a lion, a wolf, a circling dog) and the defender is envisioned as a member of a prey species (a hare, a cow, a tremulous fawn)',[7] thus again maintaining the division between prey and predator. This is particularly true in Book 5, where Diomedes re-enters the battle after suffering a wound from an arrow. When he joins the action again, Diomedes is compared to a lion several times, as a mark of 'the warrior's outward physical reanimation which is accomplished by an internal transformation'.[8] Lonsdale analyses these three similes (*Il.* 5.87-92, 5.136-143, 5.161-165) as working together with one another, focusing on Diomedes powerful return in battle by comparing him to what in the *Iliad* appears as the most dangerous of predators. At the same time, however, the lion can indeed also be prey. This is evident in the second simile mentioned by Lonsdale (*Il.* 5.136-143): [9]

[6] Davidson (1997), 305.
[7] Gottschall (2001), 286.
[8] Lonsdale (1990), 150.
[9] 'Before, he had already been impatient | to fight against the Trojans, but the rage | that now took hold of him was three times greater— | rage like an angry lion's, when he leaps | into a farmstead to attack a flock | of fleecy sheep—the shepherd tries to fight him, | but cannot overpower him—the lion | is energized and ever more riled up— | the herdsman cannot save his animals, | and rushes to the paddocks to take cover— | the ewes pour forth and huddle close together— | still full of energy and rage, the lion | bounds from the high-fenced farmyard and away— | with that same passionate intensity | strong Diomedes mingled with the | Trojans'.

δὴ τότε μιν τρὶς τόσσον ἔλεν μένος ὥς τε λέοντα
ὅν ῥά τε ποιμὴν ἀγρῶι ἐπ᾽ εἰροπόκοις ὀΐεσσι
χραύσηι μέν τ᾽ αὐλῆς ὑπεράλμενον οὐδὲ δαμάσσηι·
τοῦ μέν τε σθένος ὦρσεν, ἔπειτα δέ τ᾽ οὐ προσαμύνει,
ἀλλὰ κατὰ σταθμοὺς δύεται, τὰ δ᾽ ἐρῆμα φοβεῖται·
αἳ μέν τ᾽ ἀγχιστῖναι ἐπ᾽ ἀλλήλῃσι κέχυνται,
αὐτὰρ ὁ ἐμμεμαὼς βαθέης ἐξάλλεται αὐλῆς·
ὣς μεμαὼς Τρώεσσι μίγη κρατερὸς Διομήδης.

The ποιμήν (5.137), the shepherd, is the first one who has brought injury, χραύσῃ (5.138), to the lion, who comes back three times stronger and brave, in spite of his injury: Kirk even comments on how 'it is the wound itself that increases the lion's σθένος (139)',[10] fuelling his determination. When humans are involved, it seems that even the binary between prey and predator can be disturbed through various terms of comparison: the predator is not always such, nor is the prey. This type of simile offers a new perspective on hierarchies and power relations in the text. In the human/animal binary, the human is often perceived or portrayed as the one readers are supposed to side with, if, indeed, the animal side just stands for brutish force. Yet this inversion provided by the simile shows just how fickle the concept of the human really is. Paradoxically, the lion as Diomedes is here more human than the shepherd, going through a wide-ranging set of emotions: from his renewed courage, meaning his confidence had before been shaken, to the anger he displays when he goes back to war. By destabilising the roles of prey and predator, this simile allows readers to question whether the human/animal binary is truly as fixed as it appears to be, while at the same time allowing the injured hero Diomedes to move between the hunter and the hunted, defending himself against the shepherd and launching himself towards the sheep. Through this movement, his adversaries also move from predator (the shepherd) to prey (the flock). Once again, the simile seems to operate on a duality of similarity and dissimilarity: as it questions who is the aggressor and who is being hunted, it

[10] Kirk (1985), 70.

simultaneously opens up animacy as a conceptual space in which subjectivity and power are no longer distributed along predictable lines. Through the folding of animal into human and back again, the simile makes room for queer embodiments and unexpected agencies to emerge.

These examples briefly show how animal similes in the *Iliad* can disturb the animal/human divide in order to bring about new ways of looking at desire, gender, and humanity altogether; making us re-think conceptions of the human and how it is socially constructed, as well as re-assess the figure of the Homeric hero and its various forms of self-expression as animal forms of being. The simile creates a hybrid space between the animal and the human world, where the relation between the hero and the animal is continuously evolving, and presenting readers with new and queer ways of being. There are, however, some dangers to be aware of when looking at animal similes and at comparisons and exchanges between the human and the animal realm, especially when they are kept as binary opposites. Looking at the concept of wildness as an unbounded and unpracticable force, often associated with queerness, Halberstam highlights a fundamental critical tension: on one side, invoking wildness risks reinstating the binary opposition between civilization and barbarism; on the other, excluding wildness from the theoretical framework may inadvertently uphold normative structures, thereby reinforcing the very systems that queer critique aims to destabilize. To Halberstam, wildness as an unbounded space that rejects categorisation can be used as an oppositional political category which offers an anti-epistemological model, yet wildness 'has meaning precisely because of the category of civilisation and this means that wildness is a dangerous category to play with precisely because of its traces of violent othering'.[11] So while animacy, in Chen's terms, can provide a space of exchange and possibilities for new kinships and realms of what constitutes the human, when we associate wildness with queerness as separate concepts, we risk falling

[11] Halberstam (2021). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKhtFFekDOc>.

back into dangerous and damaging binaries. It is worth noting that while animal similes do escape to an extent the rigid gender roles imposed in the human realm, they simultaneously often re-instate binary roles and attitudes through their basic distinction between strong and weak, prey and predator.

Following Halberstam's warnings, I will therefore explore how animal similes work to create new relations with the human realm, not entirely avoiding traps of already existing binaries, while still exploring uncharted possibilities and forms of kinship and self-expression. In particular, I will focus on how animal similes push readers to re-think and re-assess the relationship of Homeric heroes with their self-expression in terms of gender, desire, and humanity; as well as interrogating how this questioning of the self brings about new ways of relating to others and thus new forms of companionship and kinship. A queer reading of animal similes, then, can not only re-assess the figure of the simile as a poetic tool with the potential to express and bring to light new forms of being, but also re-think and problematise the concept of the hero within the *Iliad*, complicating his role within the text.

My analysis of animal similes in the *Iliad* therefore highlights how these figures invite readers to re-evaluate not only human behaviour and values but also the spectrum of connections and forms of kinship available to humanity, particularly when it comes to Achilles. Drawing on theories of animacy and queerness, I examine how the simile's unique capacity to bridge the human and animal realms fosters a radical reimagining of relationality and identity. However, to fully understand the potential of animality and the kinships it allows, we must first analyse how similes work to destabilize gender constructs. Since gender roles and expectations shape the very foundations of kinship and social belonging in the *Iliad*, an exploration of how similes blur these boundaries is essential for understanding how new forms of relationality, both human and nonhuman, can emerge. To this end, I dedicate the following section of my

analysis to similes that challenge traditional gender binaries, demonstrating how disruptions in masculine and feminine roles create space for alternative ways of being.

Human Constructions of Gender in the *Iliad*

The *Iliad* presents a complex interplay of similarity and difference in the way similes destabilise gendered expectations and roles, which serves as the groundwork for broader understandings of identity and kinship. As we have seen in the previous chapter on the *Odyssey*, the ability of the simile to destabilise gender roles while also disturbing the social context of the poem they take place in is explicitly shown in what Foley defines as reverse similes, defined as allowing a 'change of perspective or reversal of social role in the comparison',[12] and 'images of sexual inversion'.[13] Reverse similes suggest 'both a sense of identity between people in different social and sexual roles and a loss of stability, an inversion of the normal'.[14] By doing so, as we will see, they reveal the potential of similes to disrupt social conventions and fixed identity roles through the fluidity inherent in comparison. If similes, by nature, do not construct absolute equivalences but instead highlight moments of instability and transformation, then reverse similes in particular can be read as moments where the *Iliad* exposes and interrogates the ideological construction of gender.

This section will therefore demonstrate how reverse similes in the *Iliad* disturb rigid gender roles by creating moments of inversion and ambiguity. Rather than being confined to isolated moments, these challenges to gender norms are woven throughout the poem's structure, demonstrating that war and heroism are not as rigidly masculine as they might initially seem. Since kinship is shaped by pre-existing gendered expectations, it is crucial to understand how the *Iliad*'s similes challenge these categories. Before fully exploring how

[12] Foley (1978), 8.
[13] Foley (1978), 8.
[14] Foley (1978), 8.

similes blur the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, however, it is essential to establish how they first unsettle normative gender roles, which form the conceptual framework through which kinship and personhood are typically understood. By first analysing the disruptions of gender within similes, this section will lay the groundwork for exploring how new forms of relationality can emerge, including those that blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman beings.

Similes commenting on gender roles in the *Iliad* are often related to warfare. This is particularly relevant when considering how power hierarchies are constructed in the *Iliad*, where physical strength and combat ability are central to a hero's value. Warfare is not just about physical battles; it also involves the adoption of predefined social roles. Female traits are often invoked to demean a warrior's prowess: women's association with warfare, often as objects of exchange through dowry, reinforces a gendered hierarchy in which men are positioned as dominant over women.

This gendered authority, according to Osborne, derives by a series of qualities, not all of them quantitative, and thus hard to pin down, moving from the ability to give advice, to physical strength, to money, to social influence. As he notes, 'formal structures and institutions of the communities' within Homeric society 'are never more than lightly sketched', and authority is characterised by its 'provisional nature'.[15] For these reasons, and for the lack of a legal and juridical systems, the way society is formed and works around gender roles is hard to define within the context of the *Iliad*: different power relations arise from different situations, societal roles, and interactions with others. Amongst these, marriage is a fundamental factor

[15] Osborne (2006), 212. Osborne also notes how 'the delicate balance between conventional rules, individual authority and community participation found in the Ithacan assembly is not peculiar to the unusual situation there. It is a mark of civilised society to have laws and councils (cf. ix.105–15) and we find similar assemblies and councils in the army at Troy (2.84–394, 9.9–79, 14.109–27; cf. Trojan assembly of 7.345–79) and indeed among the gods (esp. 4.1–72).'

that plays into structures of power: the connection of marriage with gift-giving further consolidates its role as an event that makes the exchange of power and resources possible, [16] and appears as one of the ways in which gender roles are indeed consolidated even within a society with no real legal or juridical system. This specific gendered form of power Osborne notes also mixes with the 'competitive redistribution'[17] typical in Homeric society, making the project of society-building in the *Iliad* one where individual authority over a group is built through wealth, power, strength, and gendered violence, all of which must be recognised by the community in order to gain real authority through these factors.

So it is indeed striking that most reverse similes in the poem refer to Achilles himself, and in particular to his mother-like qualities: [18] less surprising are the instances where instead Achilles is the one assigning maternal roles to others: giving the close relationship between him and Thetis, it makes sense that in his speech he would draw out such behaviours. Still, the comparisons provide interesting points of analysis, especially when Achilles himself is the one likening his behaviour to that of a mother, and the comparison is not drawn out extra-diegetically. Such an occurrence happens in Book 9, in the run-up to the embassy to Achilles, in a simile that brings together the destabilising force of reverse similes as well as animal similes. After being defeated on the field, Agamemnon is distraught and even proposes to go back to Greece and abandon the idea of conquering Troy. Despite being convinced to remain in place, Agamemnon still organises a detachment to convince Achilles to come back to fight,

[16] Osborne (2006), 214. Osborne notes how 'wives usually migrate to live with their husbands' as an evident example of marriage working as an exchange of power and resources. He brings Penelope moving to Ithaca, and Bellerophon moving to Lycia as examples: 'Bellerophon is one of a number of bridegrooms who receive gifts from their bride's father (6.191–5; cf. Priam, 22.49–51, Odysseus, ii.132–3 and Agamemnon's offer to Achilles, 9.144–57). More frequently the bride's father receives rather than gives gifts, as Peleus does for Polydore and Phyleus for Polymele (16.175–8, 190–2) or Laertes for Odysseus 'sister Ctimene (xv.367)' (214).
[17] Osborne (2006), 214.
[18] As shown in Mills (2000), Dué (2005), Gaca (2008) and Dué and Ebbott (2012). Instances include *Il*. 9.323-5 and *Il*. 16.7-10.

consisting of Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix. After Odysseus' speech, Achilles rejects the idea (*Il*. 9.323-7): [19]

> ὡς δ᾽ ὄρνις ἀπτῆσι νεοσσοῖσι προφέρησι
> μάστακ᾽ ἐπεί κε λάβησι, κακῶς δ᾽ ἄρα οἱ πέλει αὐτῇ,
> ὣς καὶ ἐγὼ πολλὰς μὲν ἀΰπνους νύκτας ἴαυον,
> ἤματα δ᾽ αἱματόεντα διέπρησσον πολεμίζων
> ἀνδράσι μαρνάμενος ὀάρων ἕνεκα σφετεράων.

Kirk discounts the use of the simile in direct speech altogether, by saying that 'what in the mouth of the poet or a weak and helpless character would be a powerful instrument of pathos sounds a petulant note when it comes from the ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν (*Il*. 1.68),[20] and points out Achilles' childishness in his wish to note how 'he is worn out in selfless unrewarded toil'.[21] This view stops the simile from having any real meaning in direct speech, as it is seen only as a poetic device which has no place and no use in real conversation; more importantly, it also disregards the idea that the character themselves might express a different view from the unitarian one presented in the poem. In comparing heroic acts in warfare to a mother's protection, Achilles presents a gendered version of heroism that seems to deviate from the normative praise of soldiers' strength. As Dué suggests, Achilles 'draws on the suffering of captive women in order to articulate his own sorrow, as he struggles against his mortality and the pleas of his comrades that he return to battle'.[22] She argues that similes that have to do with birds are particularly related to the tradition of women's laments that exist outside of epic as well, with particular reference to Aeschylus and Euripides, and finding a 'traditional connections of these similes to lament, and that the lament […] is actually a call for

[19] 'As a bird | brings little mouthfuls for her fledgling chicks | whenever she gets food and starves herself, | so I kept watch for many sleepless nights | and fought my way through many bloody days, | struggling with men to rob them of their women'.
[20] Kirk (1985), 104.
[21] Kirk (1985), 104.
[22] Dué (2005), 5.

vengeance'.[23] For her, then, 'the truncated mother bird simile […] foreshadows future events',[24] standing as a simile that moulds gender roles and expectations to foreshadow and foretell future events within the narrative and to underline the future actions of the character, all within the speech of the character himself. Scott also comments on how this simile contains a ' dilution of a traditional subject by selecting the weaker features in the simileme',[25] moving away from the more common imagery of birds of prey, a classic simile within epic.[26]

Mills also picks up on the rarity of similes within direct speech in the *Iliad*, and yet draws conclusions that are the opposite of Kirk's. After all, as Moulton says, 'Achilles utters more similes than any other character'.[27] Mills relates the simile of Achilles as a bird to another simile using maternal care, also spoken by Achilles. This appears at the beginning of Book 16, when Patroclus, having witnessed the many deaths of the Greeks, begs Achilles to forgive and forget Agamemnon's insult and re-join the battlefield to turn the tides (*Il*. 16.7-11): [28]

> τίπτε δεδάκρυσαι Πατρόκλεες, ἠΰτε κούρη
> νηπίη, ἥ θ᾽ ἅμα μητρὶ θέουσ᾽ ἀνελέσθαι ἀνώγει
> εἰανοῦ ἁπτομένη, καί τ᾽ ἐσσυμένην κατερύκει,
> δακρυόεσσα δέ μιν ποτιδέρκεται, ὄφρ᾽ ἀνέληται·
> τῇι ἴκελος Πάτροκλε τέρεν κατὰ δάκρυον εἴβεις.

Here the simile works in a twofold way: Achilles compares Patroclus to a girl (κούρη, 16.7) looking for her mother (μητρί, 16.8), making their tears (δάκρυον, 16.11) the point of comparison. At first glance, the simile is only used to emasculate Patroclus as both childish and a girl.[29] While the characterisation of Patroclus' is made explicit in the comparison, that of

[23] Dué (2005), 15.
[24] Dué (2005), 15.
[25] Scott (2009), 51.
[26] See *Il*. 2.459, *Il*. 15.690, and *Od*. 22.302 among others.
[27] Moulton (1977), 100.
[28] '"Why have you started crying now, Patroclus, | just like a silly little girl, who runs | beside her mother begging, 'Pick me up!,' | and tugs her dress and gets under her feet? | Patroclus, you are like that little girl, | with these thick tears of yours"'.
[29] This is an interpretation made particularly evident by Pope's translation (*Il*. 16.7-11): "Patroclus, say, what grief thy bosom bears, | That flows so fast in these unmanly tears? | No girl, no infant whom the

Achilles is more indirect: since Patroclus has come looking for Achilles, the hero effectively takes up the role of the mother. This is well explained by Mills: [30]

> Both similes are in Achilles' own mouth, although the use of extended similes in direct speech is relatively rare, and both express his feelings about his role in the Greek army, which is a 'parental', protective role of a kind that he has rejected by removing himself from the fighting. When Patroclus entreats him on behalf of the army, Achilles' anger touches even this unique recipient of his continued loyalty and protection.

In this simile, however, Achilles' parental role assumes a more intimate dimension, particularly in relation to his relationship with Patroclus. While no relationship in the *Iliad* is ever entirely private, the gendered intervention of feminine qualities in the hero's appearance and behaviour is not confined solely to the public sphere, but extends into a more personal, less overtly public context as well. The simile, of course, has also a kind of dramatic irony, as noted by Kirk: 'it is all the more ominous when Patroklos is sent out to protect the Greeks; Akhilleus will blame himself for failing to protect him'.[31] It then serves to create an internal battle for Achilles, built around the roles he has constructed for himself, and going against the expectations of gender roles constructed by epic.

This nuanced tension between gender, emotion, and heroism seen in Achilles' speech to Patroclus finds an echo elsewhere in the poem, particularly in moments where male characters experience extreme physical or emotional distress. While Achilles' simile introduces femininity into a private emotional register, the *Iliad* also deploys similar gendered inversions in more public, martial contexts. The maternal imagery used by Achilles resonates unexpectedly with a later simile in Book 11, where Agamemnon's suffering is compared to the pains of a woman in labour. Here, the simile opens a space in the poem where male pain can

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mother keeps | From her loved breast, with fonder passion weeps; | Not more the mother's soul, that infant warms, | Clung to her knees, and reaching at her arms, | Than thou hast mine!" (Pope, 1715-20).
[30] Mills (2000), 8.
[31] Kirk (1985), 316.

be framed through images culturally coded as feminine. This strategy not only disrupts the rigid gender binaries typically assumed within the epic world but also complicates the emotional range available to its heroes. This is clearly expressed in Book 11, after Agamemnon is wounded in battle by the Trojan hero Coon (*Il*. 11.263-72):[32]

> αὐτὰρ ὁ τῶν ἄλλων ἐπεπωλεῖτο στίχας ἀνδρῶν
> ἔγχεΐ τ᾽ ἄορί τε μεγάλοισί τε χερμαδίοισιν,
> ὄφρά οἱ αἶμ᾽ ἔτι θερμὸν ἀνήνοθεν ἐξ ὠτειλῆς.
> αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τὸ μὲν ἕλκος ἐτέρσετο, παύσατο δ᾽ αἷμα,
> ὀξεῖαι δ᾽ ὀδύναι δῦνον μένος Ἀτρεΐδαο.
> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτ᾽ ἂν ὠδίνουσαν ἔχηι βέλος ὀξὺ γυναῖκα
> δριμύ, τό τε προϊεῖσι μογοστόκοι Εἰλείθυιαι
> Ἥρης θυγατέρες πικρὰς ὠδῖνας ἔχουσαι,
> ὣς ὀξεῖ᾽ ὀδύναι δῦνον μένος Ἀτρεΐδαο.

Agamemnon's pain, the physical one of the wound and the spiritual one at having to retreat from battle, is here compared to that of women giving birth. Yet again Kirk sees negative connotations in the simile: 'the image of the woman in labour is a unique and memorable simile which, coming at this point, is eloquent testimony to the range and humanity of the poet's imagination. The immediate point of the simile is to affirm that Agamemnon's body is racked with pain, but there is an inescapable irony at several levels in the comparison. The great effort of the King of Men ends with his being rushed off to his surgeons like a woman to her accouchement - but like a woman none the less. At a deeper level the poet understands the zest for battle […]. Note, however, that Agamemnon […] does not cry out or groan'.[33] Kirk then assess the comparison as demeaning for the hero, who is 'like a woman nonetheless'.

Yet the image here evokes an unbearable pain that Agamemnon is able to tolerate and push through. This kind of pain, associated with divine arrows and childbirth, lies outside the

[32] 'Then, for as long as hot blood kept on spurting | out of his wound, Agamemnon strode amongst the ranks of men with sword and spear | and massive rocks. But when the wound dried up | after the blood stopped flowing, Agamemnon, | the son of Atreus, was pierced by pain. | As when a piercing, cruel arrow strikes | a woman in the agony of labor, | shot by the goddesses of labor pangs, |the Eileithuias, who are Hera's daughters, | in charge of cruel birth-pangs—even so | sharp pains pierced Agamemnon'.
[33] Kirk (1985), 254-5.

typical masculine economy of pain in the epic and is therefore more opaque, especially to a male audience. The simile does not just describe pain, but also signals a breakdown in the poem's usual representational strategies. At a crucial moment, when conventional imagery (blood, wounds, and verbs of physical pain) no longer suffices, the poem turns to the figure of a woman in labour, both disrupting and expanding the epic's framework of suffering. As Holmes notes, the comparison is extraordinary not only for its content but for what it reveals about the poem's limits in expressing certain kinds of vulnerability.[34] If the shared element in the comparison is indeed the intensity of the pain, then the simile also subtly elevates the experience of childbirth, requiring a tolerance and endurance comparable to that of battlefield heroism. In doing so, it aligns women with heroes in their ability to endure pain for a higher purpose: the birth of a child in one case, and in Agamemnon's case, the leadership of an army despite injury. Both parties then ignore the pain to complete their mission. While the simile and indeed reverse similes in general do not argue against the fixing of gender roles, they do reverse and mingle them enough that new perspectives on genders are allowed, going against common misconceptions and re-imagining new possibilities.

Other similes, instead, reflect on gender roles in a different way, not by underlining strength or pain tolerance across both genders like in the previous case, but instead focusing on the violence and the horrors different genders have to withstand and tolerate, highlighting the different treatments that men and women have to suffer in war. This is evident in Book 22, which describes Hector's and Achilles' final battle. While the clash between the two will be more thoroughly analysed later in terms of similes related to natural forces and the animal kingdom, there is a revealing simile positioned right before the start of their battle. Tellingly, it is also expressed through Hector's direct speech, much like Achilles' comparison to a woman or a mother comes from within his own discourse. Discarding Priam's request that Hector stay

[34] Holmes (2012), 75.

safe and possibly relent to the requests of the Greeks and give Helen up, Hector responds that not only would he not be honoured or respected by the Trojans if he did so, but also that Achilles would not hear his words, and instead come at him regardless (*Il*. 22.123-30):[35]

> μή μιν ἐγὼ μὲν ἵκωμαι ἰών, ὁ δέ μ᾽ οὐκ ἐλεήσει
> οὐδέ τί μ᾽ αἰδέσεται, κτενέει δέ με γυμνὸν ἐόντα
> αὕτως ὥς τε γυναῖκα, ἐπεί κ᾽ ἀπὸ τεύχεα δύω.
> οὐ μέν πως νῦν ἔστιν ἀπὸ δρυὸς οὐδ᾽ ἀπὸ πέτρης
> τῶι ὀαριζέμεναι, ἅ τε παρθένος ἠΐθεός τε
> παρθένος ἠΐθεός τ᾽ ὀαρίζετον ἀλλήλοιιν.
> βέλτερον αὖτ᾽ ἔριδι ξυνελαυνέμεν ὅττι τάχιστα·
> εἴδομεν ὁπποτέρωι κεν Ὀλύμπιος εὖχος ὀρέξηι.

