



# Green Letters

## Studies in Ecocriticism

ISSN: 1468-8417 (Print) 2168-1414 (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/rgrl20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rgrl20)

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To cite this article: Emma Greensmith (2025) Tree Similes and Trojan Land-Escape in Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica*, *Green Letters*, 29:2, 206-220, DOI: [10.1080/14688417.2025.2505016](https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2025.2505016)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2025.2505016>



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Published online: 03 Jun 2025.



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## Tree Similes and Trojan Land-Escape in Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica*

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### ABSTRACT

This article considers how tree similes are distinctively used by Quintus of Smyrna, a Homeric-impersonating Greek poet from the third century C.E. to articulate the dynamic and volatile relationship between the human and non-human world in the mythic space of Troy.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 December 2024  
Accepted 7 May 2025

### KEYWORDS

Poetry; epic; trees; similes;  
Homer; Quintus

It is the space between the human and the non-human where poetry occurs.

– Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language*

People aren't like anything; there are too many of them.

– Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*

Similes have long been recognised as a powerful way of drawing connections between different entities and world experiences. They are also a fundamental, constitutive feature of ancient epic poetry. This article considers how the simile device is mobilised by Quintus of Smyrna, a Homeric-impersonating Greek poet from the third century C.E., to articulate the dynamic and volatile relationship between the human and non-human world in the mythic space of Troy. Quintus' poem is less well known than many of the more conventionally 'canonical' works discussed in this issue. However, it offers a significant and provocative example of the poetic redrafting of the Homeric tradition in Late Antiquity, and shows how Homer's foundational response to the Trojan landscape (as outlined in Edith Hall's contribution) becomes for later authors a resource to be extracted, carved up and reassembled in disorienting new ways. During the relentless teleological progression of his narrative, Quintus uses several intricately crafted similes centred on trees to disperse and undercut the fast-paced and linear human action, and to invite reflection on the wider consequences of that action which extend beyond the human domain. The heroes and the trees are united in Quintus' Troy through *and only through* the story world of the simile, where they become momentarily enmeshed as actors grappling with the effects of cyclical violence and destruction. Through a close analysis of several of these moments, I aim to show how Quintus' tree similes offer a micro-commentary on the tenuous borders

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between agency and inevitability, continuity and change, annihilation and hope in the distant landscape of mythological Troy, which resonates loudly in many more contemporary positions in time.

## I. Eco-similes, Epic similes

It is now widely acknowledged that poetry as a form has a particularly rich ecocritical potential, which goes far beyond any high r/Romantic conceptions of nature or versified academic essays on climate change. The strong emphasis in an Anthropocene context on the figurative and poetic character of *any* images of nature or conceptions of ethnography has helped to underscore the value of poetry as a mode insistently invested in notions of artifice, fantasy and allegory. Poems depend on unique formal qualities and expressive versatility rather than (necessarily) on narrative coherence, and thus, in Timothy Clark's words, are 'perhaps even more than other literary [forms] animated by and able to contain open-ended, multiple and even contradictory levels of meaning'.<sup>1</sup> A poetics which directly foregrounds figurative language and highlights its own artifice is thus potentially even more 'responsible' than that which imagines itself as offering direct and unmediated access to the world it describes, because in such a poetics, language and thought become defamiliarised precisely as they move towards experiences beyond the human scales and norms which they usually express.<sup>2</sup>