To Willcock the simile shows how 'Hector's mind reverses to peacetime'[36] in its pastoral description of the two lovers almost playing hide-and-seek. Leading up to this moment, Hector does not want to approach Achilles with a peace offering, meaning without weapons, leaving his sword and shield behind, because then he will be slaughtered ὥς […] γυναῖκα (22.125), like a woman. While at a first glance the simile seems to point at the disparity in strength between a defenceless woman and an armed man in war, more interesting is the implication that a woman in war would be taken and brutalised even when defenceless. This is, of course, not a new thought, especially not to Hector: after all, Book 6 is mostly dedicated to Andromache's explanation of what will happen to her and Astyanax if Hector dies in war, underlining the possibility of slavery, rape, and violence. In this simile, Hector's comparing himself to a woman does not serve to underline the humiliation he would suffer in being killed without weapons, but rather the brutalisation against women that is normalised in war, thus adding a new level of critique to the text. The synergy between the simile and the pastoral image of the

[35] '"I cannot face him as a supplicant. | He will not pity me or show respect. | He will kill me unarmed, just like a woman, | if I set down my weapons on the ground. | I think there is no way, from oak or rock, | to chat with him as girl and boy might do | a girl and boy who chat and flirt together. | Better to start the conflict right away, | and we will soon see which of us is granted | success by the Olympian, Lord Zeus."'

[36] Willcock (1976).

lovers also plays a crucial role. While the image of the lovers whispering and hiding may initially seem innocent or tender, it sharply contrasts with the underlying violence that the simile evokes, deepening the critique of the normalization of violence in times of conflict.

While being recognised, this violence is also aestheticized and observed from a different perspective too. This is evident in Book 4, when Menelaus is wounded in battle (*Il.* 4.141-147):[37]

> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε τίς τ᾽ ἐλέφαντα γυνὴ φοίνικι μιήνηι
> Μηιονὶς ἠὲ Κάειρα παρήϊον ἔμμεναι ἵππων·
> κεῖται δ᾽ ἐν θαλάμωι, πολέες τέ μιν ἠρήσαντο
> ἱππῆες φορέειν· βασιλῆϊ δὲ κεῖται ἄγαλμα,
> ἀμφότερον κόσμός θ᾽ ἵππωι ἐλατῆρί τε κῦδος·
> τοῖοί τοι Μενέλαε μιάνθην αἵματι μηροὶ
> εὐφυέες κνῆμαί τε ἰδὲ σφυρὰ κάλ᾽ ὑπένερθε.

Moulton sees this 'association with women and children' as beginning 'to complicate our conception of Menelaus',[38] while Kirk comments on this as being 'one of the most striking and unusual of Iliadic similes' in its mixing of desire and violence. [39] It is indeed telling that the *Iliad* seems to move swiftly between expressions of desirability and description of physical damage obtained in war. The connection between the two spheres is here oblique: a woman dyes ivory with purple to create a decorated cheekpiece for a horse, an object of luxury, ornamentation, and martial display. The vivid red of Menelaus' blood is likened to the purple dye staining the pale ivory. The cheekpiece then becomes a symbol of elite status and competitive desire among warriors. The simile thus works through a chain of associations

[37] 'At once the wound gushed blood as black as clouds, | as when a woman from Maeonia | or Caria stains ivory with purple | to make a horse's cheekpiece, which is stored | inside an inner chamber, and great numbers | of charioteers are longing to possess it, | but it is saved as treasure for a king, | a beautiful decoration for the horse, | and glory for the driver—Menelaus, | so were your handsome thighs all stained with blood, | so were your handsome calves and shapely ankles'.
[38] Moulton (1977).
[39] Kirk (1985), 345.

(blood to dye, thigh to ivory, warrior to ornamented horse) that aestheticizes the moment of wounding.

Commenting on these associations, Oliensis notes that 'what Menelaus undergoes in this scene is the figurative equivalent of castration. The arrow slices downward through sword belt, corselet and the guard beneath (μίτρης, 4.137; at 4.187 Menelaus also mentions a ζῶμα, a synonym for ζώνη) and, though the location of the scratch is not specified, the implication is that the arrow reaches those most carefully protected parts in the vicinity of the lower abdomen',[40] and goes as far as saying that 'the effect of this figurative castration, moreover, is to transform Menelaus into a woman'.[41] While it is possible to read the simile as bringing down Menelaus to the demeaning characteristics of womanhood, its slipperiness makes it so that it is also possible to read it as instead of offering a more interesting commentary on violence against women. The bloodied warrior's body becomes, like the stained ivory, a site of both beauty and harm, desire and damage. Rather than diminishing Menelaus by aligning him with femininity, the simile reveals how war aestheticizes suffering across gender lines. The link between the horse's ornament and the wounded hero suggests not mockery but a shared visual language of value, beauty, and violence. The simile thus subtly invites to think more broadly about the different kinds of violence suffered in war, whether by women or warriors.

Through reverse similes, then, not only can gender roles and the ideological construction of gender altogether be interrogated, but also, thanks to the slowing of narrative pace produced by the simile, 'it is as if the camera is turning away from the main action and zooming in on material minutiae. The battle, the war, the journey: all drop away in that instant of close up'.[42] The close up of the simile, then, zooms in on gender trouble, revealing its cracks within the

[40] Oliensis (2019), 36.
[41] Oliensis (2019), 36.
[42] Canevaro (2018), 98.

narrative: the analysis of gender roles within similes shows that 'despite their discreet presence, the female characters in the *Iliad* do not remain outside the frame of epic narrative; they are at the heart of the war, closely and variably involved in the action'.[43] As she notes, 'rather than intruding in the epic narrative, the female characters' points of view complicate and enrich an often monolithic conception of the war',[44] and of gender both in and through war more broadly. These perspectives are not confined to isolated speeches but are instead woven throughout the narrative, particularly through the poetic device of the simile. It is crucial to begin with this close attention to gender because it is through gendered categories that many social and affective structures, such as kinship, care, and social legibility, are organised. Only once these categories are shown to be unstable can the simile's more expansive challenges to the human itself come into view.

These dynamics are most clearly and insistently concentrated in the figure of Achilles. It is in his speech, more than that of any other character, that similes linger, multiply, and take on an unusually reflexive force. Achilles not only becomes the object of gendered comparison but actively produces it, using the simile to articulate roles of care, protection, and vulnerability that sit uneasily within epic masculinity. The prominence of reverse similes in his direct speech suggests that Achilles functions as a formal and ideological hinge within the poem: a figure through whom the epic tests the limits of gendered heroism, emotional legibility, and social obligation. His similes expose how epic identity is constructed through comparison, and how those comparisons can unravel the very categories of gender, kinship, and authority that they appear to stabilise. It is from this unstable position, already marked by gendered and affective ambiguity, that Achilles will later become the primary site through which the simile's challenge extends beyond the human altogether.

[43] Nappi (2015), 34.
[44] Nappi (2015), 36.

This attention to how similes rework gendered expectations also allows us to think more broadly about the formal operations of the simile itself, as a structure that not only reflects but reshapes the social world it depicts. As Moretti states, looking at formal elements and how they are used in texts has a very specific aim: 'the aim is the understanding of individual texts; the means, the making explicit of social practices'.[45] As he argues, 'this is what form *always* does: it selects some elements of the given world, combines them, and creates a *model* of that world'.[46] It seems, here, that the form of a simile takes the given world of ideologically constructed gender roles, and uses it to model yet a new possibility, first through disturbance and then through construction. Similes, then, and reverse similes, create a pattern where we can recognise possible fall-outs in the ideological construction of gender. By selecting certain elements of the world and reconfiguring them within new comparative frameworks, similes challenge fixed ideas of identity and allow for alternative possibilities to emerge. In doing so, they model a world in which masculinity, femininity, and even the boundaries of the human are not rigidly defined but subject to transformation. This analysis of gendered instability in similes lays the foundation for the next step in this discussion: examining how these same mechanisms extend beyond human identity to explore broader questions of kinship, particularly between humans and animals. If similes can unsettle the ideological constructs of gender, they can also disrupt rigid divisions between species, opening space for new forms of relationality that blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman existence.

Making Kin Across the Predator/Prey Divide

Having explored how reverse similes expose the limits of gendered roles by comparing human figures in ways that momentarily disrupt normative expectations, I now turn to animal similes

[45] Moretti (2017), 7.
[46] Moretti (2017), 8.

to pursue this disruption further. While reverse similes gesture towards alternative gender expressions, they remain confined within a human framework shaped by ideology and social norms. Animal similes, by contrast, open a different kind of imaginative space. This movement into the non-human realm allows for a more radical questioning not only of gender roles but also of kinship structures and social bonds. New ways of looking at self-expression and kinship can therefore be allowed, as I will show, by looking at animal similes instead, where the comparison is not between two human beings constricted by gender roles or ideology, but instead where the comparison opens into the animal and natural realm, and where simile allows those realms to intersect.[47] The importance of this intersection far exceeds the links that have traditionally been made. Lonsdale, for example, says, 'in the war epic, with its stress on speed and action, it is hardly surprising to find that animal similes serve to emphasize either mass or individual movement'.[48] Going beyond warfare as the poem's main setting, I will here focus on the way animal similes additionally intersect with gender roles, social roles and kinship, and sexuality.

For this discussion, I also rely on Jose Esteban Muñoz's notion that 'queer thought is, in large part, about casting a picture of arduous modes of relationality that persist in the world despite stratifying demarcations and taxonomies of being, classifications that are bent on the siloing of particularity and on the denigrating of any expansive idea of the common and communism'.[49] Muñoz sees the concept of the human and of humanity as being intrinsically linked with issues of racism, coloniality, and othering, and he therefore seeks to open up new ways to consider connectivity and relationality through explorations of inhumanism. Heeding his idea that the 'project of inhumanity is the active self-attunement to life as varied and

[47] For a recent exploration of this, see Kindt's analysis (2024) of how concepts of 'the animal' and 'animality' were mobilized in antiquity to define and challenge the boundaries of the human. Through figures such as the Trojan Horse, the Cyclops, and the Minotaur, Kindt demonstrates that the ancient world conceived of human identity as deeply entangled with the non-human.
[48] Lonsdale (1990), 33.
[49] Muñoz (2015), 210.

unsorted correspondences, collisions, intermeshings, and accords between people and nonhuman objects, things, formations, and clusterings',[50] I aim to explore relationality and kinship in the *Iliad* as potentially establishing different relationships and power hierarchies. To do this, I will consider animal similes not only as ways of expressing physical prowess, as suggested by Lonsdale, but instead as poetic moments that can help explore new ways of relating to gender and sexuality within the epic context.

The animal simile can thus be understood as a poetic site where human boundaries are blurred and queered, opening up new kinds of embodiment, attachment and kinship within the Homeric world. A first example of animal kinship made visible by the simile is hinted at in Book 10, as Diomedes and Ulysses chase Dolon (*Il.* 10.360-4):[51]

> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε καρχαρόδοντε δύω κύνε εἰδότε θήρης
> ἢ κεμάδ᾽ ἠὲ λαγωὸν ἐπείγετον ἐμμενὲς αἰεὶ
> χῶρον ἀν᾽ ὑλήενθ᾽, ὁ δέ τε προθέησι μεμηκώς,
> ὣς τὸν Τυδεΐδης ἠδ᾽ ὁ πτολίπορθος Ὀδυσσεὺς
> λαοῦ ἀποτμήξαντε διώκετον ἐμμενὲς αἰεί.

Kirk regards the comparison as unusual and is careful to mark a distinction in how the term κύων is used. He comments on how 'Greek draws no linguistic distinction between the hound, a noble creature […] to which heroes in their pride may be compared, and the scavenging mongrel cur implied by the use of κύων as a term of abuse or insult'.[52] Kirk's comment shows how even animal comparisons are usually read through a starkly social lens: to him, a Homeric hero would never be associated with κύων as an insult, but rather, the comparison is meant to underline their nobility. Expanding on the relationship between human and dog, Redfield finds

[50] Muñoz (2015), 210.
[51] 'They hurtled after him, as when two hounds, | trained hunters with sharp teeth, pursue their prey, | a baby deer or hare, relentlessly | chasing across the woodland in pursuit, | their victim squealing as he runs ahead— | so Diomedes, son of Tydeus, | and great Odysseus, the city-sacker, | cut Dolon from his people and pursued him | relentlessly'.
[52] Kirk (1985), 181.

their relation 'metonymic', stating that 'the dog is a piece of unruly nature next to man or within him',[53] and explaining how dog comparisons in war underline how man can maintain his humanity while also assuming beast-like behaviours in violent situations. When reading comparisons between human and dog through this socially informed view, analyses often focus on the domesticity of the animal, a point of view likely influenced by how dogs are perceived as the first domestic animal tamed by humans.[54]

In spite of their supposed tameness, however, this simile presents dogs as quite aggressive and untamed animals: they are described as having sharp teeth, and are effectively cast as predators and hunters. This description un-tames the figure of the dog, and instead presents it as strictly belonging to the animal world: most importantly, the distinction between the tamed and quasi-human dog and the more feral dog presented here allows for the human-dog relationship to be discarded, instead focusing on a new type of kinship, that between the dogs themselves. The pack-like relationship between the two dogs (δύω κύνε , 10.360), moves away from the usual model of single combat in the *Iliad*, re-positioning the figure of the hero as one who creates relationships, fights with, and interacts with others, a possibility allowed only by the comparison provided by the simile with the animal world. The comparison provided by the simile does therefore not only yet again re-define the figure of the hero in the text, but also provides new possibilities of new forms of kinship and recognition of similarity rather than socially imposed divisions and behaviours, offering a more instinct-based and undomesticated type of relation that can be read as queering, troubling, and disturbing dominant forms of sociality.

While this simile therefore presents us with new fruitful ways of looking at affinity, companionship and kinship in the *Iliad*, in other instances the simile can also be used to

[53] Redfield (1975), 194.
[54] This is noted by Haraway (2003) in her analysis of companion species in relation to humans.

underline a lack thereof. This is made evident twice in Book 11, as Odysseus gets cornered by the Trojans (*Il.* 11.414-20):[55]

> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε κάπριον ἀμφὶ κύνες θαλεροί τ᾽ αἰζηοὶ
> σεύωνται, ὁ δέ τ᾽ εἶσι βαθείης ἐκ ξυλόχοιο
> θήγων λευκὸν ὀδόντα μετὰ γναμπτῆισι γένυσσιν,
> ἀμφὶ δέ τ᾽ ἀΐσσονται, ὑπαὶ δέ τε κόμπος ὀδόντων
> γίγνεται, οἳ δὲ μένουσιν ἄφαρ δεινόν περ ἐόντα,
> ὥς ῥα τότ᾽ ἀμφ᾽ Ὀδυσῆα Διῒ φίλον ἐσσεύοντο
> Τρῶες·

Here, Odysseus is compared to a solitary boar, hunted and surrounded by dogs spurred on by young hunters, the Trojans. To Kirk, 'the boar is a good figure for truculent counter-aggression when under attack, as the lion represents primary aggression':[56] once again, the primary term of comparison seems to remain that of aggression and brute force when bridging the human/animal divide. Yet the simile also plays with hierarchy and agency in more complex ways. The dogs, though technically the immediate attackers, act under human command, blurring the lines between instinct and discipline, nature and culture. In contrast, the boar stands apart, not necessarily in emotional isolation, but in tactical and numerical solitude, facing multiple enemies without allies. This asymmetry creates a subtle reversal: the humanized figure of Odysseus is cast in the role of the lone animal resisting an organized assault, while the hunters and their dogs form a collective whose aggression appears increasingly choreographed, and therefore, paradoxically, more mechanized or impersonal. The simile thus opens up a kind of hybridity, as traits typically coded as human or animal begin to circulate across species lines.

[55] 'As hounds and hunters | surround a wild boar just as he emerges | out of dense woodland with his jaws agape, | gnashing his bright white tusks—on every side | the hunters lunge at him and though they hear | his grinding teeth, they face the fierce opponent— | just so, the Trojan warriors surrounded | Odysseus, the leader loved by Zeus'.
[56] Kirk (1985), 271.

A similarly complex kind of predator/prey dynamic is staged as Odysseus is found by Ajax (*Il*. 11.473-83):[57]

> ὗρον ἔπειτ᾽ Ὀδυσῆα Διῒ φίλον· ἀμφὶ δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ αὐτὸν
> Τρῶες ἔπονθ᾽ ὡς εἴ τε δαφοινοὶ θῶες ὄρεσφιν
> ἀμφ᾽ ἔλαφον κεραὸν βεβλημένον, ὅν τ᾽ ἔβαλ᾽ ἀνὴρ
> ἰῶι ἀπὸ νευρῆς· τὸν μέν τ᾽ ἤλυξε πόδεσσι
> φεύγων, ὄφρ᾽ αἷμα λιαρὸν καὶ γούνατ᾽ ὀρώρηι·
> αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ τόν γε δαμάσσεται ὠκὺς ὀϊστός,
> ὠμοφάγοι μιν θῶες ἐν οὔρεσι δαρδάπτουσιν
> ἐν νέμεϊ σκιερῶι· ἐπί τε λῖν ἤγαγε δαίμων
> σίντην· θῶες μέν τε διέτρεσαν, αὐτὰρ ὁ δάπτει·
> ὥς ῥα τότ᾽ ἀμφ᾽ Ὀδυσῆα δαΐφρονα ποικιλομήτην
> Τρῶες ἔπον πολλοί τε καὶ ἄλκιμοι.

Here, the shifting dynamic of predator and prey is further complicated. Odysseus is compared to a wounded stag surrounded by jackals, only for the jackals to scatter when Ajax appears in the form of a lion, who then proceeds to devour the stag himself. The simile thus opens up a kind of hybridity: Odysseus occupies the role of the hunted animal, pursued and near collapse, yet the return of Ajax replaces one predator with another.

The different power relations presented in these similes and the different connections between the animal and human world further underline the difficulty to separate the two realms: as Alaimo notes, 'by eluding perfect modes of capture, queer animals dramatize emergent worlds of desire, action, agency, and interactivity that can never be reduced to a background or resource against which the human defines himself'.[58] While Alaimo interprets 'queer animals' as those animals which are sexually active with members of the same sex, I see queer animals as those who, through the destabilizing force of the simile, manage to call into question

[57] 'They found Odysseus, whom Zeus had favored, | pressed hard by Trojans who surrounded him— | as spotted jackals on the mountainside | surround a wounded stag, at whom a hunter | aims with an arrow from his string and strikes— | the stag sprints off, escapes the man, and while | his blood runs warm, his long light legs keep running, | but when the arrow overpowers him, | the wild, flesh-eating jackals on the mountain | devour him in the shadows of the grove, | then some god sends a lion, who is starving— | the jackals scatter, and the lion eats— | so did the valiant Trojans cluster round | clever, ingenious Odysseus, | but he fought back, attacked them with his spear, | and saved himself from death'.
[58] Alaimo (2010), 67.

hierarchies and forms of kinship in the text. *Il*. 11.473-83 both confounds and re-instates predator and prey dynamics through the animal world, and in *Il*. 11.414-20 both the boar and the domesticated dogs elude 'perfect modes of capture', making us rethink what is human and what is animal, and how the two realms can blend and interact. The bleeding of human qualities into the animal and vice versa escapes a clear definition, just like the animal escapes easy categorization as either predator or prey.

Yet in spite of this disturbance of some stark divisions between the animal and human realms and the malleability of prey and predator roles, some clear distinctions remain within animal similes. Often, kinship can only be achieved through the presence of a common enemy, as displayed in the simile describing the two Ajax killing Imbrius, a Trojan, in Book 13 (*Il*. 13.196-205):[59]

> Ἴμβριον αὖτ᾽ Αἴαντε μεμαότε θούριδος ἀλκῆς
> ὥς τε δύ᾽ αἶγα λέοντε κυνῶν ὕπο καρχαροδόντων
> ἁρπάξαντε φέρητον ἀνὰ ῥωπήϊα πυκνὰ
> ὑψοῦ ὑπὲρ γαίης μετὰ γαμφηλῆισιν ἔχοντε,
> ὥς ῥα τὸν ὑψοῦ ἔχοντε δύω Αἴαντε κορυστὰ
> τεύχεα συλήτην· κεφαλὴν δ᾽ ἀπαλῆς ἀπὸ δειρῆς
> κόψεν Ὀϊλιάδης κεχολωμένος Ἀμφιμάχοιο,
> ἦκε δέ μιν σφαιρηδὸν ἑλιξάμενος δι᾽ ὁμίλου·
> Ἕκτορι δὲ προπάροιθε ποδῶν πέσεν ἐν κονίηισι.

Unlike dogs, despite their pack-oriented nature, lions do not hunt with their companions: rather, they hunt alone, as pointed out already by the Homeric scholiast Zenodotus.[60] A fictional kinship is therefore created between the two lions (δύ᾽ […] λέοντε, 13.197) to symbolise the kinship between the warriors. Here, it is not animal behaviour that allows new kinships to arise

[59] 'And then the two named Ajax, | their courage and aggression running high, | seized Imbrius—as when two lions seize | a billy goat from a pack of sharp-toothed hounds, | and through thick undergrowth they carry him | high above ground, clenched tightly in their jaws— | so did the pair of warriors named Ajax | carry the corpse of Imbrius up high, | and then they stripped the armor off his body. | Oilean Ajax sliced through his soft neck | and cut his head off, because he was angry | about Amphimachus. He swung and pitched | the head across the crowd, just like a ball. | It landed in the dust at Hector's feet'.
[60] Kirk (1985), 71-2

in the human sphere, but rather it is human interaction that is made visible within the animal world, bending rules of companionship and making the two worlds blend into each other and create new shapes and forms of kinship. The binary between predator and prey, however, remains, and raises a fundamental question when it comes to the lens of queerness and its building of new communities: is a kinship based on this binary desirable? My objective here is not to point at a kinship based on aggression and shared predatorship, but rather to explore how the logic of the simile truly defies structure: in this case, the dogs stand for the Trojans, defending the corpse of Imbrius, while the two Aiantes are the lions, claiming it for themselves. While the two human sides are here performing different actions, defending versus desecrating a corpse, the animals are connected by their feasting on the carcass of Imbrius as goat, therefore bringing the Greek and the Trojan side together by commenting on the general violence performed by both sides on the war field. The simile once again blends divisions between the human and animal realm, in the context of the *Iliad*, bringing together enemy lines through the shared experience of warfare, while yet again maintaining a stark division between the roles of predator and prey.

The image of lions fighting over a corpse as shown in *Il.* 13.196-205 is repeated in Book 16. Again, enemy sides are unmade through what Lonsdale, picking up again on the solitary nature of these animals when hunting, defines as a 'distortion of naturalism in the similes for poetic effects'.[61] Here, Patroclus and Hector are described fighting and killing Cebriones (*Il.* 16.756-61): [62]

> τὼ περὶ Κεβριόναο λέονθ᾽ ὡς δηρινθήτην,
> ὥ τ᾽ ὄρεος κορυφῆισι περὶ κταμένης ἐλάφοιο
> ἄμφω πεινάοντε μέγα φρονέοντε μάχεσθον·

[61] Lonsdale (1990), 152.

[62] 'As when a lion pounces on a farmstead, | and wrecks the stables, but his chest is wounded, | and his own courage kills him—with that fervor, | Patroclus, you attacked Cebriones. | Then Hector jumped out of his chariot | down to the ground. The two of them contended | around Cebriones—as hungry lions | fight on the mountaintop for a dead deer— | so those two lords, the masters of the war cry, | Menoetius' son Patroclus and bright Hector, | fought for Cebriones'.

ὣς περὶ Κεβριόναο δύω μήστωρες ἀϋτῆς
Πάτροκλός τε Μενοιτιάδης καὶ φαίδιμος Ἕκτωρ
ἵεντ᾽ ἀλλήλων ταμέειν χρόα νηλέϊ χαλκῶι.

Again it is the shared experience of violence and warfare that brings the two heroes together, transforming our notion of the natural world (as Kirk says, lions do not even 'co-operate in carrying a carcass nor fight over one, even if hungry'),[63] in order to bring Hector and Patroclus together. At the same time, however, this experience of shared kinship is brief and momentary, negated by Hector's killing of Patroclus (*Il.* 16.823-8):[64]

ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε σῦν ἀκάμαντα λέων ἐβιήσατο χάρμηι,
ὥ τ᾽ ὄρεος κορυφῆισι μέγα φρονέοντε μάχεσθον
πίδακος ἀμφ᾽ ὀλίγης· ἐθέλουσι δὲ πιέμεν ἄμφω·
πολλὰ δέ τ᾽ ἀσθμαίνοντα λέων ἐδάμασσε βίηφιν·
ὣς πολέας πεφνόντα Μενοιτίου ἄλκιμον υἱὸν
Ἕκτωρ Πριαμίδης σχεδὸν ἔγχεϊ θυμὸν ἀπηύρα.

When before Hector and Patroclus had both been lions, here Hector stands for the lion, whereas Patroclus stands for the 'tireless wild boar' (σῦν ἀκάμαντα, 16.823). While in the previous simile (*Il.* 16.756-61) they were brought together by similar actions and experiences, and by the remoulding of the animal world to cast a new light on human interactions on the war field, in this one they are again divided, and separated in their roles of winning predator versus attacked prey.

A useful term to capture the logic and work of the simile in this passage is what Haraway refers to as metaplasm. Although the term usually refers to changes in spelling or orthography, Haraway returns to its original Greek meaning of 'remodeling or remolding' and extends it to signify 'remolding the codes of life in the history of companion-species relating'.[65]

[63] Kirk (1985), 406.
[64] 'Just as a lion bests a tireless boar, | when on the mountainside they fight together, | both spirited, majestic warriors, | because both want to drink from a small stream— | the boar pants hard, defeated by the lion— | so Hector, son of Priam, standing close, | stabbed with his spear and took away the life | of brave Patroclus, who had killed so many'.
[65] Haraway (2016), 113.

While this is a broad formulation, it offers a productive lens for understanding how figures of speech such as the simile can participate in shaping broader relational structures, including those between humans and animals. Here, we see this remoulding in action: when both warriors are compared to lions, the simile briefly forges a sense of kinship and equivalence between them, grounded in the similarity of their actions on the battlefield. But this moment of alignment quickly shifts: Patroclus becomes a boar and Hector a lion, marking a transformation from mutual recognition to violent opposition. Read through Haraway's notion of metaplasm, the simile here enables a temporary reconfiguration of relational codes: first to produce likeness and fleeting solidarity, and then to assert hierarchy and dominance.

Having established how animal similes open a more expansive and yet still constrictive imaginative space than reverse simile do, exceeding human-centred frameworks of gender, kinship, and social normativity, I return once more to Achilles as the figure through whom this expansion is most evidently articulated. Just as his speech earlier revealed the instability of gendered roles within human relational structures, Achilles now becomes the primary site at which the poem tests the permeability of the boundary between human and animal. It is through the extremes of his affects, and particularly through moments of grief and loss, that the *Iliad* allows human emotion, animal embodiment, and non-human modes of relationality to converge.

Human emotion and animal embodiment notoriously come together for Achilles in Book 18, during Patroclus' funeral rites. Here, Achilles' grief is compared to that of a lion (*Il.* 18.316-22):[66]

[66] 'Achilles led the bitter wails of grief. | He laid his murderous hands on his friend's chest | and howled and roared—just like a thick-maned lion, | whose cubs a man, a deer hunter, has taken | out of their forest home—the lion comes | too late, and in his desperate grief he tracks | the footprints of the man and tries to find him, | possessed by agonizing rage—just so | Achilles roared with grief and rage'.

τοῖσι δὲ Πηλεΐδης ἀδινοῦ ἐξῆρχε γόοιο
χεῖρας ἐπ᾽ ἀνδροφόνους θέμενος στήθεσσιν ἑταίρου
πυκνὰ μάλα στενάχων ὥς τε λὶς ἠϋγένειος,
ᾧι ῥά θ᾽ ὑπὸ σκύμνους ἐλαφηβόλος ἁρπάσηι ἀνὴρ
ὕλης ἐκ πυκινῆς· ὁ δέ τ᾽ ἄχνυται ὕστερος ἐλθών,
πολλὰ δέ τ᾽ ἄγκε᾽ ἐπῆλθε μετ᾽ ἀνέρος ἴχνι᾽ ἐρευνῶν
εἴ ποθεν ἐξεύροι· μάλα γὰρ δριμὺς χόλος αἱρεῖ·

Just as in the Odysseus-as-boar simile of Book 11, the first term of comparison seems to be physical: Achilles' cries are compared to the lion's roar. However, as Kirk says, 'the more significant emotional parallel is the loss and the consequent agonized grief of hero and lion, followed by their anger'.[67] Like the lion has failed to protect its cubs from a hunter, so Achilles has failed to protect Patroclus from Hector, and both will try to find the cause of their grief, and take their revenge. The final part of the simile thus narratively foreshadows what will happen in the *Iliad*, hinting at the future individual combat between Achilles and Hector. As it did in *Il.* 11.414-20, the simile here presents two predators, the hunter and the lion, while Patroclus remains as the victim, and again like in *Il.* 11.414-20, the human figure is here, if not animalistic, then the one less deserving of empathy. By contrast, by choosing an expression of grief as a point of comparison between Achilles and the lion, the lion becomes humanized in its intense emotions, and, in Alaimo's words, a 'queer animal' that evades both human and animal definitions by blending into both realms.

This simile does not only confuse and blur the line between predators and prey, and between animal and human, but it also re-evaluates the concept of the hero and his role in the *Iliad*: the lion, as well as the hero, becomes both main aggressor and protector at the same time. Mills comments on the gendered characteristics of this simile, and further highlighting the animal comparison as being central to its tension: to her, 'both the image of the grieving lion and that of the father-warrior encapsulate one of the central paradoxes of the hero […]: he must

[67] Kirk (1985), 184.

be both a killer and a care-giver, but care-giving may demand that he is killed, with the result that he will be entirely unable to protect those dependent on him in the future'.[68] While Mills notes that Achilles is exceptional amongst other heroes in the *Iliad* in the range and intensity of his emotions, she recognises the paradox present in all hero figures between killing and care-giving, aggression and protection, in this instance made visible through the lion comparison. The pack-like behaviour exhibited by lions, with their hunting and aggressive behaviour being generally stimulated by the need to feed and protect their cubs, naturalises and validates the human duality of violence and care. In returning to this simile, now through the framework of animal-human boundaries, it becomes clear that its destabilising force lies not just in its evocation of gendered grief, but in its collapsing of distinct ontological categories altogether. Once again, the destabilising force of the simile brings down stark divides between the human and animal realm, letting the two worlds bleed into one another, and offering a new perspective on the figure of the human in the *Iliad* altogether.

Hector's victory and position as top predator in *Il.* 16.823-8 is then swiftly destabilised and overtaken by the force of Achille's grief and rage. This is evident in the final duel between Hector and Achilles in Book 22 (*Il.* 22.188-201):[69]

> Ἕκτορα δ᾽ ἀσπερχὲς κλονέων ἔφεπ᾽ ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς.
> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε νεβρὸν ὄρεσφι κύων ἐλάφοιο δίηται
> ὄρσας ἐξ εὐνῆς διά τ᾽ ἄγκεα καὶ διὰ βήσσας·
> τὸν δ᾽ εἴ πέρ τε λάθησι καταπτήξας ὑπὸ θάμνωι,
> ἀλλά τ᾽ ἀνιχνεύων θέει ἕμπεδον ὄφρά κεν εὕρηι·
> ὣς Ἕκτωρ οὐ λῆθε ποδώκεα Πηλεΐωνα.
> […] ὡς δ᾽ ἐν ὀνείρωι οὐ δύναται φεύγοντα διώκειν·
> οὔτ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ὁ τὸν δύναται ὑποφεύγειν οὔθ᾽ ὁ διώκειν·
> ὣς ὁ τὸν οὐ δύνατο μάρψαι ποσίν, οὐδ᾽ ὃς ἀλύξαι.

[68] Mills (2000), 9.

[69] 'Achilles with relentless speed pursued | Hector—as when a dog pursues a fawn, | and drives her from her mother's lair and hunts her | across the hillside, through the glades and valleys, | and even if she crouches in the bushes | to hide, he runs and tracks her, till he gets her— | so Hector could not hide from swift Achilles, | the son of Peleus. […] | As in a dream, the chase goes on forever— | you never catch, you never get away — | so ran Achilles, always just behind, | feet pounding but unable to catch up | and Hector was unable to escape'.

Fulfilling the foreshadowing of *Il.* 18.316-22, where Achilles had been compared to a lion seeking revenge over the hunter who had killed its cubs, in *Il.* 22.188-201 Achilles assumes the position of dog predator running after its prey, a young deer. Curiously, however, Achilles has not here maintained his role as lion, but rather has become the hunting dog. Given that hunting imagery implies human intervention, as we have seen across many of these similes, it is striking that Achilles is here compared to the very same figure he was seeking revenge against in *Il.* 18.316-22, thus once more confounding hierarchies between predators, prey, humans, and animals. It is also significant that while the binary division between prey and predator remains, the moment where this binary solidifies, meaning when the predator catches the prey, is postponed, utilising a further simile to defer the outcome.

The first simile, comparing Achilles to a hunting dog, foreshadows the end, yet the second one (ὡς δ' ἐν ὀνείρῳ, 22.199), in its dreamlike quality, implies that Achilles and Hector could potentially be stuck in this loop, where the cycle of predator eats prey never becomes officially and physically confirmed and sealed. In this last case, the simile defers the ultimate outcome of the relation between Hector and Achilles as well as their roles as either predator or prey, pointing at a future, at a dream, that is not reachable within the narrative of the *Iliad*, and that yet nevertheless exists as potentiality, and is hinted at through the 'like' of the simile. And yet, the binary between predator and prey remains as a division that animal similes do not seem to be able to completely dismantle within the epic, thus abiding by the stark logic of the battlefield which requires a winner and a loser, a hero and a victim. While the flexibility and variety with which different heroes are likened to different animals and the constellation of relations the simile creates in the *Iliad* hints at a possible instability in the predator/prey binary, this possibility is never fully explored in the narrative. The lion similes that frame Achilles' pursuit of Hector in Book 22 make this unstable hybridity explicit while also revealing its limits. While hero and predator come together into a shared affective economy of hunger,

anticipation, and inevitability; this convergence does not abolish difference. The simile's ambiguity here holds Achilles in a state of suspended identification: he is drawn into animality without fully becoming animal. The simile thus sustains two incompatible positions at once, allowing Achilles' predatory joy to be legible only through analogy, through a form that both releases and restrains his animal likeness. Achilles appears as a figure of mixture whose excess vitality threatens the moral and social order the poem ultimately seeks to preserve.[70] In queer theoretical terms, this animal likeness stages a refusal of stable categorisation, a brief opening onto uncontained bodily potential that the narrative must eventually discipline through closure, death, and lament.

The reinstating of the predator/prey binary in the *Iliad* is reinforced by the characters themselves acknowledging and making real this division. There are two cases, in fact, of animal similes being found in direct speech in the *Iliad*. The first is Achilles' answer to Hector once the two have stopped running around the walls of Troy, and Hector now tries to strike a pact with Achilles regarding the destiny of their bodies once one will have killed the other. Here, Achilles disregards Hector's words completely and rejects any kind of kinship between them (*Il*. 22.260-7):[71]

> τὸν δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ὑπόδρα ἰδὼν προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς·
> Ἕκτορ μή μοι ἄλαστε συνημοσύνας ἀγόρευε·

[70] In this sense, Achilles' animal/human entanglement is a 'form of cultural figuration parallel and sometimes opposite to normative social praxis' (McInerney 2024, 291), a quality that McInerney sees as a fundamental sign of hybridity. Although Achilles nor other characters in the *Iliad* ever becoming physically enmeshed with the animals they sometimes resemble, McInerney's theory of hybridity is nevertheless useful to understand their animal entanglement. To him, hybridity in Greek culture functioned as a mode of representation that ran alongside, and at times in tension with, dominant social practices. Hybrid figures further mediated oppositions across multiple contexts and domains, such as encounters with non-Greek speakers or eastern Mediterranean populations. Hybridity could then signify productive forms of cultural mixture through the strategic adoption of alternative identities. In the case of the *Iliad*, such cultural encounters appear on the battlefield, where animal similes are most present.

[71] 'Swift-footed Lord Achilles scowled at him | and answered, "Hector, do not speak to me | of contracts. Fool, forget about agreements. | Lions do not swear solemn oaths with humans, | and wolves and lambs do not share common feelings. | Their enmity endures forevermore. | Just so, there is no way for you and me | ever to love each other or be friends, | and there can be no oaths between us two, | till one man falls and slakes the thirst of Ares, | the warrior, the god who bears the shield'.

ὡς οὐκ ἔστι λέουσι καὶ ἀνδράσιν ὅρκια πιστά,
οὐδὲ λύκοι τε καὶ ἄρνες ὁμόφρονα θυμὸν ἔχουσιν,
ἀλλὰ κακὰ φρονέουσι διαμπερὲς ἀλλήλοισιν,
ὣς οὐκ ἔστ᾽ ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ φιλήμεναι, οὐδέ τι νῶϊν
ὅρκια ἔσσονται, πρίν γ᾽ ἢ ἕτερόν γε πεσόντα
αἵματος ἆσαι Ἄρηα ταλαύρινον πολεμιστήν.

With the final use of the future tense (οὐδέ τι νῶϊν | ὅρκια ἔσσονται, 22.265-6) in particular, Achilles establishes a relationship that strictly affirms not only the predator/prey binary, with Achilles cast as one of the wolves and Hector as part of a group of lambs, but also the animal/human one (λέουσι καὶ ἀνδράσιν, 22.262), and prohibits any type of communication between the two, both in the current and in the future moment. While this simile seems to reject interactions between separate realms completely, it is meaningful that Achilles feels the need to speak and verbalize such a division. Similes in direct speech are rare in the *Iliad* altogether, [72] even though they are frequently assigned to Achilles if and when they do occur, [73] thus giving this simile more visibility than others. As Mills and Dué suggest,[74] these similes often mark crucial moments in Achilles' psychological self-construction and emotional expression. In this case, the act of speaking the simile aloud reveals Achilles' need to *declare* the division, rather than rely on it as a pre-existing, proverbial truth: as Kirk comments, it is unusual in its choice of topic, 'for it expresses a proverbial truth about relationships in the world of animals and men, and then transfers this in an unusual way to the present situation'.[75] While to Kirk the simile is atypical because it expresses what he defines as a 'proverbial truth', it seems instead that precisely because Achilles needs to make this particular relation between human and animal explicit, the division between these two realms is not proverbial after all. Instead, it is

[72] Moulton (1974).
[73] See previous discussion of *Il*. 9.323-7 , *Il*. 16.7-11, and *Il*. 22.123-30.
[74] Dué (2005), 5-15; and Mills (2000), 8.
[75] Kirk (1985), 254.

a point of contention that needs to be established so that Achilles can construct the relation he wants and needs in this specific moment, establishing himself as predator and Hector as prey.

While across other similes in the *Iliad* both Achilles and Hector occupy different roles and relate in different ways to the animal world, here Achilles offers only one possibility: there is no exchange between animal and men, and no possibility of peace between predators and prey, regardless of commonalities. Achilles' need to speak and thus make real only one possible relationship between him and Hector confirms that other ways of relating to one another had indeed been a possibility, both across the human and animal binary, and across that of prey and predator. As North states, commenting on likeness as an underdetermined concept that operates on difference, 'every highly determinate thing […] contains at least one point of indeterminacy, where it crosses over something else':[76] by trying to determine one relationship through the absence of possible kinships Achilles points at all the undetermined relations that could have been possible instead.

Achilles' comparison of himself to a lion as predator is re-instated in another simile found again in direct speech later on in the text, this time pronounced by Apollo, who criticises Achilles' desecrating Hector's corpse as a behaviour that is too animalistic and savage (*Il.* 24.38-45):[77]

> ἀλλ᾽ ὀλοῶι Ἀχιλῆϊ θεοὶ βούλεσθ᾽ ἐπαρήγειν,
> ᾧι οὔτ᾽ ἄρ φρένες εἰσὶν ἐναίσιμοι οὔτε νόημα
> γναμπτὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσι, λέων δ᾽ ὡς ἄγρια οἶδεν,
> ὅς τ᾽ ἐπεὶ ἄρ μεγάλητι τε βίηι καὶ ἀγήνορι θυμῶι
> εἴξας εἶσ᾽ ἐπὶ μῆλα βροτῶν ἵνα δαῖτα λάβησιν·
> ὣς Ἀχιλεὺς ἔλεον μὲν ἀπώλεσεν, οὐδέ οἱ αἰδὼς
> γίγνεται, ἥ τ᾽ ἄνδρας μέγα σίνεται ἠδ᾽ ὀνίνησι.

[76] North (2021), 67.

[77] 'Instead, you want to help his murderer, | Achilles, who lacks any sense of justice, | whose mind and inmost heart refuse to bend, | whose thoughts know only wildness—as a lion | yields to his power and his strong proud heart, | and pounces on the mortal flocks to feast— | just so, Achilles has destroyed all pity. | He has no shame, which hurts and helps mankind. | Others, presumably, have lost someone, | and mourned an even greater love—a brother, |born from the same womb, or even a son. | And yet they set their grief and tears aside. | The Fates gave humans an enduring heart'.

Achilles' savagery is here considered inhuman, and his heart and need for slaughter are compared to that of a lion. While many other similes in the *Iliad* regarding lions can be read in positive terms, here Achilles' behaviour is harshly criticised: this time, the animal creature is not taken as a point of comparison because of its strength or emotion, but rather as a mindless beast, opposed to the human compassion and rationality Achilles fails to display. It is Apollo as spokesperson who is here portraying a fixed hierarchy between different categories of beings, yet these categories can still interact, be similar to one another, change, evolve. Across the *Iliad*, then, animal similes offer a shifting landscape of roles and images, putting the human and the animal in a continuously moving and evolving relation to one another. The hero-as-animal presents itself in different ways across the text, depending on context and dynamic. That the human/animal binary is firmly re-instated in conventional ways only through the directly spoken simile is significant: while particular characters want to establish particular fixed relationships, the multitude of other similes in the *Iliad* that provide alternatives to these singular interpretations shows indeed how the simile provides an enhanced effect of shape-shifting and instability, hinting at many different possible relations, dynamics, and forms of kinship as expressed directly by the characters, rather than in third-person narrative.

This dual function of animal similes in the *Iliad*, which both reinforce the human/animal binary and simultaneously open up new forms of kinship, reflect a broader tension within queer theoretical engagements with nonhuman life. As pointed out by Halberstam, a *queer theory of wildness* risks either reproducing the binary logic of civilization versus barbarity or, conversely, stabilizing the very norms it seeks to unsettle by avoiding the category of wildness altogether. As Hall also mentions, commenting on the animal simile, 'the terms of the comparison shift constantly, creating confusion as to the precise significance of humanity in

relation to the animals it domesticates: are all humans like animals, or does inferior social class make a human like an animal under the power of its pack-, flock-, or herd-leader'?[78]

This tension is particularly relevant in the *Iliad*, where wildness often emerges in moments of battle and combat. Yet, as Halberstam argues, wildness is not only a counterpoint to civilization, but also a disruptive force that allows for alternative modes of being, unruly desires, and deep affiliations with the nonhuman world: 'in the terrain of the ferox, bodies flee, escape, hide, and seek. They express themselves not simply in same-sex or opposite-sex orientations, but through murderous desires, violent longings, flights from time, chaotic and illegible political associations, and deeply felt relations to animals and the wild'.[79] Such expressions of wildness complicate fixed categories of identity, including, but not limited to, sexual identity. As Halberstam writes: 'wildness has conjured anarchy, embodiment beyond identity. […] It resides in our past and forms the unknowability of the future still to come. Wildness is neither utopia nor dystopia; it is a force we live with and a way of being that we are organising out of existence'.[80]

Achilles offers the *Iliad*'s most sustained and ambivalent engagement with this force of wildness. Across the poem, and most insistently in the animal similes that cluster around his withdrawal, grief, and return to battle, Achilles occupies a position that oscillates between heroic order and feral excess. His repeated likening to lions, dogs, and other predators does not simply mark his martial superiority but situates him at the threshold of what Halberstam describes as wildness: a mode of being defined by unruly affect, violent longing, and forms of relationality that exceed civic containment. At the same time, Achilles' wildness is never allowed to remain fully open or generative. The epic persistently reinscribes his animality within the logic of dominance and predation, ensuring that even his most excessive affects such

[78] Hall (2025), 120.
[79] Halberstam (2020), 11.
[80] Halberstam (2020), 180.

as grief, rage, desire for revenge, are ultimately legible within the hierarchical structures of warfare and heroism. Achilles thus becomes the figure through whom the *Iliad* both experiments with and constrains the queer potential of wildness, revealing how deeply the poem relies on animal similes to gesture toward alternative modes of being while simultaneously disciplining them.

This is where similes, as poetic devices, hold particular significance not only as moments of narrative deviation, but as sites of possibility that invite an exploration of alternative modes of kinship extending beyond human social structures. It is therefore possible to read the simile as a poetic tool that, in Donna Haraway's words, makes kin: to Haraway, kinship means 'not necessarily to be biologically related but in some consequential way to belong in the same category with each other in such a way that has consequences'.[81] Kinship is therefore not restricted to biological ties but emerges through consequential, transformative relationships. In the *Iliad*, animal similes function similarly: they construct, challenge, and reimagine affiliations beyond the human, forging connections that disrupt normative hierarchies. Throughout the *Iliad*, animal similes therefore shape a dynamic, ever-shifting network of relations between human and nonhuman worlds. While animal similes open up possibilities for new forms of kinship, the underlying predator-prey dynamic remains a persistent framework within the *Iliad*. Yet even as some similes complicate rigid distinctions and suggest fluid relational possibilities, they do not fully dissolve the hierarchical structures that govern human/animal interactions, and in particular do not dismantle the persistent predator-prey dynamic. The hero-as-animal therefore remains as a shifting figure, one whose identity is destabilized by the simile's comparative logic but still often positioned within a framework of dominance and survival.

[81] Haraway (2019). Available at: < https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/making-kin-an-interview-with-donna-haraway/ >.

Returning to Muñoz's queer inhumanism and his idea that queer thought should work towards new modes of relationality, I believe that a queer reading of the simile as a destabilising force between realms allows us to do just this: imagine new constellations of different forms of being with each other and by ourselves. Animal similes promote a 'radical attempt to think incommensurate queer inhumanity' as 'a denaturalizing and unsettling of the settled, the sedimented',[82] hinting at new possibilities and forms of self-expression and kinship through their comparison to a realm that is not defined by the same social rules and imposition as the human world. It is only through the 'like' that such kinships can be explored: while reverse similes can disturb the gender binary, similes that bridge the gap between the human and the animal, the sub-human, the non-human, help us re-assess not only social roles and their values, but also human behaviour and kinship in itself, offering new ways of interacting with and relating to one another. The kinships highlighted by the 'like' of the simile show that belonging and recognition can be found across all ways of being: similarity and understanding become defined not by a fixed social and cultural understanding of identity, but instead by a variety of shared experiences, articulated through a spectrum of dis/similarity that underlines not only how experiences can be alike, but also how they can differ and be influenced by different power hierarchies.

In the *Iliad*, while reverse similes predominantly destabilise and question the gender binary, commenting on specific forms of gender expression across the poem (such as parenthood, for example), animal similes can offer new forms of expressions, while maintaining some binary oppositions, like those of prey and predator. A queer reading of the simile, then, read in this chapter through the lens of animal and posthuman theory in particular, can offer us a new outlook on humanity and sociality in the *Iliad*. The similes analysed do not provide a clear exploration of what can be achieved through the dismantling of human norms

[82] Muñoz (2015), 210.

via the animal world: yet they show how the figure of the simile, interacting with realms that are not immediately accessible to human characters, can hint at different possible ways of being, feeling, relating to one another, working outside the norm imposed in the text. This potential of the simile remains not fully tapped into within the classical text: the binary between predator and prey remains stark within the *Iliad*, and while the variety of characters that are likened to both roles remains impressive, suggesting that these categories are at the very least mobile, their opposition remains quite stark.

The Ethics of Antinormativity: Queering the Animal Simile

The tension between the simile's potential to gesture toward alternative forms of expression and its tendency to reaffirm rigid binaries found in the *Iiad* raises important questions about how we approach queerness through the figure of the animal. Even as the simile briefly disrupts normative boundaries, allowing characters to momentarily inhabit other modes of being, it often reinscribes hierarchies such as that of predator and prey. Is it then a desirable strategy to read the animal simile as holding the potential for queer expression and representation? I would argue that, at its most literal, it may not be: the binary between prey and predator remains stark and dangerous, and it risks to create affinities between predatory behaviour and queerness that members of the LGBTQ+ community have tried for many years to fight, and still continue to do so. Yet, even within the *Iliad* and even with this binary in place, the animal world and the 'like' of the simile can point at explorations of desire and forms of being and feeling outside of the norm, informed and inspired by contemporary queer poetry and by current turns in queer studies and animal studies that might provide new insights in how these similes can be read as liberating within the text.

How, then, can contemporary uses of the queer simile move past this binary of predator and prey? One way is to consider how the simile itself, and in this case the human/animal simile

especially, might trouble the binary between norm and anti-norm. It is first important to recognise that the term queer itself, and everything that it carries with it, including its anti-normative stance, is not automatically part of a political project that is also ethical. In the special issues of the journal *differences* titled 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity' (2015), a series of scholars of queer theory consider how the field has evolved and changed and, to an extent, lost its political drive: by becoming increasingly vague in its ethical and political project, queer remains as a term that automatically implies antinormativity, and yet does not specify which norms it goes against and with what purpose, while paradoxically keeping the idea of 'the norm' at the centre of its critique. As Wiegman and Wilson explain, 'queer antinormativity generates and protects the very propriety it claims to despise. To channel the energies of queer inquiry otherwise, we hope to promote scholarship that not only rethinks the meaning of norms, normalization, and the normal but that imagines other ways to approach the politics of queer criticism altogether'.[83] Noting how the term antinormativity is never questioned, Jagose also comments on how 'the queer conviction that it is the antinormativity of certain practices or self-stylings that make them recognizable as political means that antinormativity stands, mostly unchallenged, as queer theory's privileged figure for the political'.[84] Yet this antinormativity often goes undescribed. Here, then, is where the simile might offer a productive complication. Similes often stage moments of comparison that are structurally unequal, unstable, or even contradictory. In this way, they can expose the limits of both normativity and antinormativity, highlighting the relational, shifting, and contingent nature of identity and difference. Reflecting on the simile, then, may offer a way to reframe the conversation in queer theory: not by reframing the norm/anti-norm binary, but by revealing how it is continually rehearsed, reconfigured, and undone within the space of analogy.

[83] Wiegman and Wilson (2015), 18.
[84] Jagose (2015), 27.

I propose that animal similes may function not merely as oppositional gestures to normativity, but as queer and anti-normative interventions within a broader political and ethical project that scrutinizes how social norms are constructed, inhabited, and potentially undone. Drawing on Muñoz's notion of queer inhumanism and relationality, the animal simile can operate as a destabilising force between different realms, offering a framework for imagining new modes of existence alongside others and in solitude, guiding us through shifting, hidden, and unfamiliar relational terrains. Animal similes gesture toward alternative forms of self-expression and kinship, linking human experience to spaces not governed by the same social strictures. The connective power of the simile reveals that belonging and recognition extend across all forms of being, and are not simply defined by fixed social or cultural markers of identity, but through a spectrum of shared experiences. This spectrum emphasizes both similarity and difference, highlighting how experiences can align yet remain shaped by varying power relations, ultimately opening new pathways for ethical and relational imagination.

While the *Iliad*'s animal similes may only gesture towards alternative ways of being without fully articulating them, this very gesture invites further exploration. It is in this liminal space that contemporary queer poetry finds fertile ground, seizing the imaginative potential of the simile and expanding it beyond the constraints of ancient binaries. Poets working within queer and posthuman frameworks take up the simile's capacity for relationality and estrangement, using it not only to disrupt normative identities but to imagine entirely new modes of self-expression, embodiment, and kinship. The movement between human and animal becomes a way to articulate experiences that resist conventional representation. This imaginative inheritance from classical simile, reworked and recharged through queer lenses, is especially visible in contemporary collections such as Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* (2016). As I will show in this section, then, contemporary sensitivities and intentionality behind the animal

simile can make it part of a broader ethical and political project of queer self-expression and representation.

Kelly's *Bestiary* self-evidently takes its title from the illustrated bestiaries of the Middle Ages, which served the purpose of categorising and defining both real and imaginary animals, often assigning to them moral lessons; as well as building on and pushing against the historical association of the term bestiality with male homosexual intercourse, invoking the term's layered meanings to unsettle boundaries between species, morality, and desire. While the concept of a bestiary is originally a process of differentiation, of drawing borders, naming and fixing different creatures and their related imaginaries, Kelly's poems refuse to draw boundaries continuously throughout the collection, exploring different forms of being, feeling, learning how to process her trauma, her desires, and her identity. In an interview with the *LA Review*, she states that 'poems gave me a way to say what I was too afraid to say as a black lesbian, a black woman. To admit need and pain, desire and trauma, and claim my humanity'.[85] In the interview Kelly also talks of bodily awareness: of her need to express physical and embodied feelings, emotions, and eroticism. As a queer black woman, embodying different animals throughout the collection gave Kelly the words she felt she could not say out loud, processing her trauma as well as her desires.

The animal similes in *Bestiary*, then, serve a process of personal healing informed by Kelly's understanding of her own identity, both political and erotic; her queerness, her blackness, her animality and humanity. There is much to say, of course, on the history of connections between blackness and animality:[86] in *Becoming Human* (2020) Jackson comments on how, in common racist thought, 'the black body's fleshiness was aligned with

[85] Finney and Kelly (2016). Available at: < https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/conversation-nikky-finney-donika-kelly/>
[86] See for example Boisseron (2018), Jackson (2020b), Marriott (2023).

that of animals and set in opposition to European spirit and mind'.[87] Jackson gives a model for reading African diasporic tradition that does not coalesce into a single dominant and Western conception of 'the human', but rather engages in imaginative practices of word-building coming from the history of blackness's bestialisation and thingification, altering the meaning of 'being human' and seeking new forms into the animal as ontological being and not simply 'beast' opposed to the colonial concept of humanity. Taking this into account, as well as other recent studies on the connection between blackness and animality as an anti-racist project,[88] the animal similes can in *Bestiary* be read as following Kelly's project of reclaiming her humanity, as she states in interviews. The collection is part of a personal project embedded within the politics and ethics of queerness, blackness, trauma. Poems like "Secretary" show the process of reclaiming personal eroticism and pleasure through the animal world: [89]

> Bend your leg
> back. Bend your leg like
> this secretary bird.
> Stomp that lizard
> dead. Long leg, bird
> leg. You got small
> lives to eat. You got
> a dance to do: mate.
> Them girls don't come
> on their own. Spread
> your wings like legs, wide.
> Put some air
> in your bones.

The similes 'bend your leg like | this secretary bird' and 'spread | your wings like legs' display the pendulum of the simile: the speaker starts comparing themselves to a bird, and ends up identifying with the bird, compared at the end to a human body. The animal simile, in this case,

[87] Jackson (2020a), 29.
[88] Such as Gumps (2021), which sees marine mammals as queer and complex beings from which we can learn great submerged wisdom; or Bennet (2020), an analysis of the history of blackness and historical fraught proximity between Black and animal lives.
[89] Kelly (2016), 52.

and its swing between animality and humanity, allows for an expression of queerness and eroticism that frees the speaker from human trauma, allowing them to lift in spite of it ('put some air | in your bones'). Similarly, as the collection navigates the first person speaker identifying with mythological creatures that bring together the animal and the human (centaurs, satyrs, mermaids),[90] animals that are usually prey (birds, fish), or predators (wolves, bears) through both simile and metaphor, Kelly's project of exploration of the self becomes clear in its dismantling of prey and predator binaries, intentionally explored to reclaim her agency against her sexual assault as well as exploring her possibilities as a queer woman of colour in a colonial, racist, and queerphobic world. The question of how to express the self, of how to construct and dismantle it against institutions and then understand it again is thus explored through the animal simile (as well as the animal metaphor) in a project that is personal as much as it is political. This formal crafting of animality can then become, through the simile, an anti-racist and anti-colonial project. The animal space is intentionally understood as working against the Western, heteronormative space of the human, reclaimed as a means of articulating alternative understandings of the self.

In "Love Poem: Minotaur", the simile yet again allows a process of transformation through animality:[91]

> Freedom is a thread of light snaking
> the canyon like an ant through a conch.
> A good-bye to each dead end and small room.
> Salt, once of the sea, now of the wind,
> now on my brow, making a witness of me.
> I open my mouth to the wind. The wind opens
> my heart, my breast. I leave the bare
> bones behind. I leave the soul, once another's,
> once my own, there in that maze of sand,

[90] Kelly (2017) has commented on her use of Greek mythology: by focusing on mythological figures such as the Minotaur, who blur the lines between animal and human, to her the classical remains associated with the animal world, thus disturbing the fixed Western concept of the human as coming from the rational wisdom of Greek philosophy.
[91] Kelly (2016), 51.

mortar, and bellows. A golden light hails
me, pulls me like a worm from the earth.

Here, Kelly's use of simile constructs a process of liberation through animality, where kinship is established not through the human world but within the animal and elemental. The Minotaur of the title itself, a hybrid figure, neither fully human nor fully beast, becomes a site of transformation rather than monstrosity. The central simile of the poem ('freedom is a thread of light snaking | the canyon like an ant through a conch') does not compare freedom to a human experience but rather to an insect moving through a natural structure. This positioning within the non-human world suggests that the speaker's liberation is not tied to conventional human narratives of escape or transcendence: while the ant's path through the conch is both a passageway and an enclosure, which evokes the labyrinthine structure of the Minotaur's prison, rather than reinforcing entrapment the simile still transforms the act of moving through confined spaces into a form of agency, an innate ability to navigate and emerge.

This transformation is reinforced by another simile: 'a golden light hails / me, pulls me like a worm from the earth'. Here, the speaker's movement toward freedom is again aligned with an animal that seems to position liberation as a process of shedding and surfacing. The imagery evoked by 'leaving the bare bones behind', by being 'opened' by the wind, gestures toward a shedding of past selves, a metamorphosis that is not about returning to a fixed human identity but about embracing something more fluid, more elemental. Kelly's animal similes, then, do not position the animal as a mere instrument for human experience, but instead enact and establish forms of kinship that make alternative forms of selfhood possible, allowing the speaker to find a path not by rejecting the animal, but by moving through it. The animal world, then, becomes a space of language and communication that allows more movement and fluidity than the human ones, where hierarchies and structures of power are too sedimented to avoid.

Conclusion

These are limited examples of queer uses of animal similes, but I have chosen them specifically because of their explicit connection to a vaster, wider project of queerness along with a specific anti-racist and anti-colonial outlook. The animal simile, then, has the potential not only to hint towards different ways of being, as it does in the *Iliad*, but also to indicate which political project those ways should subscribe to, instead of merely gesturing towards the greater freedom of the animal world. Evidently, the main difference between the use of animal similes in ancient epic and contemporary queer poetry is here decisively brought upon by authorial intention: contemporary queer poets such as Donika Kelly are often interviewed, or active on social media, or preface their collections with their thoughts and feelings on their works, explaining their literary and cultural aims.

By contrast, as we know, the Homeric question stops us from thinking of Homer as a singular author, and authorial intention is almost impossible to consider. Yet we know that even at the time the simile was considered a distinctive poetic tool that would have gained attention in a public setting, and the many studies on Homeric simile show us that there is indeed something about the simile that makes us wonder, interrogate the text, look at it from a different angle. While we cannot discuss Homer's intention as author, we can indeed state that the simile is an intentional poetic form, that has been employed vastly across Homeric poetry and beyond, and that often interacts with the animal world. The need for intentionality and self-exploration that queer authors feel is well served by the simile and its explicit mode of exploration, opposed to that of the metaphor: it only follows, then, that it should be part of the author's political and ethical project of queerness. In this sense, the simile's exploratory and overtly comparative form aligns well with the concerns of queer poetics, which often foreground self-interrogation, ambiguity, and intentional acts of meaning-making. Yet even as queer poetry may be grounded in conscious political and ethical projects, it too is open to being

read against the grain, just as Homeric similes are. Poetic language, ancient or modern, is never wholly contained by its author's intention. It carries its own agency, its own afterlives, always capable of being reinterpreted, reclaimed, or resisted. The simile, with its built-in doubleness and capacity for reframing, becomes a particularly fertile site for such possibilities.

What, then, can we read in the animal similes of the past? They are again a start, a springboard for queer explorations, they contain a kernel of possibilities. Through its engagement with concepts of similarity, animality, and humanity, and the tradition such engagement has built, the Homeric simile has left its dent in literary studies. It is then up to us now, to explore the animal simile in a way that does not just gesture at possible futures, but instead interacts with power-structure of both the present and the past, creating a new and politically informed language of dis/similarity. Whether in the *Iliad* or in modern queer poetry, these moments of comparison create spaces where identities are unfixed and relationality is redefined. In returning to them, we do not merely uncover traces of queerness in the ancient world; we continue the work of shaping a literary and political language that refuses to be bound by rigid categories, allowing new and radical ways of being to emerge.

Beyond its thematic implications, the animal simile also invites a new mode of reception, where the comparison between texts is not simply based on direct influence or historical lineage but rather on a shared engagement with poetic imagery. In this case, the recurring motif of the animal allows us to examine how similes function across time, forming a connective thread between the *Iliad* and modern queer poetry. By focusing on how different texts interact with the figure of the animal through simile, we can develop a transhistorical approach to literary analysis, focused on how poetic structures generate meaning across different contexts: through this, we can read the simile as a crucial site for interrogating the very foundations of identity, kinship, and belonging, allowing new and radical ways of being to emerge.

Chapter 5: Moves like Waves: Simile and Water in and around the Argonautica

Introduction

So far, my exploration of the simile has been conducted by focusing on the classical text first, and then moving to contemporary writing and theory. This method has allowed for a dialogue between the classical world and modern literary practice, with ancient texts serving as a lens through which to examine the shifting landscapes of contemporary poetics, rhetoric, and literary theory. I now want to propose a different analytical framework: in this chapter, dedicated to Apollonius' *Argonautica*, my aim is not just to prove how the classical text can contribute to modern literary theories and practices, but instead to show how modern literary discussions can inform new readings of the simile within the epic text, and how those readings can also reflect back to contemporary literary theory. By shifting the temporal orientation of inquiry, then, the aim is to demonstrate how contemporary understandings of simile and rhetorical devices can open new perspectives on ancient texts, and how those ancient texts, in turn, can further enrich contemporary discussions on rhetoric, metaphor, and poetics.

Drawing inspiration from Alice Oswald's "Interview with Water" (2020), this chapter delves into similes about water, bodies of water, and movement related to water in classical epic poetry. Focusing on Apollonius' *Argonautica*, I examine how the poem, while re-affirming gender roles in its assessment of the dynamic between Jason and Medea, uses the sea's vast, fluid expanse as a space of movement and transformation that hints at a similar movement in the de-stabilisation of identity. The Argo, as both a literal vessel and a symbolic site of transition, embodies this dynamism, mirroring the shifting nature of gender and desire within the text. This continuous motion, across waters, between identities, and through

language, extends to the poem's use of simile, which itself becomes a means of negotiating instability and possibility. The fluidity of water and the reflections and refractions it allows for, as I argue, lend themselves to being likened to the ever-changing nature of language; and can replicate, on the level of imagery, the same movement of dis/similarity that structurally characterises the simile as a poetic device. As I will show, the connection between water and simile achieves this through three main characteristics: movement across tenor and vehicle, movement through time, and its potential for the formation of community through dis/similarity.

This chapter therefore aims to suggest a meta-rhetorical mode of classical reception by examining how similes function within classical epic and how their mechanics can inform modern rhetorical discussions of the device. My focus is both on how similes operate within the *Argonautica*, and how water similes can shape contemporary theories of rhetoric and figurative language. By analysing the movement and structure of water similes, this chapter aims to highlight the simile's potential to influence modern interpretations and applications of rhetorical techniques across different literary traditions.

In "Interview with Water" (2020), a lecture given as part of her tenure as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Alice Oswald considers dis/similarity through her focus on 'the liquid, impermanent, unstable gift of similarity'; this, as she notes, is 'not the same as sameness'.[1] Her lecture will serve as an entry point into thinking about water not only as a physical element but also as an expression of fluidity both in language and in thought: as she notes, water's constant movement, its capacity to reflect and distort, and its ability to change form align seamlessly with the structure of the simile, which relies on dynamic processes of comparison and transformation. In this sense, beginning with Oswald's contemporary meditation on water

[1] Oswald (2020).

allows us to engage directly with its conceptual resonances before turning to the ancient text, where similar motifs emerge in different terms and for distinct narrative purposes. The choice to start with a contemporary conversation therefore fosters a meta-critical dialogue where Oswald's reflections on water, language, and similes inform the way we read and interpret ancient texts, just as those ancient texts, in turn, deepen our understanding of poetic structures across time. Oswald's own lecture is shaped by her own poetry volume *Nobody* (2019), arguably an engagement with Homer's *Odyssey*, as well as her reflections on the *Odyssey* and the epic tradition more broadly, further reinforcing the idea that literary conversations are not structured in a straight genealogical line, but rather function as a dynamic network of influence, where texts continuously shape and reshape one another.

The 'liquid gift of similarity' noted by Oswald and amplified through the metaphorical potential of water and liquidity can indeed also be found in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, which provides a rich field for exploring how similes, particularly those involving water, operate on multiple levels. Contemporary critics have noted that 'watery thinking provides a tool to craft literary forms and a theoretical model, both contemporary and early modern, for how cognition flows'.[2] Following this consideration, I argue that similes in the *Argonautica* often employ water similes which, when reflected back into Oswald's consideration on similarity, shed light on the liquidity of poetic language itself. As I will explore, just as the Argo ship moves through the physical space of the sea, the simile moves and encourages movement in many different directions of meaning-making through time and space. Water's capacity to take on different shapes, to reflect, distort, and reveal, mirrors the simile's ability to draw connections between seemingly dissimilar things, while also acknowledging the inherent instability and mutability

[2] Helms and Mentz (2024), 13. They describe 'watery thinking' as using water as a 'medium of sensory experience' which 'supplies both metaphors about and the matter of thought' (12). For more literary criticism on 'watery thinking' see Blackmore (2002), Mentz (2015) and Duckert (2017); and for more experimental forms of creative-critical work see Chen and MacLeod (2013), and Smith and Howes (2018). For a comprehensive guide on the so-called 'blue humanities', see Mentz (2023).

of those comparisons. Just as water resists being fully contained or fixed, so too does the simile resist closure, leaving room for multiple interpretations and meanings.

The trajectory of this chapter, moving from contemporary to ancient and then returning to the contemporary, emphasizes the recursive and dynamic nature of literary interpretation. Rather than viewing classical and modern texts as separate or self-contained entities within distinct traditions, this approach reveals their continuous dialogue, demonstrating how each reconfigures and reshapes the other in an ongoing process of reinterpretation. By foregrounding this interplay, the chapter resists a linear model of influence in favour of a more fluid conception of textual exchange, one in which the past and present exist in a state of mutual transformation rather than strict succession. This chapter therefore marks a methodological turn within the thesis, prompted by the *Argonautica*'s maritime setting, which makes fluidity not simply a thematic concern but a narrative principle: identity, perception, and desire are all carried along by the movements of water. The simile becomes the poem's primary means of rendering that motion intelligible, translating physical fluidity into linguistic rhythm. In contrast to Ovid's metamorphic fixity or Homer's oscillation between separation and reunion, Apollonius' epic foregrounds the continuum of becoming that water itself embodies. The methodological drift of this chapter thus mirrors the poem's own aesthetics, where comparison operates less as a mechanism of closure and more as a current of relation.

This shift also clarifies how the *Argonautica* expands the queer potential of the simile: through the medium of water, queerness lies here not only in defying categories but in inhabiting the in-between states that water makes possible, such as reflection, suspension, submersion, and emergence. Apollonius' similes invite to experience likeness as liquidity, and to see how identities, desires, and even narrative perspectives can flow into one another. The poem's nautical and aquatic world demands a reading practice attuned to movement rather than opposition, to the shimmer of resemblance rather than the solidity of transformation.

The relationship between water, simile, and poetic form, each of which embodies a sense of instability and flux, is therefore central to this discussion. Similes in epic poetry, particularly those that invoke water, function not as fixed points of equivalence but as moments of slippage and metamorphosis. Water's shifting and elusive nature resists containment, much like the simile, which does not merely equate one thing with another but rather opens up a space of provisional likeness that is always in motion. By reading simile through the lens of water's fluidity, I aim to gain new insights into its function in epic poetry while also extending these observations into contemporary literary and theoretical frameworks. The recursive movement between past and present does not merely historicize modern texts or modernize ancient ones; instead, it reveals how both are enmeshed in an ongoing negotiation of form and meaning. This approach invites a reconsideration of how literature generates and destabilizes meaning across time, challenging fixed interpretations and emphasizing the productive tensions between resemblance and difference, continuity and rupture.

Fluidity has long been a central concept in queer theory, disrupting rigid binaries and essentialist categories in favour of more mutable, relational understandings of identity and desire.[3] Similarly, the aesthetics of resemblance, especially within the simile, do not depend on stable identities but on a movement between forms that resists definitive closure. In this sense, the instability of water and the transformative potential of simile resonate with queerness as a mode of thinking that values process over fixity, difference over sameness, and relationality over discrete identity. This chapter's movement between contemporary and ancient texts therefore underscores the necessity of reading literature not as a static archive but as an ever-

[3] In particular, the language of fluidity has been utilised to describe the Black diasporic experience (Amideo, 2021). Amideo uses the term 'queer tidalectics' to reflect the emergence of language as a form of relationality that, through the idiom of crossing, of fluidity, is capable of bringing about change in stratified sociocultural perceptions' (5). For more on this see Glissant (1981), Tinsley (2008), Wardi (2011), and Wright (2015).

evolving conversation. In exploring how water, simile, and poetic form interact across different temporal and cultural contexts, the discussion challenges conventional boundaries of literary history and interpretation, demonstrating that meaning is never settled but always in flux, much like the very images of water that permeate the poetic moments here analysed.

Water and the Simile

Before discussing Oswald's theory of the simile as presented in "Interview with Water" (2020), it is first important to recognise the importance of the simile in her previous work as well, as explicitly evident in her book-length poem *Memorial* (2011). In the preface, she defines the poem as 'a translation of the *Iliad*'s atmosphere [...] a bipolar poem made of similes, [...] a series of memories and similes laid side by side'.[4] Interestingly, Oswald's use of simile has been read as a departure from the classical text, in spite of the obvious influence of ancient epic on her work. Linne and Niederhoff argue that 'the most challenging and puzzling feature of Oswald's rewriting of the *Iliad* is the decontextualisation of its similes',[5] noting how Oswald transplants Homeric similes out of their original context while at the same time hiding the link between tenor and vehicle. Such is the case, for example, with Oswald's use of a simile which originally compares the thickness of snowflakes to the thick crowd of the Greek army (*Il.*19.357-61):[6]

> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε ταρφειαὶ νιφάδες Διὸς ἐκποτέονται
> ψυχραὶ ὑπὸ ῥιπῆς αἰθρηγενέος Βορέαο,
> ὣς τότε ταρφειαὶ κόρυθες λαμπρὸν γανόωσαι
> νηῶν ἐκφορέοντο καὶ ἀσπίδες ὀμφαλόεσσαι
> θώρηκές τε κραταιγύαλοι καὶ μείλινα δοῦρα.

[4] Oswald (2011), 3.
[5] Linne and Niederhoff (2018), 21.
[6] Text by Monro and Allen.

Linne and Niederhoff translate this simile in their work: 'as when the snowflakes fly thick from Zeus, driven cold under the blast of the north wind, child of the clear air, so thick was the mass of the bright-shining helmets moving out from the ships then'. [7] In their translation, the *tertium comparationis* is made explicit, as evidenced by the repetition of the term 'thick' and the use of the formulaic 'as when… so then' construction. Oswald employs this simile in a different context, for Deicoon's obituary:[8]

> DEICOON the Trojan
> Was too eager too heroic
> He found praise yes
> But also death
>
> Like snow falls quickly from god to the ground
> When the north wind blows down the heavens
>
> Like snow falls quickly from god to the ground
> When the north wind blows down the heavens

In the poem, the comparison centres around Deicoon's fate and the image of snow falling swiftly from the heavens to the ground. Deicoon's eagerness and heroism, which lead to his death, are likened to the way snow falls quickly from the sky, especially under the force of a northern wind. This simile suggests both the speed and inevitability of Deicoon's fall, as snow falls towards the earth. In Oswald's version of the Homeric simile, however, as Linne and Niederhoff argue, 'the simile marker at the end of the vehicle is conspicuous by its absence; the simile marker at the beginning, the word like, is used in a puzzling manner, leaving the connection between tenor and vehicle unexplained'.[9] Oswald's use of the word 'like' establishes the beginning of the comparison, but she does not clarify the relationship between the two elements (the tenor, Deicoon; and the vehicle, snow).[10]

[7] Translation from Linne and Niederhoff (2018), 21.
[8] Oswald (2011), 23.
[9] Linne and Niederhoff (2018), 21.
[10] Which is, in itself, another form of watery expression.

In Homer, the simile of the falling snow therefore operates within a linear framework, emphasizing the density and movement of the Greek army. Oswald's version, however, strips away this specificity, turning the simile into an independent, recurring motif that floats free from narrative constraints. This temporal dislocation echoes the poem's larger elegiac mode, in which the past is not neatly contained but continuously resurfaces, much like Oswald's similes, which seem to drift, unmoored, between moments of remembrance. By omitting a concluding simile marker, Oswald therefore leaves the exact nature of the connection ambiguous. This ambiguity is deliberate and echoes Oswald's larger view of similes as inherently unstable and fluid comparisons: for Oswald, simile is not simply a device to establish a clear, fixed likeness between two things; rather, it serves as a space where meanings flow, overlap, and shift. By embracing this instability, Oswald's similes avoid settling into straightforward equivalences, instead highlighting a lack of connection through the missing marker.

Oswald's use of the simile as a space where meanings overflow and overlap rather than being neatly clarified is central to her broader reflections on simile, as presented in "Interview with Water" (2020). Her understanding of simile moves beyond its conventional function as a rhetorical device of comparison and instead highlights its generative instability, its capacity to unsettle rather than define. To grasp Oswald's approach, it is essential to recognize the four main points that I believe underpin her analysis. Firstly, simile as a figure of speech works with similarity rather than sameness. Instead of establishing equivalence, similes introduce a relational space where two elements coexist without fully merging. Secondly, water, as a predominant theme and image in both classical and contemporary poetry, also operates on the basis of similarity rather than sameness. It is constantly shifting, adapting, and resisting fixity, making it an apt metaphor for the workings of simile itself. Thirdly, both simile and water reflect the instability of language. Just as water evades containment, simile resists closure,

allowing meaning to flow in multiple directions. Finally, the intersection of simile as a rhetorical device and water as poetic imagery provides a framework for deeper engagement with both. By considering simile through the lens of water's fluidity, we can better understand how language operates in poetic texts, particularly in relation to movement, transformation, and impermanence, and therefore taking water as both 'subject and shaper' of poetic language.[11]

Oswald's approach suggests that these two roles of water as both subject and shaper, together with the rhetorical and the poetic, are inseparable. Each informs and influences the other, creating a dynamic interplay rather than a fixed interpretative model: Oswald's mode of reading resists the impulse to categorize or stabilize meaning, instead privileging the generative possibilities of poetic language and aligning with contemporary literary and theoretical movements that emphasize process, indeterminacy, and relationality over static meaning. By conceptualizing simile as a space of movement rather than comparison, Oswald therefore challenges traditional frameworks of poetic analysis. In this sense, simile does not merely describe or reinforce an idea: it enacts a kind of fluid thinking, a way of understanding language as something in flux, bringing up broader concerns in literary theory about the nature of representation and the limits of linguistic expression. Just as water reshapes itself according to its environment, simile adapts to the context in which it appears, shifting in meaning depending on the reader's interpretative stance. Oswald's framing of simile through water therefore resonates with a broader poetics of instability that values openness and multiplicity over definitive readings. These intersections do not establish rigid theories but instead generate interpretative possibilities, opening up new ways of thinking about poetic imagery and figures of speech. By positioning simile as an unstable yet generative force, Oswald's work offers not only a fresh perspective on classical poetry but also a methodological approach that extends to

[11] Mentz (2023), 6.

contemporary literary analysis, demonstrating how metaphor and poetic form can engage in a continuous and evolving dialogue.

This perspective is particularly illuminating when applied to epic poetry. An example of Oswald's approach can be found in her commentary on the famous simile in *Odyssey* Book 8, which compares Odysseus crying after hearing Demodocus' song to the tears of a woman who has lost her husband in war (*Od*. 8.521-31):

> ταῦτ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἀοιδὸς ἄειδε περικλυτός· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
> τήκετο, δάκρυ δ᾽ ἔδευεν ὑπὸ βλεφάροισι παρειάς.
> ὡς δὲ γυνὴ κλαίηισι φίλον πόσιν ἀμφιπεσοῦσα,
> ὅς τε ἑῆς πρόσθεν πόλιος λαῶν τε πέσηισιν,
> ἄστεϊ καὶ τεκέεσσιν ἀμύνων νηλεὲς ἦμαρ·
> ἡ μὲν τὸν θνήσκοντα καὶ ἀσπαίροντα ἰδοῦσα
> ἀμφ᾽ αὐτῶι χυμένη λίγα κωκύει· οἱ δέ τ᾽ ὄπισθε
> κόπτοντες δούρεσσι μετάφρενον ἠδὲ καὶ ὤμους
> εἴρερον εἰσανάγουσι, πόνον τ᾽ ἐχέμεν καὶ ὀιζύν·
> τῆς δ᾽ ἐλεεινοτάτωι ἄχεϊ φθινύθουσι παρειαί·
> ὣς Ὀδυσεὺς ἐλεεινὸν ὑπ᾽ ὀφρύσι δάκρυον εἶβεν.

This simile is one of the most striking in the *Odyssey*, emphasizing the depth of Odysseus' grief upon hearing Demodocus' song about the Trojan War. Following Foley, in my previous discussion of lines 8.521-31 with regards to reverse similes in the *Odyssey* (Chapter 3), this simile disrupts heroic norms and aligns Odysseus, albeit momentarily, with a figure marked by emotional exposure, powerlessness, and loss. Rather than comparing his weeping to a more conventional masculine image, Homer likens him to a bereaved widow, a woman collapsing in sorrow after witnessing her husband's death in battle. The comparison highlights not only the intensity of Odysseus' emotion but also his vulnerability, contrasting sharply with his usual portrayal as a heroic figure defined by endurance and cunning. The simile also extends beyond the widow's immediate grief, including the brutal reality of her enslavement, which compounds the pathos of the scene. This layering of suffering (grief for the lost husband, the impending

loss of freedom) suggests that Odysseus' own sorrow extends beyond personal loss to encompass the wider devastations of war, and brings his tears as the signifier of his pain. This is the translation Oswald employs in her lecture:[12]

> So the great singer sang, but Odysseus liquefied. The tears ran out under his eyelids and onto his cheek. As when a woman crumples over and mourns her husband, he has fallen in full view of his city and his family; he was trying to delay the stroke of grief for his children. She sees him dying and gasping, drapes herself on his body screaming a shrill sound. And the men behind are hitting her head and shoulders with their spears, and they lead her away to slavery, to suffer hard work and sadness, and her face is sucked in with pitiful grief. So Odysseus was pouring out pitiful tears from his eyelids.

Oswald's translation of τήκετο (8.522) as 'liquefied' not only captures the physical act of weeping but also suggests a dissolution of self,[13] pointing at her broader poetic interest in fluidity as both a physical and conceptual state. Grief here is not static but mutable, a process that distorts, transforms, and is never the same: Odysseus' tears resemble, but do not fully mirror, those of the grieving widow. Oswald's phrasing, particularly 'her face is sucked in with pitiful grief', reinforces this instability, presenting sorrow as something that consumes and reshapes, much like water erodes and refracts what it touches.

To Oswald, this simile is therefore particularly important because it in a way constitutes 'a simile about similarity',[14] thanks to its focus on Odysseus' tears being compared to those of a widow. Tears are liquid, imply liquefaction, a surfaced reflection. This, to Oswald, is an intrinsic quality of water: 'I keep a bucket of rain water under my window', she narrates, 'and it delights me that green leaves reflected in a bucket are not quite green. I don't know what colour they are. At certain moments early in the day they might be called pre-green, but then the clouds change, or the wind moves a surface mark, and all at once they seem bright dark and

[12] Oswald (2020). Although Oswald does not specify it, it is likely this is her own translation, as she also does not credit or cite any other source.
[13] Penelope also experiences this in *Od*. 19.205-9, as her flesh melts (κατατήκετ', 205) like snow after reuniting with Odysseus.
[14] Oswald (2020).

blind silvery, then foggy emerald'.[15] Water in the form of tears here functions in the same way: Odysseus's tears are similar to, but not quite the same as, those of a widow mourning her husband. The tears become Oswald's bucket of water: in it, Odysseus does not see his identical reflection, but something that is not quite like it, making water-as-tears a vessel for similarity just as much as the simile is. Oswald names the capacity of language to invoke the similar-but-not-quite 'agitated similarity',[16] arguing that 'it behaves like water' by throwing 'everything into trembling reflection'.[17] Here, simile and water come together to present a shifting image of grief and despair, moving between Odysseus and the widow through their tears.

The intertwining of simile, water, and the dynamic nature of language are here fundamental: water, with its fluidity and reflective quality, reflect the mutable nature of language and meaning. The reflections seen in water's ever-changing surface mirror the shifts and transformations inherent in words and similes. The fluidity of water replicates on the level of imagery the same movement of dis/similarity that defines the simile as a liquid and shifting poetic device. This connection between water and simile therefore extends beyond individual moments in poetry to a broader theoretical framework in which language itself is seen as fluid, unfixed, and relational: just as water resists containment, slipping through rigid structures and reshaping itself according to its environment, simile too refuses to be pinned down to a singular meaning. Both become mediums of instability, enacting a form of movement that prevents

[15] Oswald (2020).

[16] To describe what she calls 'agitated reflection', Oswald makes reference to Samuel Johnson's preface to his English dictionary: 'my labour has likewise been much increased by a class of verbs too frequent in the English language, of which the signification is so loose and general, the use so vague and indeterminate, and the senses detorted so widely from the first idea, that it is hard to trace them through the maze of variation, to catch them on the brink of utter inanity, to circumscribe them by any limitations, or interpret them by any words of distinct and settled meaning; such are bear, break, come, cast, full, get, give, do, put, set, go, run, make, take, turn, throw. If of these the whole power is not accurately delivered, it must be remembered, that while our language is yet living, and variable by the caprice of every one that speaks it, these words are hourly shifting their relations, and can no more be ascertained in a dictionary, than a grove, in the agitation of a storm, can be accurately delineated from its picture in the water' (Johnson, 1755).

[17] Oswald (2020).

closure and insists on relationality, proving that the simile does not simply equate one thing with another but instead generates a space where meaning wavers, oscillates, and transforms.

More recently, the connection between water and simile has also been noted by Purves. Also looking at Homer as an example, Purves aims to analyse the connection between simile and water, noting not only how water is a fundamental part of the weather-world of Homer and more generally of epic, but also how 'water is a reflective as well as an opaque medium, offering on its surface a mirror of like for like and below its surface a space of submersion, erosion, and disappearance'.[18] As she says, 'water is therefore particularly useful for thinking about the ways in which similes both reflect and drift away from their object of comparison',[19] moving between underwater and the surface. In her analysis, Purves focuses on waves in particular, as entities which force repetition and movement and trouble the binary between above and below sea-level, coming and going, cresting and breaking. Citing examples from the *Odyssey*,[20] Purves notes how the simile and the movement of waves in the simile allow for characters to move between land and sea and experience different forms of being through that movement; but she also proposes that such movement of the simile and waves-as-simile might suggest different ways of reading both the text and simile, moving between surface and deep reading, between reading from underwater or from above. This can be seen in particular in her commentary on *Od*. 5.428-35:[21]

[18] Purves (2024), 98.
[19] Purves (2024), 98.
[20] Notably *Od*. 5.50–54, *Od*. 5.313–23, *Od*.5. 327–30, *Od*. 5. 366–70, and *Od*.5.428–35 to discuss how similes about the sea and the eroding movement of waves aid in portraying to Odysseus' transformations through his years of travel; as well as *Od*. 5.454–56, *Il*. 18.35–51 and *Il*. 24.79–97 to comment on what she describes as 'emotional weather lamentation' (Purves 2024, 115).
[21] 'And he rushing forward caught hold with both hands on the rock face and clung to it, | groaning, until the great wave went over. This one | he so escaped, but the backwash of the same wave | struck him and, rushing forward, threw him far out in the open water. | As when an octopus is dragged away from its shelter | the thickly-clustered pebbles stick in the cups of the tentacles, | so in contact with the rock the skin from his bold hands | was torn away, and the great wave covered him over'. Text and translation from Purves (2024).

ἀμφοτέρηισι δὲ χερσὶν ἐπεσσύμενος λάβε πέτρης,
τῆς ἔχετο στενάχων, ἦος μέγα κῦμα παρῆλθε.
καὶ τὸ μὲν ὣς ὑπάλυξε, παλιρρόθιον δέ μιν αὖτις
πλῆξεν ἐπεσσύμενον, τηλοῦ δέ μιν ἔμβαλε πόντωι.
ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε πουλύποδος θαλάμης ἐξελκομένοιο
πρὸς κοτυληδονόφιν πυκιναὶ λάιγγες ἔχονται,
ὣς τοῦ πρὸς πέτρηισι θρασειάων ἀπὸ χειρῶν
ῥινοὶ ἀπέδρυφθεν· τὸν δὲ μέγα κῦμα κάλυψεν.

Here, as Purves argues, Odysseus' body effectively dissolves both into the line of the verse and into the sea itself, merging with its fluid motion. When Odysseus is first described as being swept by the wave, the perfect middle-passive participle ἐπεσσύμενος (rushing, 5.428) is applied to him; a few lines later, the same participle (ἐπεσσύμενον, 5.431) is transferred to the wave. This grammatical repetition produces a slippage of agency: what begins as Odysseus' own movement is quickly reassigned to the sea, rendering him both actor and object of the rushing motion. Purves notes how the ambiguity of the participial ending allows Odysseus to be read not only as struck by the wave but also, simultaneously, as 'rushing upon' it, capturing a reciprocal exchange of force between human body and water.

Purves reads this oscillation as symptomatic of Odysseus' status as a hero 'in the middle voice', [22] whose agency is neither fully active nor wholly passive. The wave's repeated turning mid-verse pulls Odysseus back and forth within the line itself, producing a mimetic effect in which the movement of the sea agitates syntax and destabilises categorical distinctions. In this sense, water functions not merely as an image but as a formal principle: its surface produces resemblance through reflection, while its motion prevents that resemblance from ever settling. As Oswald has similarly suggested, water offers a mode of similarity that is gliding and provisional rather than fixed. Similes, like water, remain on the surface, touching their objects only fleetingly before being carried onward by the poem's flow: as Purves says, 'no matter

[22] Purves (2024), 104.

how hard the octopus in the simile—or the simile itself—tries to take grip, the onward flow of the poem will always pull it back and away (ῥινοὶ ἀπέδρυφθεν· τὸν δὲ μέγα κῦμ' ἐκάλυψεν, 435)'.[23]

Purves' analysis of this and similar passages highlights the deep entanglement of language, agency, and fluidity in both the structure of Homeric verse and the physical imagery of the sea. At its core, her argument suggests that Odysseus' identity is not static but instead caught within a liminal space, and that such shifting of the self is reflected in both the movement of water and the shifting syntax of the poem. The repeated participle ἐπεσσύμενος (5.428 and 5.431, rushing), first attributed to Odysseus and then to the wave, serves as a linguistic marker of this instability, demonstrating how agency does not rest solely within the human figure but instead oscillates between human and natural forces. This blurring of distinctions reinforces Oswald's broader claim that water, like simile, creates a kind of 'agitated similarity': a form of resemblance that never fully solidifies but instead ripples across the text in an ongoing, unstable exchange.

Purves' reading emphasizes the middle-passive voice as a crucial site where Odysseus' status as a hero is challenged and reconfigured. In this passage, Odysseus is both the agent and the object of movement: he rushes forward, yet he is also rushed upon by the wave. This grammatical indeterminacy mirrors his narrative position as he is suspended between destruction and survival, land and sea, selfhood and dissolution. The sea, in this reading, is not just an external force acting upon Odysseus, but rather an active participant in his transformation: the shifting participle suggests a kind of mimetic exchange between hero and water, where one reflects and reconfigures the other in a continuous movement of dis/similarity, transformation, and erosion. Purves' insight that 'the wave each time turns or breaks mid-verse, pulling Odysseus back and forth within the line' highlights how this

[23] Purves (2024), 104.

instability extends beyond thematic content into the very form of the verse itself.[24] The enjambment of motion across lines mimics the turbulent motion of the sea, creating a rhythm that resists closure. The poetic line, like the sea, does not allow for a moment of rest: Odysseus is caught in the pull of verse just as he is caught in the pull of the waves. This interplay between form and content reinforces the idea that language, like water, refuses to be fixed.

The octopus simile at 5.432-5 deepens this effect by illustrating the tension between stability and inevitable loss. The octopus, like Odysseus, attempts to grasp onto something solid, yet it is ultimately torn away by the wave. Purves' claim that 'similes, unlike metaphors, remain on the surface and only glancingly touch the object of their comparison before drifting loose of the narrative' aligns with the broader argument that simile is an inherently unstable device:[25] unlike metaphor, which seeks to fuse two things together, simile always retains a sense of separation, gesturing toward resemblance without ever fully collapsing into identity.

The sea, as a medium of fluidity and transformation, embodies this state of in-betweenness. It does not offer stability but instead enacts a process of continual redefinition, much like the simile itself. Purves' observation that 'the mirroring or mimetic aspect of the sea agitates language into fluid overlays' suggests that language, too, is implicated in this process of instability.[26] The repetition of ἐπεσσύμενος (5.428 and 5.431) across different subjects demonstrates how meaning is not confined to a single entity but instead moves between elements in a relational web. Crucially, this linguistic fluidity reflects the broader themes of the poem: identity is not singular but multiple, shaped by encounters, losses, and transformations. The simile therefore participates in the very movement it describes, reinforcing the sense that poetic language, like water, is never fully graspable: simile, language, and water work together to create a poetic space of movement and transformation.

[24] Purves (2024), 104.
[25] Purves (2024), 104.
[26] Purves (2024), 104.

The way water both reflects and distorts, offering an image that is recognizable yet never identical, suggests an alternative way of understanding poetic likeness, one that prioritizes approximation over equivalence. This slipperiness of resemblance complicates any attempt to fix meaning, making water similes an especially rich site for exploring how language navigates between coherence and dissolution. If Oswald highlights water's capacity for 'agitated similarity,' and Purves extends this to the broader structure of simile in Homer, then water similes in the *Argonautica* similarly invite a reading that foregrounds motion, transformation, and uncertainty. Unlike similes that reinforce stable comparisons, water similes reflect a dynamic mode of meaning-making, where identities and relationships are always in flux. The way water both reflects and distorts, offering an image that is recognizable yet never identical, suggests an alternative way of understanding poetic likeness, one that prioritizes approximation over equivalence. This slipperiness of resemblance complicates any attempt to fix meaning, making water similes an especially rich site for exploring how language navigates between coherence and dissolution. In Apollonius' epic, such similes do not merely describe movement but actively participate in it, unsettling narrative structures and resisting rigid categorization.

Taking both Oswald's analysis and Purves' invitation into account, I want to propose a reading of the *Argonautica* that dives into how water similes suggest a new way of not only looking at the poem but at simile itself, and to ask whether such a way of reading could contribute to my current analysis of the simile as a queer figure of speech. By examining water similes in the *Argonautica*, and by examining their fluidity and openness vis-à-vis the similes that are more explicitly about gender roles, we can gain a series of insights into the ineffability of language and identity, which aligns with a queer reading of simile: in particular, I believe, the poem emphasizes how water similes can capture complex, fluid concepts that resist fixed definitions,

much like the elusive nature of queer identity and desire. In Apollonius' *Argonautica*, similes concerning gender often operate within a framework where the comparison, though potentially expansive, still relies on a degree of narrative and structural stability. These similes gesture toward roles and relationships, but ultimately work to reaffirm them within the broader coherence of the epic form. In contrast, similes involving water disrupt this stability, embodying a more fluid and recursive exploration of dis/similarity. Water here is not only a signifier of instability but also of repetition: the pull and push, the ebb and flow, the return that never arrives in quite the same way. This doubleness of movement and recurrence invites a reading of the *Argonautica* as a poem deeply invested in its own temporal disjunctions, positioned as it is in a self-conscious, non-linear relationship with Homeric epic. Water similes, in this context, reflect the simile's capacity to resist fixed binaries and to explore meaning through echo, approximation, and return. The interplay between fluid imagery and formal instability becomes a way of thinking not only about identity and queerness, but also about the temporal textures of epic itself. In this way, water similes allow the poem to imagine gender not as a stable role but as a shifting, recursive process: at once shaped by the past and constantly in motion.

Like a παρθένος: Medea and the Static Nature of Maidenhood

This relation between gendered and aquatic imagery in similes not only illuminates the ways in which simile functions within the *Argonautica* but also raises broader questions about the rhetorical work that similes perform in shaping and challenging identity categories. Water similes, with their fluidity and resistance to fixed meaning, present an opportunity to explore queerness in language, both in terms of the themes they evoke and in their structural refusal to adhere to strict analogical frameworks. At the same time, however, this reading of water similes

is best understood in contrast to another major domain of simile use in the poem: those that engage with gender.

Gendered similes, which frequently structure the representation of Medea and Jason's relationship, operate in a different yet equally revealing way. While they can challenge conventional gender roles, they work within a more stable comparative framework, reinforcing existing social and ideological structures even as they gesture toward potential subversion. Before delving into the liberatory potential of water similes, then, it is necessary to first establish how similes concerning gender function within the *Argonautica*. Understanding their rhetorical operation not only provides a crucial backdrop for my discussion of water imagery but also allows us to see more clearly the ways in which simile, as a figure of speech, is implicated in broader negotiations of identity, power, and stability within the text.

In this regard, the famous simile at *Argon*. 3.275-279 serves as a particularly instructive example, marking a pivotal moment in both the narrative and in the poem's broader engagement with gender through simile. Medea's and Jason's first encounter in Book 3 is fundamental to charting their roles and positions within their relationship. It also shows how desire acts in changing and adapting gender roles according to the movement of eros, whose 'transition is mediated through […] simile',[27] describing the changes first in Medea's and then in Jason's self-perception. As Skinner notes, 'sexual desire fills that ethical vacuum at the heart of the epic, continuing to motivate the conduct of Jason and Medea'.[28] Desire and its power are in fact an extremely gendered force in the text, which define almost all interactions between Medea and Jason. Desire is portrayed, especially but not only through the simile, as a painful

[27] Hunter (2018), 66.
[28] Skinner (2005), 185.

penetration which affects and casts Medea as its gendered female victim. When seeing Jason for the first time (*Argon*. 3.275-279): [29]

> Τόφρα δ' Ἔρως πολιοῖο δι' ἠέρος ἶξεν ἄφαντος,
> τετρηχώς, οἷόν τε νέαις ἐπὶ φορβάσιν οἶστρος
> τέλλεται, ὅν τε μύωπα βοῶν κλείουσι νομῆες.
> ὦκα δ' ὑπὸ φλιὴν προδόμῳ ἔνι τόξα τανύσσας
> ἰοδόκης ἀβλῆτα πολύστονον ἐξέλετ' ἰόν.

The force of Eros is here described as a μύωψ (3.277), a horsefly:[30] its frenzied character underlines not only its constancy and continuous presence, but also the impossibility to evade it, underlined by the fact that 'there is an expectation that the victim will charge'.[31] The association with the stinger points at this pain of desire being characterised by penetration, and this is underlined by the actions of Eros and its arrow: Eros arrives violently (τετρηχώς, 3.276), and the arrow he chooses to hit Medea with is πολύστονος (3.279). The simile of desire as a violent and penetrative force continues in the description of the flame of eros, compared to a

[29] 'Meantime Eros passed unseen through the grey mist, causing confusion, as when against grazing heifers rises the gadfly, which oxherds call the breese. And quickly beneath the lintel in the porch he strung his bow and took from the quiver an arrow unshot before, messenger of pain'. Text by Mooney and translation by Seaton, unless stated otherwise.

[30] Marshall (2017) challenges the long-standing translation of μύωψ as 'gadfly' and argues that 'spur' is the more accurate meaning. While modern interpretations, especially since 19th-century German scholarship, have favoured the gadfly image, earlier translations before the 1800s consistently rendered *μύωψ* as 'spur'. Marshall critiques the gadfly translation by examining its weak textual foundations, and by analyzing Greek literary contexts where μύωψ more commonly refers to a goad or spur in equestrian settings. She argues that the 'spur' interpretation aligns better with the pedagogical role Socrates claims in the *Apology*, as a divine instrument guiding Athens toward self-improvement, rather than a tormentor acting arbitrarily. The shift in translation, she contends, affects how we understand Socrates' mission, either as a chaotic nuisance (gadfly) or as a deliberate instructor (spur). In the context of *Argonautica*, where μύωψ is used to describe the force of Eros, this distinction between a persistent external torment and an internal, driving force becomes particularly relevant. Desire, much like the μύωψ, is presented as both invasive and inescapable, a force that penetrates and embeds itself within Medea's body. The imagery of Eros' arrow and flame reinforces this sense of internalized, overwhelming compulsion. By considering μύωψ as a spur rather than a gadfly, the metaphor shifts from one of external harassment to one of internal propulsion, framing Medea's experience of love not as passive suffering but as an active, consuming force that directs and constrains her movement. This interpretation complicates the tension between desire as an imposed affliction and as an intrinsic drive, highlighting the ways in which erotic experience in the *Argonautica* is shaped by both constraint and inevitability.

[31] Campbell (1994), 244.

fire burning in Medea's chest (*Argon*. 3.286-287). The enjambement of νέρθεν stresses the position of the flame as being within Medea, again underlining the penetrative action of the arrow and the flame, whose pain, following Sappho, is described as a sweet pain (γλυκερῇ […] ἀνίῃ, *Argon*. 3.290).[32]

The following simile further describes the effects of eros as penetration, explicitly underlining Medea's maidenhood (ὡς δὲ γυνή, *Argon*. 3.291) and describing eros as having sneakily penetrated and spread into her chest (τοῖος ὑπὸ κραδίῃ εἰλυμένος αἴθετο λάθρῃ | οὖλος Ἔρως, 3.296-297).[33] As Hunter explains, 'the simile expresses the sense that in a young girl like Medea love is always waiting to appear', and it 'forms a pair with 4.1061-5 where the anguished Medea is compared to a grieving widow at work; neither suggests a happy outcome for her'.[34] The force of desire is therefore seen as an inescapable and constant force that literally thrusts itself into one's body without the possibility for movement or removal. In this way, the simile, while oscillating between tenor and vehicle, captures Medea in a state of inner turmoil and tension, where movement or escape may be impossible. The final image is one of constraint and entrapment, which complicates rather than entirely negates the possibility of fluid desire or self-expression.

Desire as penetration, additionally, is not only an external force coming from Eros as demi-god through his arrow, but once inflicted it is also stabilised as such from the inside, as already anticipated from the first simile (ὡς δὲ γυνή, 3.291) and further proven by Medea's dreams in her famous night of indecision later in Book 3. Here, the choice Medea has to make between helping Jason or remaining faithful to her family and letting him die is described as a choice between life as a wife (κουριδίην παράκοιτιν, *Argon*. 3.623) or as a virgin (παρθενίη,

[32] This portrayal of desire is of course a reference to Sappho's fragment LP 130, where eros is described as γλυκύπικρον.
[33] 'So, coiling round her heart, burnt secretly Love the destroyer'.
[34] Hunter (1989), 130.

Argon. 3.640), therefore understanding her desire as dividing her life into two possibilities, defined predominantly through her virginity or lack thereof. Yet these two possibilities seem to continuously collapse into each other. Again, this is confirmed through the use of the simile: Medea's cries are described as those of a young promised wife (ὡς δ' ὅτε τις νύμφη, *Argon*. 3.656) whose husband has died suddenly before the consummation of their wedding,[35] thus leaving her a virgin (πάρος ταρπήμεναι ἄμφω | δήνεσιν ἀλλήλων, *Argon*. 3.660-1). As Knight explains, the simile 'foreshadows a future wedding […] and suggests the end of Medea's story',[36] defined by marriage and penetration and thus by institutional and erotic structures of patriarchal violence and ideology. It also points at Medea's current state as being of an 'indeterminate and transitional nature',[37] as she is neither a widow nor a promised wife. In either case, both these conditions point at the lack of satisfaction of her erotic longing, as 'the simile evokes […] desire grounded in bodily rhythms',[38] but also in patriarchal institutions.

Medea's internal entrapment into this structure of desire is further confirmed in her encounter with Jason the morning after, as he promises her marriage and safety in Greece in exchange for her help. Jason's promise also entails a moving away from the institutional gender relations of marriage: in fact, again through simile, he underlines how Medea can actually escape this structure, since in Greece she would instead be honoured like a goddess (οἱ δέ σε πάγχυ θεὸν ὣς πορσανέουσιν, *Argon*. 3.1124). The simile suggests a movement away from the normative expectations of marriage, implying elevation rather than subjugation. Yet this elevation is a rhetorical device that serves Jason's aims: it offers Medea a fantasy of transcendence while ultimately reinscribing her within a patriarchal framework, as a wife-to-be whose legitimacy depends on male protection and recognition. The divine comparison

[35] There is also an interesting parallel with Euripides' Alcestis, as three times Medea goes back to her bed just like Alcestis three times says goodbye to her marriage bed (Eur. *Alc*.170-199). This prefigures the *Argonautica*'s Medea's tragic destiny as well as her sacrifices for Jason.
[36] Knight (1991), 249.
[37] Hunter (1989), 168.
[38] Phillips (2020), 240.

operates on a sliding scale: Medea's own semi-divine lineage lends it plausibility, but this very ambivalence allows Jason to both flatter and contain her. The simile thus both gestures toward and forecloses the possibility of escaping binary gender roles, simultaneously invoking her difference and absorbing it into familiar structures of power.

In reality, of course, Medea will not be honoured as a goddess in Greece: instead, her travels there are again impeded by discourses of legitimacy, virginity, and penetration. Not only is her eros defined by such binary institutions and roles, as shown by the uses of the simile in Book 3 of the *Argonautica*, but so is her destiny, as proven by Alcinous' words in Book 4 when deciding whether to give hospitality to Jason and the Argonauts (*Argon*. 4.1106-9): [39]

> παρθενικὴν μὲν ἐοῦσαν ἑῷ ἀπὸ πατρὶ κομίσσαι
> ἰθύνω: λέκτρον δὲ σὺν ἀνέρι πορσαίνουσαν
> οὔ μιν ἐοῦ πόσιος νοσφίσσομαι: οὐδέ, γενέθλην
> εἴ τιν' ὑπὸ σπλάγχνοισι φέρει, δῄοισιν ὀπάσσω.

Medea's acceptance in Greece is therefore contingent on her status as a virgin (παρθενικήν, 4.1106), with her union with Jason serving as both a precondition for and proof of their marriage, especially in the absence of formal sanction. Sharing a bed with him and the act of penetrative sex are not just a private moment but a metonymy for marriage itself, securing her position in a foreign land. This moment effectively seals Medea's fate. Commenting on Euripides' *Medea*, Cairns notes that 'the marriage between Medea and Jason exhibits many of the regular features of an Athenian marriage, but in extreme form' of its 'viri- or patrilocal' character. [40] The use of simile in describing their relationship in the *Argonautica* similarly anticipates the intensification of patriarchal control within marriage, reinforcing through its vocabulary the social structures that bind Medea's fate to Jason's. As Cairns further observes,

[39] 'If she be yet a maid I decree that they carry her back to her father; but if she shares a husband's bed, I will not separate her from her lord ; nor, if she bear a child beneath her breast, will I give it up to an enemy'.
[40] Cairns (2014), 123.

'Medea's marriage is dysfunctional from the outset', [41] and the themes of marriage, virginity, and consummation 'highlight (indeed take to extremes) the risks felt to be inherent in ordinary ritual processes and social institutions'.[42]

Medea is therefore inextricably linked to marriage and patriarchal institutions, her trajectory shaped by the very structures that claim to define and contain her. The similes marking her transition from virginity to marriage construct a rigid temporal and social threshold, presenting this shift as both definitive and inescapable. Yet, while these images impose a clear before and after, they also expose the vulnerability inherent in such rigid distinctions: her entry into marriage does not grant stability but rather signals the precarious position she will occupy within it. The violence anticipated by the similes, then, is not merely physical but structural: Medea's transformation is framed as inevitable, yet its consequences leave her stranded between the very categories that define her fate. If the Argo's similes model fluidity, those attached to Medea reveal the opposite tendency: they crystallise motion into fixity. Apollonius repeatedly likens Medea to static natural phenomena that dramatize paralysis rather than movement. Her emotional flux is continually translated into images of containment, exposing how comparison can entrench binaries (male/female, active/passive, rational/irrational) even within a poem otherwise devoted to motion. The static force of these similes contrasts with the Argo's fluid analogies, showing how Apollonius holds in tension two contrary movements: the expansive drift of the collective and the arrested intensity of the individual.

The simile and its division into two binary terms can therefore indeed reinforce a specific type of ideology, which, in the case of Medea, is a patriarchal one. The gendered vocabulary used

[41] Cairns (2014), 124.
[42]Cairns (2014), 125.

to describe her emotions, desires, and fears throughout the *Argonautica* is significant not only in grammatical but, more importantly, in symbolic terms, as it works alongside plot and narrative structure to define Medea's storyline and destiny through marriage and physical penetration. However, while the gadfly simile at *Argon*. 3.275-9 evokes sudden disruption rather than permanent transformation, its function within the broader narrative contributes to the ideological framework that renders Medea's identity as defined by her virginity and its loss. Unlike similes that explicitly frame desire through imagery of irrevocable change, such as the fire metaphor at *Argon*. 3.286-7, which suggests an internalized, consuming force, the gadfly comparison instead emphasizes the external, intrusive nature of Eros' influence. The stinging fly does not fundamentally alter the heifer but provokes an uncontrollable and distressing reaction, which mirrors Medea's immediate and involuntary response to desire. This moment, however, gains its full ideological weight when considered in conjunction with the subsequent development of Medea's character: while the sting itself is transient, the consequences of her erotic awakening are not. The simile's emphasis on sudden, inescapable disturbance aligns with the broader framework of the *Argonautica*, where Medea's emotional turmoil is not treated as a phase but as the catalyst for a narrative shift that ultimately necessitates her transformation from maiden to wife. [43]

Through the narrative, Medea is presented as either a virgin or a wife, with her transition between these states portrayed as an absolute shift that reshapes both her personal identity and the course of the epic. The ontological division between maidenhood and wifehood then constructs Medea's identity around her status as a virgin or not. Her maidenhood is not treated as an aspect of her character but as a fixed state, one that defines her current existence and must be irrevocably left behind for her to fulfil her narrative role. Virginity in this framework is not

[43] For more on the construction of virginity in Ancient Greece, its problematisation and its fetishization, see Cantarella (1985), Goldhill (1995), Sissa (2013) and Andò (2022).

just a physical condition but a symbolic marker that delineates Medea's before and after, creating a sharp boundary between the girl she is and the wife she will become. Her identity as a maiden is not portrayed as dynamic or multifaceted but as a static condition awaiting resolution through her assimilation into wifehood.

This binary, reinforced by the similes, shapes her character arc, suggesting that her life is fundamentally transformed by her transition from one state to the other; a transformation tied explicitly to the patriarchal structures of marriage and penetration. While the gadfly simile alone does not fully encapsulate this ideological construction, its placement at the pivotal moment of Medea's first sighting of Jason underscores the immediacy and inevitability of her erotic subjugation. When read in tandem with the fire imagery, as well as later similes reinforcing her liminal status (such as the widow comparison at *Argon*. 3.656-61), the cumulative effect of these metaphors is to frame Medea's identity as divided into unalterable stages rather than as fluid or continuously evolving. Thus, while the gadfly simile itself does not depict Medea's transformation as permanent, its role within the larger network of imagery contributes to the broader ideological framework of the *Argonautica*, wherein Medea's fate is determined by her transition from one fixed state to another.

Wandering Desires: Movement and Relationality on the Argo Boat

Building on the discussion of how similes concerning Medea rely on static, binary states to reinforce patriarchal ideologies, I now turn to a different set of similes that allow for a more fluid exploration of identity and relationality. While the similes surrounding Medea frame her existence within rigid categories of virgin and wife, the similes associated with the Argo suggest an alternative framework that emphasizes motion, adaptability, and communal experience. These similes resist the static binaries that define Medea's narrative trajectory, offering instead a model of identity and desire that is dynamic and open-ended.

In this final section, I focus on how similes in the *Argonautica* interact with water imagery and how that surrounds and relates to the Argo boat, which stands in the text as a signifier for movement and travel. These similes introduce a different kind of signification within the *Argonautica*, one that exists outside the direct purview of the patriarchal structures that define Medea's storyline, and even continues in receptions of the myth of the Argonauts. Famously, Barthes described the Argo as 'an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form',[44] underscoring its ontological openness and capacity for transformation. This alludes to the well-known paradox of Theseus' ship, preserved by the Athenians by replacing its planks until no original material remained, a story most often associated with Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* (Plut. *Thes*. 23.1):[45]

> τὸ δὲ πλοῖον ἐν ᾧ μετὰ τῶν ἠϊθέων ἔπλευσε καὶ πάλιν ἐσώθη, τὴν τριακόντορον, ἄχρι τῶν Δημητρίου τοῦ Φαληρέως χρόνων διεφύλαττον οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι, τὰ μὲν παλαιὰ τῶν ξύλων ὑφαιροῦντες, ἄλλα δὲ ἐμβάλλοντες ἰσχυρὰ καὶ συμπηγνύντες οὕτως ὥστε καὶ τοῖς: φιλοσόφοις εἰς τὸν αὐξόμενον λόγον ἀμφιδοξούμενον παράδειγμα τὸ πλοῖον εἶναι, τῶν μὲν ὡς τὸ αὐτό, τῶν δὲ ὡς οὐ τὸ αὐτὸ διαμένοι λεγόντων.

This passage, as Geretto notes, is the one most associated with the expression "Theseus' Ship Paradox", which 'indicates a classical problem concerning artifacts and the metaphysics of identity' and 'asks whether an object whose components have been totally replaced with others (adequately fitting the original ones) is still the same object'.[46] Inspired by the ship of Theseus,

[44] Barthes (1989), 46.

[45] 'The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel'. Text and translation by Perrin.

[46] Geretto (2024), 56. Geretto also notes that 'from a conceptual point of view, the philosophical question of sameness and diversity implicit in it can be glimpsed in other periods in the history of thought, such as in Heraclitus (see the famous fragments related to the river's flux) or in Plato (especially the dialogue *Parmenides*)'. Theseus' paradox has been further analysed by philosophers like Hobbes (1655) and Locke (1690): the debate includes principles of identity, numerical and qualitative sameness, and theories of relativity. The paradox continues to be a central topic in metaphysical discussions on persistence, change, and selfhood. More recent discussion with relation to metaphysics and non-living artifacts can be found in Inwagen (1990) and Evnine (2016).

often identified as the Argo boat, Barthes reads the Argo as a signifier of a constantly evolving process. This openness makes the Argo an ideal signifier for the dynamics of desire and queer desire in particular. Its adaptability and movement are mirrored in the poem's use of similes, which highlight the Argo's role as both a physical vessel and a space of relational possibilities. The continuous replacement of planks suggests an identity that is neither stable nor essential but defined by transformation, a contrast to Medea's trajectory, where her identity is rigidly constructed through patriarchal binaries. The Argo, then, becomes an alternative model of subjectivity and relationality.

This relationality is deeply intertwined with the Argo's movement through water, a crucial aspect that aligns with Oswald's considerations on the metaphorical potential of water as possessing 'the liquid, impermanent, unstable gift of similarity'.[47] Her observations, as we have explored earlier, allow us to think of water not merely as an element but as a metaphor for fluidity in language and identity, emphasizing reflection, distortion, and transformation. These qualities are echoed in the similes describing the Argo, where the ship's interactions with water become a metaphorical space for exploring shifting identities and evolving desires. Water's fluidity mirrors the structure of similes themselves, with their capacity to reflect and transform meaning through dynamic processes of comparison, as they both provide 'a tool to craft literary forms and a theoretical model, both contemporary and early modern, for how cognition flows' specifically with regards to fluidity in language and identity.[48] Just as water resists containment and definition, the Argo's relationship with its aquatic environment resists static categorization, emphasizing movement and change over fixed binaries. Unlike the static states that define Medea's identity, the similes involving the Argo emphasize transition and change, with water serving as the medium that enables this transformation. The Argo's ability

[47] Oswald (2020).
[48] Helms and Mentz (2024), 13.

to navigate the unpredictable sea and its role in uniting the Argonauts presents it as a locus of fluidity and adaptability.

My analysis will consider not only the similes that describe the Argo as an object but also those that position it within its environment, with a particular focus on how water similes emphasize three interconnected aspects: first, the temporal movement of similes, drawing particularly on how some of Apollonius' water similes draw on and reconfigure motifs from the Homeric tradition. This intertextual relationship underscores the way similes traverse time, and reveals how the *Argonautica* as a text engages in a meta-rhetorical exploration of the simile, reflecting on its own position within a broader tradition of epic poetry. Second, the movement of the simile across tenor and vehicle, emphasizing its inherent potential for fluidity. This aspect resonates with the ways in which similes, like water, reflect and distort meaning through processes of comparison, highlighting their dynamic capacity to disrupt fixed binaries. Water's fluidity replicates on the level of imagery the same movement of dis/similarity that structurally characterizes the simile as a poetic device. Finally, the capacity of water similes to organize recognition in the other through dis/similarity, focusing on the relational dynamic between the Argo and the water it traverses. By facilitating connections between the ship, its environment, and its crew, these similes frame communal identity as fluid and adaptive, rather than fixed. This sense of relationality aligns with Oswald's insights into how water's reflective and transformative qualities can inspire broader considerations of identity and collectivity.

By emphasizing these three dimensions of water similes, this section will then highlight how Apollonius' use of water-related imagery can be read as a meta-rhetorical meditation on the simile itself; its structure, its movement, and its capacity to shape meaning. Apollonius' comparisons ripple outward: as Hall observes of epic similes more broadly, water imagery 'dissolves the boundaries between narrative frames and natural forces',[49] forcing one to follow

[49] Hall (2025), 242.

their drift, to read with the flow rather than against it. The fluidity of water, with its reflections and distortions, therefore parallels the simile's ability to transform meaning and perspective, reinforcing its role as a dynamic interpretive tool rather than a static literary device. In the *Argonautica*, the interplay between the Argo and the sea it navigates mirrors the simile's rhetorical potential to transcend static divisions and foster new relational configurations. By examining how these water similes resonate with broader literary and rhetorical traditions, the poem not only reimagines the function of the simile within classical epic but also inspires modern discussions of its relevance as a dynamic tool for exploring identity, community, and transformation across time and texts.

Let us begin by looking at the similes in the *Argonautica* that directly engage with water. As noted by Hunter, 'a simile is a marked poetic form […] which by its very nature foregrounds issues of similarity and difference', as well as 'a very powerful tool of intertextual allusion and variation, one of the principal modes in which poetic *techne* is displayed'.[50] This is true throughout the whole course of the *Argonautica*, where the simile becomes a tool not only for the narrative but also as a direct connection to previous traditions. In particular, water similes in the *Argonautica* directly engage with the Homeric tradition, utilising the tradition of the epic simile as a 'charged poetic mode' that displays important connections and intertextual references to past histories and traditions.[51] This is evident from the very first water simile in the poem, found in Book 2 during the encounter between the Argonauts and King Amycus of the Bebrycians. As Amycus challenges Polydeukes to a boxing match, Apollonius describes the king's formidable strength with a simile (*Argon*. 2.70-4):[52]

[50] Hunter (2006), 85.
[51] Hunter (2006), 85.
[52] 'Hereupon the Bebrycian king—even as a fierce wave of the sea rises in a crest against a swift ship, but she by the skill of the crafty pilot just escapes the shock when the billow is eager to break over the bulwark—so he followed up the son of Tyndareus, trying to daunt him, and gave him no respite'.

ἔνθα δὲ Βεβρύκων μὲν ἄναξ, ἅ τε κῦμα θαλάσσης
τρηχὺ θοὴν ἐπὶ νῆα κορύσσεται, ἡ δ' ὑπὸ τυτθὸν
ἰδρείῃ πυκινοῖο κυβερνητῆρος ἀλύσκει,
ἱεμένου φορέεσθαι ἔσω τοίχοιο κλύδωνος,
ὧς ὅγε Τυνδαρίδην φοβέων

Amycus is compared to the swell of the sea (κῦμα θαλάσσης, 2.70), a comparison that captures not only his physical dimensions but also the kinetic energy and rhythm of his movements. The imagery of the wave rising enriches the simile by evoking the immense, potentially destructive force Amycus embodies. The simile's layers of meaning are amplified by its intertextual engagement with Homeric precedent. As Hunter notes, 'the model is a much-discussed simile at *Il*. 23.597–599',[53] where Menelaus' heart warms like dew-wet grain at Antilochus' words. Apollonius reworks the Homeric simile by using a different term of comparison to express emotion, moving from dew to sea waves. The capability of water to shapeshift and morph into different expressions and environments makes it a perfect vehicle for the expression of shifting and ever-changing forms of emotion. This interplay between similarity and variation is not only part of the simile within the text through the comparison between the king and the sea, but also part of the simile as a rhetorical device across traditions, from the Homeric epic to Apollonius. Like the sea rearing up, so does the simile, oscillating between terms of comparisons and literary allusions past and present. By reconfiguring Homeric models and situating water imagery at the heart of its narrative, the simile not only follows the movement of the physical expanse of the sea but also reveals the transformative potential of poetic language, where meaning flows and evolves across tradition and innovation. This passage then shows how water similes can serve as an expression for the fluid and transformative qualities

[53] Hunter (1993), 211. Here is the simile translated by Wilson: 'With this, Antilochus, brave Nestor's son, | led out the horse and put her in the hands | of Menelaus, who was overjoyed— | just as the dew on ears of grain grows warm, | when crops are growing and the farmlands bristle, | just so, your heart inside your chest grew warm, | Lord Menelaus, and you spoke to him | with words that flew on wings'.

of language itself, underscoring the *Argonautica*'s engagement with its literary inheritance and its thematic preoccupation with fluidity, be it of the sea, of identity, or of language.

Another example can be found in Book 3 of the *Argonautica*, where the Colchians' shouts are likened to the sea crashing against rocks (*Argon*. 3.1370-3):[54]

> Κόλχοι δὲ μέγ' ἴαχον, ὡς ὅτε πόντος
> ἴαχεν ὀξείῃσιν ἐπιβρομέων σπιλάδεσσιν:
> τὸν δ' ἕλεν ἀμφασίη ῥιπῇ στιβαροῖο σόλοιο
> Αἰήτην.

The comparison uses the interaction between sea and rocks to convey the intensity of the Colchians' collective noise. This imagery finds its Homeric precedent in *Iliad* 2.394-396, where the cheers of the Achaeans for Agamemnon's speech are compared to waves crashing against a tall rock. Hunter explains that 'the Homeric model effectively contrasts the crowd's roar with Aietes' grim silence',[55] adding dramatic tension to the scene and linking the collective Colchian outburst with a natural, elemental force. The simile not simply compares the Colchians' noise to the sea but also serves to underscore Aietes' speechlessness by juxtaposition. The overwhelming force of sound (the sea's roar, the Colchians' shouts) paradoxically highlights the absence of response from Aietes, as if he has been rendered mute by the sheer intensity of the moment. Apollonius' reuse of Homeric sea imagery thus not only amplifies the stakes but also reframes the emotional and psychological tension in his own narrative.

This simile is then apparently more faithful to its Homeric model than the one observed at *Argon*. 2.70-4. Yet they inspire different reactions within the narrative: the Homeric crowd cheers, and so do the Colchians, but in the *Argonautica* the simile is not used to emphasize the

[54] 'And the Colchians gave a loud cry, like the roar of the sea when it beats upon sharp crags; and speechless amazement seized Aeetes at the rush of the sturdy quoit'.
[55] Hunter (1993), 251.

noise they produce. Rather, it is employed to starkly put into focus Aietes' silence. Apollonius cleverly uses the Homeric precedent to set expectations that are then instead refused: by reimagining the stormy sea motif, Apollonius underscores the transformative potential of poetic language, and highlights how meaning flows, evolves, and adapts across time and contexts. The very simile that exemplifies the fluidity and transformative power of poetic language is thus mobilised to express the absence of speech in Aietes: while the Colchians' collective voice surges like the sea, Aietes remains as still and speechless as the rock that endures the waves.

Water imagery here serves a dual purpose: as a bridge between bodily, environmental, and emotional realms, and as a metaphor for the fluidity of poetic tradition itself. Like water, the simile shapeshifts, oscillating between its immediate narrative function and its broader role as a rhetorical device connecting Homeric precedent to Apollonius' innovations, while also bridging realms (bodily, environmental, and emotional). Yet within this fluidity, Aietes' silence is made all the more conspicuous: his speechlessness becomes a fixed point in the narrative, an anchor of meaning amid the waves of poetic transformation.

The interplay between natural and human elements further brings about themes of fluidity and transformation, which carry over into Apollonius' similes surrounding the Argo's movement. Just as the Colchians' outburst is shaped and amplified by the sea and its surrounding environment, the Argo's journey unfolds within the ever-changing dynamics of its watery realm. Let's now turn to the Argo itself as a focal point, where similes depicting its motion further explore themes of transition, interconnectedness, and adaptability. Similes surrounding the Argo's capacity for movement are numerous and varied throughout the *Argonautica*,

reflecting the narrative's focus on the ship's journey and its interaction with the ever-changing sea. The first significant instance appears in Book 2 (*Argon*. 2.933-5):[56]

> ἡ δ' ἐς πέλαγος πεφόρητο
> ἐντενές, ἠύτε τίς τε δι' ἠέρος ὑψόθι κίρκος
> ταρσὸν ἐφεὶς πνοιῇ φέρεται ταχύς, οὐδὲ τινάσσει
> ῥιπήν, εὐκήλοισιν ἐνευδιόων πτερύγεσσιν.

Here, the Argo is likened to a sparrow-hawk (κίρκος, 2.934), soaring effortlessly through the sky. What stands out is not only the focus on the ship's seamless movement but also the grammatical transformation enacted by the simile, as the feminine pronoun referring to the Argo (ἡ, 2.933) gives way to the masculine sparrow-hawk. This grammatical shift, underscored by the paradoxical stillness within motion that defines both the ship and the bird, suggests a deeper instability in how identity and action are framed. While it may be objected that similar grammatical shifts are present in other similes throughout the text, the shift here is particularly striking because it highlights the fluidity of identity in this context, shifting between the feminine form of the ship and the masculine form of the bird. The Argo moves swiftly across the sea (πεφόρητο, 2.933), and the sparrow-hawk glides rapidly through the air (φέρεται ταχύς, 2.934), yet the sparrow-hawk's wings remain motionless (οὐδὲ τινάσσει, 2.935), embodying an interplay of activity and rest. This interplay reflects the broader themes of fluidity and transformation in the similes describing the Argo. By linking the ship's movement to an image of effortless flight, the simile transcends static categories of motion and stillness.

This paradoxical quality mirrors the fluidity of water, which resists containment and allows for reflection, distortion, and transformation, echoing both the Argo's navigation of the sea and the simile's capacity for shifting meaning. Just as the Argo traverses its watery

[56] 'Then Argo was borne over the sea swiftly, even as a hawk soaring high through the air commits to the breeze its outspread wings and is borne on swiftly, nor swerves in its flight, poising in the clear sky with quiet pinions'.

environment, adapting to external forces and carrying its crew toward their collective purpose, the simile disrupts binary frameworks, suggesting an alternative mode of relationality rooted in transition and openness. Unlike the static states that define Medea's identity through binary terms, the Argo's movement and the similes that describe it emphasize transformation and interconnectedness. The sparrow-hawk simile highlights a kind of movement that defies simple categorization, embodying the fluid, relational possibilities that characterize the ship's journey and, by extension, the epic's exploration of desire and community. The Argo, in this reading, becomes more than a vessel; it is a space where identities and relationships are constantly redefined, shaped by interaction and shared experience, much like water itself. Through this lens, the *Argonautica* uses the Argo's journey and its similes to challenge static divisions and to embrace the transformative power of fluidity, adaptability, and queer relationality and communality.

The communality of the Argo is powerfully expressed in Book 2, where the ship becomes not only a vessel but also a metaphorical space of relationality and collective effort (*Argon*. 2.1071-6): [57]

> καὶ τοὶ μὲν ἀμοιβήδην ἐλάασκον:
> τοὶ δ' αὖτ' ἐγχείῃσι καὶ ἀσπίσι νῆ' ἐκάλυψαν.
> ὡς δ' ὅτε τις κεράμῳ κατερέψεται ἐρκίον ἀνήρ,
> δώματος ἀγλαΐην τε καὶ ὑετοῦ ἔμμεναι ἄλκαρ,
> ἄλλῳ δ' ἔμπεδον ἄλλος ὁμῶς ἐπαμοιβὸς ἄρηρεν:
> ὣς οἵγ' ἀσπίσι νῆα συναρτύναντες ἔρεψαν.

Here, the Argo is compared to a house (δώματος, 2.1074), specifically one whose construction involves communal labour, with one individual working steadily after another (ἄλλῳ δ' ἔμπεδον ἄλλος ὁμῶς ἐπαμοιβὸς ἄρηρεν, 2.1074). This depiction emphasizes not just the

[57] 'And as when a man roofs over a house with tiles, to be an ornament of his home and a defence against rain, and one tile fits firmly into another, each after each; so they roofed over the ship with their shields, locking them together'.

physical structure of the ship, but its role as a shared space brought into being through collective action: seafaring through a ship of the size imagined here requires collective action. The simile suggests an interplay between the Argonauts and the ship itself, as the narrative shifts between the subjects covering the boat with shields (τοὶ δ᾽ αὖτ᾽ ἐγχείῃσι καὶ ἀσπίσι νῆ᾽ ἐκάλυψαν, 2.1072), the boat being compared to a house, and finally returning to the crew assembling the shields (ὣς οἵγ᾽ ἀσπίσι νῆα συναρτύναντες ἔρεψαν, 2.1073). This oscillation between the ship and its crew blurs the distinction between object and occupants, portraying the Argo not as a static vessel but as something shaped through and inseparable from collective effort. The Argo resists fixed definitions; it is at once an object, a home, and a communal space. By likening the ship to a house built to protect against rain (ὑετοῦ ἔμμεναι ἄλκαρ, 2.1074), the simile reframes Argo, and the subtle relocation of water as from below to above further complicates the spatial logic of seafaring: the Argo is not just a vehicle on water, but also a shelter from it. In doing so, the simile adds further dimensionality to the Argo, resisting fixed definitions. It is at once object, home, and protective structure, whose meaning is shaped not by its form alone but through the coordinated, ongoing labour of those aboard.

The Argo, in its ever-changing and relational nature therefore reflects queer relationality, not just in terms of its physical structure but also in how it embodies a communal space that is shaped through collective effort. The Argo is built through the coordinated labour of the Argonauts, a construction process that emphasizes mutual dependency and interwoven agency. This depiction resists a singular, fixed definition of the ship; instead, the Argo's identity emerges through the actions of its crew, highlighting a process of becoming rather than being. As Halberstam articulates it, gender identity expresses 'relationality' in that it describes 'not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds'.[58] The Argo, as a space that both shelters and is itself shaped by collective movement,

[58] Halberstam (2000), 63.

offers a model for understanding queerness as an ongoing negotiation of relations rather than a static position. The ship is neither a stable object nor an individualized entity but a structure brought into being and maintained through collaboration, much like the fluid and interdependent nature of queer social formations.

By positioning the Argo as a site of collective action rather than a static entity, the passage challenges the notion of identity as something singular and self-contained, instead presenting it as something that emerges through shared experience. The Argo boat disturbs definition by continuously evolving, changing, and moving. The poet and critic Maggie Nelson, relying on Sedgwick definition of queer as 'relational',[59] sees the Argo as 'a nominative […] willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip. That is what reclaimed terms do – they retain, they insist on retaining, a sense of the fugitive'.[60] The ship is never just an object: it is always in the process of becoming something else, its meaning shifting depending on how it is used, perceived, and inhabited. The shields that transform it into a house are emblematic of this process: they are not part of the ship's original structure, yet through collective effort, they alter its function and identity. This transformation, facilitated through communal action, highlights the way queerness emerges through relationships rather than through fixed definitions. The Argo is a site where relationality redefines meaning: it is neither singular nor stable, and its queerness lies precisely in its resistance to fixity, in its ability to be both a vessel and a home, both a means of travel and a space of shelter. The ship's identity is not found in its materials but in its capacity to foster connection, to exist in movement rather than stasis. The Argo's journey is not simply about reaching a fixed destination; it is about the continuous navigation of new possibilities, the ongoing interplay between bodies, space, and meaning. The queerness of the Argo lies in

[59] Sedgwick (1993).
[60] Nelson (2015), 35-6.

its refusal to be pinned down, in its existence as a structure that is always in relation, always in motion.

The relational dynamic presented in this simile therefore mirrors the broader fluidity explored in the poem's water similes, where meaning emerges through processes of interaction, reflection, and distortion rather than through fixed boundaries. Unlike the rigid binaries associated with Medea, the Argo's communal identity is fluid, continually redefined by the interplay between the ship and its crew. The shields used to cover the ship transform it into a protective house, a shift that relies on the relational labour of the Argonauts. This mutual dependency between space and subjects destabilizes any clear division between them, reinforcing the Argo as a locus of shared purpose and evolving identity. The interplay of the Argonauts and the ship itself becomes emblematic of a broader thematic movement in the *Argonautica*, where similes facilitate a reading of identity and space as relational, dynamic, and resistant to rigid categorization through the figure of the simile.

This dynamic of instability and transformation is further reinforced by the final mention of the Argo in Book 4, where, led by Jason at the end of the Argonauts' journey, it sinks into the sea, leaving only its traces behind (*Argon*. 4.1617-22):[61]

> τόφρα δ' ἄγεν, τείως μιν ἐπιπροέηκε θαλάσσῃ
> νισσομένην: δῦ δ' αἶψα μέγαν βυθόν: οἱ δ' ὁμάδησαν
> ἥρωες, τέρας αἰνὸν ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδόντες.
> ἔνθα μὲν Ἀργῷός τε λιμὴν καὶ σήματα νηὸς
> ἠδὲ Ποσειδάωνος ἰδὲ Τρίτωνος ἔασιν
> βωμοί: ἐπεὶ κεῖν' ἦμαρ ἐπέσχεθον.

[61] 'And he guided Argo on until he sped her into the sea on her course; and quickly he plunged into the vast abyss; and the heroes shouted when they gazed with their eyes on that dread portent. There is the harbour of Argo and there are the signs of her stay, and altars to Poseidon and Triton; for during that day they tarried'.

This passage is remarkable for its treatment of the Argo as a signifier that is never truly lost yet never fully fixed. Unlike a simile, which depends on a relational comparison between two terms, the Argo's final disappearance is not a metaphorical displacement but a physical dissolution, an erasure of form that paradoxically ensures its ongoing presence through the marks it leaves behind. Jason plunging into the sea (δῦ δ' αἶψα μέγαν βυθόν, 4.1618) marks an abrupt and decisive act of disappearance, reinforcing the sense of transition and instability that pervades the poem. The reaction of the heroes and their shouting (οἱ δ' ὁμάδησαν**,** 4.1618) underscores the moment's extraordinary nature; the sinking of the Argo is not merely a physical event but a spectacle that defies conventional expectations. Their reaction signals a shift from certainty to ambiguity: rather than a moment of closure, the ship's vanishing act introduces an element of the uncanny, positioning the Argo as something that escapes definitive categorization. The final lines establish the lingering presence of the ship through its signs (σήματα νηός, 4.1620), underscoring how the Argo continues to exist not as an intact object but through residual marks. The reference to the altars dedicated to Poseidon and Triton suggests that the Argo's presence is not entirely erased but transformed into a site of memory and ritual. This shift from tangible object to symbolic trace leaves space for ongoing reinterpretation, allowing the Argo to persist in the imagination of those who encounter its remnants.

The transformation of the Argo into traces rather than a lasting monument resists closure, reinforcing the ship's status as a shifting and evolving entity rather than a fixed object. This differs sharply from the fate of the Phaeacian ship in Book 13 of the Odyssey, which, after bringing Odysseus home, is turned into stone by Poseidon as a form of divine retribution (*Od.* 13.154-64):[62]

[62] 'The Cloud Lord Zeus said, "Brother, I suggest | that while the people in the city watch, | you turn the ship arriving into stone, | still looking like a ship. They will all | be shocked. Then you can surround their town | with a huge mountain." | Hearing this, Poseidon | went to Phaeacian Scheria, and waited. |

τὸν δ᾽ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη νεφεληγερέτα Ζεύς·
ὢ πέπον, ὡς μὲν ἐμῶι θυμῶι δοκεῖ εἶναι ἄριστα,
ὁππότε κεν δὴ πάντες ἐλαυνομένην προΐδωνται
λαοὶ ἀπὸ πτόλιος, θεῖναι λίθον ἐγγύθι γαίης
νηῒ θοῆι ἴκελον, ἵνα θαυμάζωσιν ἅπαντες
ἄνθρωποι, μέγα δέ σφιν ὄρος πόλει ἀμφικαλύψαι.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τό γ᾽ ἄκουσε Ποσειδάων ἐνοσίχθων,
βῆ ῥ᾽ ἴμεν ἐς Σχερίην, ὅθι Φαίηκες γεγάασιν.
ἔνθ᾽ ἔμεν᾽· ἡ δὲ μάλα σχεδὸν ἦλυθε ποντοπόρος νηῦς
ῥίμφα διωκομένη· τῆς δὲ σχεδὸν ἦλθ᾽ ἐνοσίχθων,
ὅς μιν λᾶαν ἔθηκε καὶ ἐρρίζωσεν ἔνερθε
χειρὶ καταπρηνεῖ ἐλάσας· ὁ δὲ νόσφι βεβήκει.

The Phaeacian ship, once a vessel of movement and transition, becomes permanently immobilized, its transformation into rock serving as a final and definitive act of divine intervention. This moment is deeply ironic: Poseidon's punishment turns a ship, an emblem of mobility, into something entirely static. Its transformation into stone is an enforced stasis, an unnatural interruption of movement that fundamentally alters the ship's purpose. The use of the verb ῥιζόω (ἐρρίζωσεν, *Od*. 13.163) underscores the permanence of this change, reinforcing the idea that the ship's transformation is irreversible. Zeus' insistence on the surprise it will generate (ἵνα θαυμάζωσιν ἅπαντες ἄνθρωποι, *Od*. 13.159) positions the petrified ship as an object of spectacle, an enduring monument to divine power.

Unlike the Argo, which dissolves into the sea and leaves only traces, the Phaeacian ship becomes a fixed landmark, a warning sign that resists reinterpretation. The Argo's legacy is marked by its traces (σήματα, *Argon*. 4.1620), whereas the Phaeacian ship becomes a sign whose meaning is imposed by the gods rather than shaped by ongoing human interaction. The Phaeacian ship, once a vessel of movement and transition, becomes permanently immobilized, its transformation into rock serving as a final and definitive act of divine intervention. The Argo's disappearance, by contrast, is not a punishment but an absorption into the very medium

As the ship sped towards the shore, the god | moved near it, turned it all to stone, and slapped | his palm to make it rooted to the seabed.'

that facilitated its journey. Where the Phaeacian ship is arrested in a single moment of petrification, the Argo's legacy is marked by its traces, allowing for a different kind of continuity, one that is fluid, incomplete, and open to reinterpretation. This distinction is crucial for understanding the *Argonautica*'s broader treatment of movement and instability. While the *Odyssey* often resolves narrative tensions through acts of divine finality, the *Argonautica* embraces indeterminacy, allowing its central vessel to dissolve rather than become fixed in place. The Argo's disappearance thus embodies the same deferral of definition that characterizes similes, resisting rigid boundaries and instead privileging movement, transformation, and the persistence of memory through traces rather than monuments. This tension between fixity and fluidity extends beyond the fate of the ship itself and into the poem's larger engagement with epic tradition.

The Argo's absorption into the sea also suggests a different conception of memory from the monumentalizing impulse seen in the *Odyssey*. The transformation of the Phaeacian ship into stone ensures its permanence, but also fixes its meaning in place: it becomes a warning, a cautionary symbol of divine wrath. The Argo, by contrast, is remembered not as an object but through the space it once occupied, through the altars and the harbour that bear its name. This mode of remembrance is inherently more dynamic, as it invites ongoing interaction and interpretation rather than enforcing a singular reading. The Argo thus functions less as a static memorial and more as a locus of continued narrative and poetic engagement, allowing its story to remain open-ended rather than definitively concluded. Just as the Argo dissolves into the sea, the poem itself seems to resist a clear ending, positioning itself within an ongoing literary tradition that is always subject to reinterpretation and reconfiguration.

The Argo's disappearance therefore embodies the same deferral of definition that characterizes similes, resisting rigid boundaries and instead privileging movement, transformation, and the persistence of memory through traces rather than monuments. Through

it, the *Argonautica* stages its own engagement with poetic tradition: just as the Argo does not remain as a fixed object but continues through its marks on the landscape, so too does Apollonius' epic resist definitive closure, positioning itself within an ongoing literary tradition that is always subject to reinterpretation and reconfiguration. The Argo's fate, then, is not just about the ship: it is about the nature of epic itself, about what endures and what dissolves, and about the ways in which meaning is not located in permanence but in the fluid interplay of presence and absence, memory and transformation.

Conclusion

The ineffable traces found at the end of the *Argonautica* finally encapsulate the openness and capabilities of the simile as a form of expression for fluid identities, particularly visible in this text thanks to its focus on water, movement, and relationality. As we have seen, water similes in the *Argonautica* highlight three interconnected dimensions of this rhetorical device. First, they reflect the temporal movement of similes: this intertextuality not only reinforces the continuity of epic traditions but also establishes the *Argonautica* as a meta-rhetorical reflection on the simile's place within this broader poetic history. Second, water similes emphasize the fluidity of movement between tenor and vehicle, illustrating how similes disrupt rigid binaries by reflecting and distorting meaning through comparison. Just as water flows and adapts, so too do similes operate as dynamic, shifting constructs that challenge fixed interpretations. Finally, these similes demonstrate the relational dynamics of recognition through dis/similarity, organizing connections between the Argo, its environment, and its crew. By doing so, they position identity and community as inherently fluid, shaped by context and interaction, showing that identity 'not only depends on time, but is shaped by the conditions of its arrival, by how it came to get here'.[63]

[63] Ahmed (2006), 40.

The structure of the simile and its interaction with water imagery, then, shows that, as explained by Burt, 'simile - this is *like* that - seems more self-conscious, more aware of the limits of language. […] the "like" in simile reminds us that we cannot hold on after all; each wave moves, in *sequent* toil, and all do contend'.[64] Once again, water is here to remind us of the constant process of erosion, movement, and transformation that the simile implies. Similes, in their essence, resist absolute definition and embrace approximation and similarity. They create connections that are not fixed but dynamic. In the *Argonautica*, this flexibility of similes, combined with the inherent fluidity of water, reflects broader themes of identity and experience. Following Oswald's mode of 'using water to read'[65] the text allows for a deeper understanding of how simile operates, offering a space for the proliferation of discussions on identity, desire, and the fluidity of meaning across time. Through this approach, then, the simile emerges as a powerful rhetorical and meta-rhetorical tool that can provide new perspectives on modes of reception as well as on the fluid interplay between language, identity, and desire.

This engagement with fluidity reaches its culmination in the final moments of the *Argonautica*, where the Argo itself disappears into the sea, leaving only traces behind. Unlike the structured finality that often marks the endings of epic journeys, the Argo does not arrive at a fixed conclusion. Instead, its disappearance serves as an extension of the logic of the simile: something that is always in transition, resisting rigid definition. The Argo does not become a permanent monument, nor is it destroyed in a climactic moment of closure. Rather, it dissolves into the very element that has structured so much of the poem's imagery: water. The Argo, which made the entire journey possible, vanishes, leaving only its σήματα (signs or traces) behind. These traces, while marking the Argo's passage, do not fix its meaning. They remain

[64] Burt (2014), 19.
[65] Oswald (2020).

as evidence of movement rather than as stable artifacts, reinforcing the idea that meaning in this poem (and beyond) is always in flux.

This deferral of fixed meaning is therefore a reflection of the nature of similes themselves. The simile operates by holding two things in relation without collapsing them into sameness. It suggests likeness while simultaneously preserving difference. This quality aligns with the *Argonautica*'s broader themes of relational identity, where characters and objects are defined not by static essence but by their connections and transformations. The Argo, throughout the poem, is not just a ship; it is a house, a sanctuary, a battlefield, a lover, and a body in motion. Each of these identities emerges through relational context rather than through intrinsic properties. By the time the ship disappears, it has accumulated so many meanings that it can no longer be reduced to a single, fixed definition. In particular, the emphasis on relationality extends to the way the Argo functions as a communal space. Unlike the individualized heroism of earlier epics, the *Argonautica* foregrounds collective action. The ship's movement depends on the coordinated labour of its crew, and its transformations are the result of shared effort. This collective identity is reinforced by the similes that describe the Argo, which often draw on images of social structures, natural processes, or fluid interactions. Just as a simile requires both its terms to function, the Argo's identity emerges through its relationships rather than existing as a self-contained entity.

The fact that the Argo's final disappearance is not framed as a loss but as a transformation is significant. This moment suggests that presence and absence are not binaries but points on a continuum, much like the simile itself, which relies on the simultaneous assertion of similarity and difference. The Argo does not cease to exist; it moves into a different register, becoming something that can only be known through its traces. This transition mirrors the way similes work, as they create meaning not through direct assertion but through suggestion, proximity, and relational positioning. The journey of the Argonauts not ending with

a triumphant return but with dissolution, leaving behind marks that are both present and absent, also aligns with the function of similes, which do not resolve into single meanings but remain open-ended, allowing for multiple interpretations.

By drawing these connections between the Argo, similes, and the broader themes of the poem, we can see how Apollonius constructs a vision of epic that embraces instability rather than resisting it. The Argo's final disappearance is not a failure of meaning but an invitation to reconsider what meaning entails. Rather than providing definitive conclusions, the poem encourages an ongoing process of interpretation, much like the workings of a simile, which always holds open the possibility of further connection, further transformation. In this way, the *Argonautica* challenges us to think differently about how epic functions. Rather than seeing it as a genre that establishes fixed truths, Apollonius presents it as a medium of flux, a space where meaning is always being negotiated, where identity is always shifting, and where the simile, unstable, relational, and fluid, becomes the ideal mode of expression. The final traces of the Argo, much like the similes that structure the poem, remind us that nothing is ever fully fixed, that every act of interpretation is an act of movement, and that meaning, like water, is something that must always be followed, never held. Through this approach, then, the simile emerges as a powerful rhetorical and meta-rhetorical tool that can provide new perspectives on modes of reception as well as on the fluid interplay between language, identity, and desire.

Conclusion: The Queer Potentialities and Futures of the Simile

Closing Remarks

In this thesis, I have explored the simile as a dynamic and transformative rhetorical device. By tracing the simile's destabilising role across epic and its use in contemporary queer poetry, I have attempted to uncover the simile's capacity to interrogate and redefine linguistic, social, and ontological norms. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, the simile is uniquely suited to interrogate fixed notions of identity, since it offers a rhetorical space where boundaries blur and queerness can be articulated. Similes open up interpretative spaces that resist closure: as von Glinski notes, they 'work against the grain [of the text] as hermeneutical puzzles that open up new complexities'.[1] They neither reinforce a cohesive imagery system nor settle into narrative transparency; instead, they question the boundaries between illusion and truth, appearance and reality, factuality and potentialities. The simile's capacity to refract and reconfigure meaning, as this thesis has demonstrated, not only enriches the text but also serves as a lens through which we can examine the transformative potential of queerness, while the potential of the simile for unexpected and open forms of comparison can further be applied to comparative criticism and classical reception studies. This thesis has therefore shown how the simile's interplay of similarity and difference facilitates new ways to interrogate textual relationships, moving beyond genealogical modes of reception to embrace a broader, more dynamic intertextuality, and positioning the simile a methodological tool for rethinking classical reception, comparison, and relationality.

To properly address the applications of the simile discussed in this thesis, this conclusion is structured into three sections. In the first section, I review the considerations

[1] von Glinski (2012), 154.

offered in previous chapters and give an overall assessment of the role of the simile within ancient epic and contemporary poetry. In the second section, I assess the simile's contributions to comparative criticism and classical reception studies. In the third and final section, I gesture towards the potential future applications of the simile, as well the possibilities generated by colloquial ways of introducing similarity. How might common phrases such as 'feeling like' and 'being like' mirror the dynamics of the simile in literary discourse, offering avenues for resistance and escapism among queer individuals? In everyday language, these expressions allow individuals to articulate experiences, emotions, and states of being that may not fit within fixed or predetermined categories. The simile, then, is not merely a poetic or literary device but an active mechanism for shaping selfhood, both in language and in lived experience. By mapping out these vistas, these insights pave the way for future explorations into the simile's evolving role in literary analysis and its intersections with contemporary queer literature.

A New Understanding of Simile in Epic and Contemporary Queer Poetry

Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated how the simile serves both as an object of inquiry and a methodological framework, highlighting its queer potential and its disruption of stable literary genealogies. By focusing on poetic language, I have shown how queerness and the study of queerness in the ancient world need not be confined to specific figures or acts, but can instead emerge through the relational structures created by similes and built to resist fixed meaning, disrupt narrative continuity, and generate slippages between categories. I have shown how similes unsettle narrative structures and enable transhistorical dialogues, ultimately positioning the simile as a queer figure of speech that challenges fixed categories and opens new interpretive possibilities (Chap. 1). I have also demonstrated how the simile can build a plane of phantasmagoric imagination that becomes parallel to the real world, and through which violent erotic desires can be freely imagined and fulfilled. I also noted the simile's potentiality as a toolkit for the expression of queer desires (Chap. 2). We have observed that

the simile can disrupt traditional gender norms as well as social and familial dynamics across diaspora (Chap. 3), and that it can challenge perceptions of the human in relation to different forms of being and sociality (Chap. 4). The relationship between simile and displays of dis/similarity through water imagery has also been examined to reflect on the simile's evolving applications, pointing to the possible use of the simile as a meta-rhetorical tool that explores its own function within the epic tradition (Chap. 5). The simile, through its thin but clear separation of tenor and vehicle, allows for the coexistence of textual reality and poetic imagination. From noting how the simile is uniquely suited to exploring alternate worlds and realms beyond and within epic poetry, we can conclude that the simile's distinctive linguistic structure and conceptual framework not only offer ways of exploring non-conformity within classical epic, but also serve as a toolkit for the full expression of queerness in contemporary queer literature.

At its core, the simile can therefore be read as an act of queer speculative thinking. Where Foley's notion of reverse similes has proven that the simile is particularly suited to disturbing social norms, I hope with this thesis to have shown that such a disturbance can go beyond binary notions of gender expression.[2] In this section, I will summarise how my thesis has shown that the simile gestures toward what could be rather than simply affirming what is; allows for imaginative realities to briefly appear at a textual level; and allows for non-normative explorations of the self, kinship and desire. By embracing the provisional, the shifting, and the relational, simile opens up new ways of thinking about queerness, embodiment, and the possibilities of language itself.

My analysis of the *Metamorphoses* revealed the simile as a crucial medium for articulating desire, acting a medium through which erotic imagination can exceed the limits of

[2] Foley (1978).

the narrative world, even when this imagination remains bound to structures of violence and domination. The episode of Apollo and Daphne makes this tension clear: the simile allows Apollo to imagine fulfilment, revealing the form's capacity to blur reality and fantasy, yet it simultaneously exposes the cultural constraints within which this imaginative space operates. Contemporary queer writers such as Trish Salah reconfigure this dynamic through impersonation, which functions as a simile-like mechanism that destabilises identity categories and opens new speculative possibilities.

In the *Odyssey*, similes briefly reconfigure familial structures and kinship across time and space, even as the narrative ultimately restores patriarchal order. Vuong's reinterpretation of the Homeric epic transforms this instability into a sustained reimagining of paternal inheritance, reframing comparison as a diasporic mode that registers displacement, fractured lineage, and the transmission of trauma, while ultimately enabling queer self-fashioning, desire, and the reassembly of kinship.

Similarly, animal similes in the *Iliad*, especially those related to Achilles, gesture towards alternative modes of relationality by drawing on non-human experience, though they remain shaped by the poem's binary logic of predator and prey. Contemporary queer poets such as Donika Kelly extend these possibilities by dismantling the boundaries between human and animal, using the simile to question normative structures of identity and desire.

The *Argonautica* introduces a further dimension through its water similes, which foreground fluidity, movement, and reflection. These similes highlight the instability of meaning within the epic tradition and demonstrate the form's inherent meta-rhetorical quality. Their associations with water emphasise ongoing processes of transformation and invite readings attentive to multiplicity, refracted identity, and conceptual drift. The simile therefore emerges as not only a descriptive device but also a meta-rhetorical tool that interrogates its own function within the poetic tradition, underscoring its potential for innovation and self-

reflection. Just as waves erode and reshape the shoreline, so too does the simile erode fixed categories, offering alternative frameworks for understanding identity and power. This interplay between water and simile as dynamic forces aligns with Burt's assertion that the simile is inherently self-aware, drawing attention to the limits of language and to its constant deferral of definition. As she says, 'simile shows that we know how much of language is artifice, how much we make up when we try to describe the world'.[3]

The common thread that runs through this analysis is the simile's unique function as a rhetorical device that mediates between dualities without fully collapsing them. Unlike metaphor, which draws its power from the interaction between its elements but often presents them as fused or interchangeable, the simile preserves a crucial space of approximation, resemblance, and distinction. This ability to hold tension without resolution makes it particularly suited to articulating queerness, which often operates within spaces of fluidity, resistance, and transformation. Because the simile relies on comparison, it necessarily invokes a precedent, drawing upon existing categories and expectations: yet in doing so, it also introduces slippage, undermining the very stability it appears to reinforce. This dual function allows it to operate within hegemonic structures while simultaneously gesturing beyond them: its generative indeterminacy resists the imposition of singular meanings, making it an important tool for articulating experiences that exist beyond the limits of fixed categorization.

The simile can therefore function as a mechanism of 'queer world-making' which, to Muñoz, always requires 'an active kernel of utopian possibility'.[4] To him, the act of queer world-making happens when minoritarian subjects decide to fashion a new world through 'spectacles, performance, and willful enactments of the self for others'.[5] If we take the simile,

[3] Burt (2014), 21.
[4] Muñoz (2009), 40.
[5] Muñoz (2009), 200.

as I have shown in this thesis, as a poetic tool that is aware of the limits and possibilities of language, and that, as shown by Burt, shows 'how much of language is artifice',[6] it is therefore possible to read it as enacting that kernel of possibility through the alternative vision it allows. As I have shown, similes enact and draw connections that do not collapse difference but rather keep it in dynamic tension, offering glimpses of alternative realities that resist closure: they become minoritarian performances through acts of imaginative transformation, where 'performative acts of conjuring deform and re-form the world'.[7] They momentarily reshape reality, creating alternative modes of meaning.

The simile's potential for queer world-making therefore lies in its ability to create a space where minoritarian subjects can disidentify with dominant modes of representation and instead forge new modes of relationality. Muñoz states that 'queerness is a longing that propels us forward, beyond the here and now. The here and now is a prison house; we must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there'.[8] The simile enacts this very movement: it refuses to be confined to a single interpretative framework, instead gesturing toward other possibilities, other ways of being that exist beyond the limits of what is immediately present. By exploring the simile as a formal structure that mirrors Muñoz's vision of queer world-making, we see how it functions as a means of constructing alternative realities within and against hegemonic structures. Similes provide a way of thinking beyond the constraints of the present, allowing us to glimpse the contours of a queer futurity that is not yet fully realized but is always in the process of being imagined. Crucially, this framework allows us to not only reconsider the role of simile within the study of classical literature, but to also reframe the how the field of Classics addresses and interacts with queerness and queer theory. By shifting attention from *who* is represented to *how*

[6] Burt (2014), 21.
[7] Muñoz (1999), 30.
[8] Muñoz (2009), 1.

queerness operates at the level of textual structure and meaning-making, I have therefore argued that poetic language itself, and the simile in particular, can instantiate queer ways of knowing and relating. In doing so, the simile emerges not just as a literary device but as a radical mode of engagement that can open up classical studies to new, transformative possibilities.

Simile and Classical Reception

Throughout this thesis, I have also investigated the simile not just as a literary device, but as a transformative methodology for comparative criticism and classical reception studies more broadly. Each chapter has contributed a new dimension to this reimagined understanding, demonstrating how the dynamic relationship between tenor and vehicle and expressing dis/similarity in a non-hierarchical and fluid manner mirrors interactions between texts in comparative criticism. This approach positions the simile as a medium for dialogue: as Hardwick had already hinted in her article on reception as simile, 'the simile activates dialogue between ancient and modern texts and their readings, and in both there may be a subtle element of reversal. This reversal is dialogic, involving an exchange of qualities and a sharing of insights which can also be subversive of expectations. In both cases the simile is an agent of perspective transformation'.[9] Through this thesis, I hope to have shown the multiplicity of perspectives that the simile can inspire when used as a tool of comparative criticism.

One illustration of this dialogic potential can be found in the chapter on the *Metamorphoses*, where I draw on Butler's concept of radical fantasy to position the simile as a mechanism that bridges the actual and the possible. The connection between simile and impersonation then also emerges as a way to read comparatively between the ancient and modern text, especially in

[9] Hardwick (1997), 329.

queer practices of performance and self-reinvention, laying the groundwork for subsequent chapters to expand on the simile's role in creating imaginative spaces for exploration and critique.

The following chapter builds on this foundation to focus on intertextual connections as a method of comparison between the *Odyssey* and Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016). Intertextual connections between similes not only enable the reimagining of mythological figures and relationships, but also allow for a less genealogical way of comparison. Vuong's poetic reworking of Homeric themes shows how the space of possibility generated by the simile in addressing father-son relationships can be explored to navigate the intersections of queerness, displacement, diaspora, and inherited trauma. Simile then becomes a conduit through which both texts can be read in dialogue, allowing Vuong's poetry to reframe the *Odyssey*, even as the *Odyssey* deepens our understanding of Vuong's interrogation of kinship, identity, and loss.

The chapter on Homer's *Iliad* shifts the focus on the simile's interaction with animal imagery in Homeric and contemporary poetry. Unlike the direct literary references and classical allusions explored in the first and second chapter, which emphasize intertextual connections and the reinterpretation of established characters, this chapter investigates how similes can inspire comparisons between texts that are rooted on analysing their dis/similar use of poetic imagery. Specifically, animal similes in the *Iliad* are employed to explore themes of sociality, animality, and kinship: having established this, I examine how queer poets such as Donika Kelly repurpose the animal simile to engage with anti-racist and anti-colonial projects, linking the form to broader political and ethical concerns. The explicit comparative nature of the simile makes it an ideal rhetorical device for these authors, who use it to interrogate intersections of humanity, animality, and power structures. These topics are hinted at in the Homeric text, where, however, the animal simile remains stuck in the binary of predator and

prey. Thus, while the Homeric simile gestures at the possibilities of alternative modes of being, contemporary queer poets are able to intentionally activate these possibilities as political critique. This chapter, therefore, highlights the simile's role as a springboard for reimagining classical texts in ways that move beyond direct literary references to a broader, figurative form of comparative analysis.

Finally, the last text-based chapter examines the simile's relationship to fluidity, movement, and intertextuality through an analysis of water similes in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. It is only by appreciating the general poetics of fluidity and reflection that dominate the poem, in fact, that the contrast with Medea's similes of paralysis can unfold in its full significance and charge. Water similes in the *Argonautica* emphasize the temporal and relational dynamics of the form, illustrating how it disrupts rigid binaries and invites dynamic, shifting interpretations. Water, as a motif, becomes exemplary of the simile's capacity to reflect and refract meaning, creating connections that are not fixed but constantly evolving. This chapter demonstrates how the simile operates as both a rhetorical and meta-rhetorical tool, highlighting the simile's potential to foster comparative readings that are attuned to the fluid interplay between language, identity, and desire. Simile-as-water-as-comparison, then, offers a powerful framework for understanding classical reception as a dynamic, iterative process.

Taken together, these chapters illuminate the simile's potential to inform new comparative perspectives within classical reception studies. By focusing on the simile's ability to navigate dis/similarity, this thesis moves beyond genealogical models that privilege influence and lineage, proposing instead a relational approach that embraces multiplicity and fluidity, and foregrounds relationality over hierarchy. This characteristic of the simile further aligns with recent calls within classical reception studies to rethink its methodological underpinnings. One of the central challenges facing classical reception studies today, as well as the field of Classics

more broadly, is its ability to remain relevant in an academic landscape marked by shifting institutional priorities. While classical reception more specifically is definitely more attuned to its own inner workings and machinations, the field of Classics more generally has been hesitant to turn its critical lens onto itself, engaging in what might be termed meta-reception as the study of its own traditions, biases, and conceptual frameworks. A simile-based methodology, and a queer simile-based methodology, provides a potential way of undertaking this reflexive work. The queer simile, with its ability to establish connections across disparate traditions without collapsing them into singular narratives, offers a means of broadening the scope of reception studies. As Umachandran notes, 'queerness under the sign of the classical has the chance to redress, repair, and re-do relationships to the past in alternative ways than the parent discipline has directed. Speculation, as I propose it, is one of these ways'.[10]

Speculating on the queer simile and its capacity for multidirectional engagement has allowed me to look at the future of classical reception studies as an evolving, interdisciplinary space that remains critically engaged with contemporary debates and intellectual movements. The ongoing evolution of classical reception studies will require sustained methodological innovation, where the field's engagement with its own history is essential for ensuring its continued relevance. Reflexive methodologies that account for the multiplicity and fluidity of reception processes will be key to this endeavour, and the simile, as a mode of comparison that resists closure and embraces relationality, offers a valuable framework for this work. By advancing the study of classical reception as a space of ongoing negotiation and reinterpretation, rather than as a field defined by static inheritances, the future of the discipline can be one of inclusivity, adaptability, and intellectual dynamism.

[10] Umachandran (2023), 481.

The Future of the 'Like': The Potentialities and Limits of Comparison

This thesis has explored how simile functions as a site where likeness both enables and unsettles meaning in classical epic. Across the *Metamorphoses*, the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, and the *Argonautica*, the simile has emerged not merely as a stylistic ornament but as a form that stages the instability of relation itself. Its logic makes visible the paradox of all acts of comparison: they create connection while preserving difference, intimacy while maintaining distance. It is in this double movement that the simile's queer potential resides. The readings offered here have traced how the simile performs, within the ancient text, the very work of queerness as theory and as method by generating space for alternative relations, partial identifications, and suspended identities that resist closure.

To speak of the future of the like is to consider how this potential might extend beyond the poems analysed here and beyond the frameworks of queer interpretation that have shaped this study. In most traditional literary criticism in the field of Classics, similes have often been treated as somewhat transparent and thus simpler figures of speech. Yet, as this thesis has shown, they are anything but straightforward: they are reflexive mechanisms that interrogate their own operation, as becomes more evident in later Greek and Latin epic poetry, where the chain of reception and cultural referencing continues to expand. The queer potential of the simile identified here does not end with Ovid or Apollonius but continues to mutate, expanding as the simile becomes increasingly aware of its own limits.

Yet to imagine a future for the simile within queer classical criticism is also to acknowledge its boundaries. The simile's power lies in its ephemeral precarity: it can gesture toward alternative worlds but cannot sustain them. Its structure presupposes a return to separation, a reassertion of difference after the moment of likeness has passed. Yet this limitation, rather than diminishing its force, invites further exploration of where ancient literature locates the possibilities that simile only momentarily realises. What other forms or

devices, such metaphor, ekphrasis, parataxis, even silence, might carry that potential more capaciously? If the simile offers a glimpse of relational freedom, perhaps the next task in the field of queer Classics is to identify the forms that refuse to turn away from that glimpse.

The insights of my project suggest several directions for such work. One might trace how metaphor and simile overlap and diverge in their capacity to destabilise identity, how the instantaneous equivalence of metaphor differs from the suspended negotiation of simile.[11] One might also look to the fragmentary or the unfinished nature of some ancient texts (whether intentional or shaped by their reception history) as generating moments where form itself fails to close, as spaces where the 'like' dissolves into something more radically open. One might move from the microstructure of the simile to the macrostructure of literary tradition itself, focusing on the network of resemblances that connects texts, languages, and genres. The future of the like may thus be intertextual as much as intratextual, as a model of relation that exceeds the boundaries of a single poem.

When it comes to queer theory and methods, this future points toward a more capacious understanding of queerness in classical literature as something not limited to character or theme but embedded in form and the very grammar of comparison. Still, recognising the simile's limitations sharpens our sense of critical responsibility: not every form of connection in the ancient world is liberatory, and not every act of comparison produces queer potential. By attending to both the generative and the restrictive capacities of the simile, we can begin to identify new textual spaces where the imagination of alternative worlds might be more fully unleashed. Ultimately, to locate the future of the 'like' is to commit to reading comparison itself as both a theoretical and an ethical practice. The simile asks us to dwell in the in-between, to imagine relation without erasure. Its tension between sameness and difference, between

[11] Zanker (2019) partially addresses this in his Introduction, where he frames the study of the Homeric metaphor as neglected in comparison to that of the simile (25).

union and distance, remains the most enduring analogy for the work of queer classical criticism: to hold together the impulse toward identification with the recognition of otherness. The future of the 'like', like its past, therefore depends on our willingness to keep reading in the subjunctive, and to continue imagining what it means to be *as if*.

This formal and ethical framework is not confined to ancient epic. The simile, with its capacity to hold multiple meanings in tension and to connect disparate realms, offers a framework for rethinking how we approach identity, desire, and difference. In an era marked by increasing attention to the fluidity of identity, the simile's ability to navigate these complexities makes it an invaluable tool for critical inquiry and creative expression. The simile, and its related forms of comparison, continue to evolve as dynamic and multifaceted instruments, particularly within contemporary queer poetry and everyday language. Colloquial phrases such as 'feeling like' and 'being like' offer a compelling parallel to the formal dynamics of the simile in literature. These everyday constructions, often used to express subjective experiences or moments of emotional resonance, can be read as miniature similes that can create spaces for resistance and relationality when acting as practices of queer world-making. The adaptability of the simile to both poetic and colloquial contexts highlights its relevance as a rhetorical and conceptual tool in contemporary queer discourse, as both literary and everyday language. The simile's role can therefore extend beyond the page, functioning as a lived practice of comparison and connection. The phrase 'I feel like' is often a way of gesturing toward a state of being that is not fully realized, but rather in flux. The simile, therefore, becomes a linguistic mechanism for articulating selfhood in ways that acknowledge transformation and multiplicity rather than rigid categorization.

The simile's role in imagination thus further expands its importance beyond the literary realm. By allowing individuals to construct analogies between their lived reality and imagined possibilities, the simile fosters creative thinking and new ways of seeing the world which are

particularly relevant in queer discourse, where the ability to imagine alternative futures and modes of existence is often a necessary act of survival and resistance. Whether in poetry, casual conversation, or acts of self-definition, the simile remains an indispensable mode of meaning-making, one that continues to evolve alongside the shifting landscapes of language, identity, and culture.

Through this thesis, I have therefore sought to contribute to the growing discourse at the intersection of classical literature, queer theory, and contemporary poetics, demonstrating how the simile serves as a nexus for these fields. By revisiting ancient texts with an eye toward their queer potentials and by situating these texts in dialogue with contemporary works, this study has sought to underline the relevance of the simile as a site of exploration and transformation. Whether in the context of ancient epic or contemporary queer poetry, the simile continues to inspire new ways of thinking about the intersections of language, reality, and imagination, reminding us that meaning, like identity, is always in flux, shaped by context, connection, and the infinite possibilities of the 'like'.

I have also demonstrated how the simile operates as a powerful mechanism for negotiating queerness, temporality, and identity, both within classical texts and beyond them. My analysis has been in line with Muñoz's idea that world-making can function 'through the performance of queer utopian memory, that is, a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated - a utopia in the present'.[12] Muñoz identifies the 'workings of queer utopian memory and the structure of feeling that is adjacent to such a reconstructed notion of utopia and memory' as 'a force field of affect and political desire that I call utopian longing'.[13]

[12] Muñoz (2009), 37.
[13] Ibid., 35.

Muñoz envisions a utopia that is neither bound to a nostalgic past nor an ever-deferred future, but rather emerges in the present as an ongoing, transformative process. This framework, I believe, helps illuminate how the simile, in its perpetual movement between likeness and difference, enables new ways of imagining selfhood and relationality.

Such a temporal framework negotiated by the simile resonates with Holmes' notion of anachronism. To her, the value of such a temporal model is that it is 'at once fluid and bound to ethical and political commitments'.[14] She notes that:[15]

> If anachronism dislodges you from the dominant temporality of the present, it does not do so in the spirit of transcendence or retreat but as an impetus to living differently in the present, an impetus marked by a 'desperate immanence, as if what is given is not good enough but will have to do'. In time's folds lies the possibility of a surprise that shifts the conditions of our ethical orientation towards the next 'now'.

Holmes' notion of anachronism as an impetus for 'living differently in the present' offers, I believe, a compelling way to think about the simile's role within both classical and contemporary texts. The simile, like anachronism, and because it disturbs temporality as anachronism does, holds an ethical and political charge, a refusal to accept 'what is given' as fixed or sufficient, and instead always looking for new possibilities and potentialities. It is this very refusal that allows the simile to destabilize dominant modes of temporality, opening up new ways of being and relating that are not bound to linear or normative structures of past, present, and future. In the context of epic, this capacity enables the simile to disrupt and reimagine heroism, gender, and relationality; while in contemporary queer poetics, the same mechanism creates spaces for rethinking identity as something in flux, shaped by both memory and aspiration, by both history and futurity.

[14] Holmes (2020), 72.
[15] Holmes (2020), 69.

Reframing the simile as a queer method therefore allows us to trace its enduring capacity to unsettle, reimagine, and reshape identity across time. With this thesis, I have sought to show not only what the simile can do for classics, but also what it can do for queerness, for the queers of the past, those of the present, and those not-yet-here. The simile, in its perpetual motion between likeness and difference, between recognition and transformation, becomes a bridge across time and space where the past and the future can meet, where identities that were once repressed can be reclaimed, and new ones can be born. The simile allows us to envision the self as something that is always becoming, always changing, always reaching toward what is yet to be, toward the promise of a world that is not bound by the limitations of the present or constrained by the norms of the past. In its openness, ambiguity, and endless potential, the simile offers us the tools to imagine such a world. It offers us the possibility of seeing ourselves differently, of seeing the world otherwise, and of imagining futures that are not just possible, but, crucially, might be already in the making.

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