If all this is true of poetry in general, then it is especially so for the simile, a paradigmatic piece of figurative language which draws persistent attention to its mediating qualities and techniques of artificiality. Operating as both everyday shorthand figures and specific devices associated with poetic art, similes demonstrate the ubiquity of figuration in even seemingly 'objective' modes of expression.<sup>3</sup> As is brilliantly conveyed by Stephanie Burt, the simile can thus provide a formalistic, miniaturised emblem of the experience of poetry itself. 'Poetry', Burt writes, 'in some accounts stands apart from other uses of language because it is only *like* those uses, its references only like (not a part of) the way that other uses of language point to things, or act on things, in the real world'.<sup>4</sup> Simile fundamentally denies identity – "'like" implies "is not"' – and so it can aid and enact these wider properties of poetry, and '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'.<sup>5</sup> Work in ecolinguistics and ecocriticism has gradually begun to consider the particularised importance of similes (not just as an extension of metaphor), for encouraging sustainable thinking and new-materialist or posthumanist perspectives, by opening up an emotive way of thinking about multiple landscapes and living species, suggesting their sense of material embodiment and agency, and drawing attention to the familiarity between such different entities whilst rendering that familiarity temporary and illusory, through the separating boundaries of the 'just ... as', and the disavowing properties of the 'like'.<sup>6</sup>

Similes are also absolutely integral to the world of ancient epic poetry. Given the rich ecocritical potential that they hold, they ought to have a major role in the ongoing work being undertaken by classicists to convey the importance of epic, the most foundational and influential ancient genre, in contemporary eco-poetic thought. A recently published book in the classical field (which does not itself engage with ecocritical ideas) helps to demonstrate the benefits of paying sustained attention to this tiny but mighty piece of

poetic form. In *The Stories of Similes* (Beck 2023), Deborah Beck focuses on the embodied experience of similes in ancient epic texts and reads them as not ornamental or appositive to the narratives, but rather as story worlds themselves, which are connected in complex ways with the primary plotline, characters, and events. In this reading model, the ‘as/so’ frame fashions a border around a simile that both sets it apart and weaves it into the main story of an epic poem, in a process that is simultaneously ‘intellectual, emotional, and immersive’.<sup>7</sup> A key feature of this process is multiplicity: through their preference for generalised settings and ‘timeless’ landscapes, epic similes most often exist in a universal reality that is not bounded by any one time or place. They are both recognisable to and beyond the reach of any individual person, and they therefore produce an uncontainable, proliferating number of possible associations.<sup>8</sup>

These general qualities of the immersive epic simile highlighted by Beck became especially enhanced in the imperial Greek period. Taking up the interest and insights into Homeric similes fostered by the Alexandrian scholar poets and critics, composers of epic from the second to the sixth centuries C.E. made vast and intensive use of the simile device, and within their similes, they favoured mannered parallelisms between tenor and vehicle, frequently making items and details from the simile intrude or trespass into the main storyline.<sup>9</sup> This penchant for similes can partly be explained by the strong sense of affiliation and belatedness experienced by these poets: for authors opting to return directly to the metre and idiolect of the Homeric tradition, the simile offered a way to both demonstrate an allegiance to that tradition and also to symbolise the interlocking processes of similarity and difference at work in such an act of Homeric imitation. It must also be comprehended as a part of the increased interest in the natural world displayed in many of these imperial texts. The most important example in this vein is Oppian’s *Haliutica*, a five-book didactic epic on fish from the second century C.E, which has analogy as its dominant principle and the simile as its master trope. As Emily Kneebone has compellingly demonstrated, various forms of comparison permeate the structure of this work, and the 120 similes illuminate the major ways in which ‘the poet’s anthropomorphic language brings fish into the domain of the human and vice versa’ and reflect contemporary debates about the blurring of the human-animal boundary.<sup>10</sup>

## II. The epic ecosystem of the *Posthomerica*

Quintus Smyrnaeus’ *Posthomerica* is one of the central and most influential poems in this imperial Greek epic corpus. This fourteen book epic by an otherwise anonymous poet tells the story of the Trojan war from after the death of Hector to the shipwreck of the Greeks after the sack of Troy. It displays an overwhelmingly Homeric lexicon and style, and in a delayed proem the author even claims to *be* Homer himself, describing his inspiration by the Muses on the mountains of Smyrna, one of Homer’s celebrated birthplaces in the biographical tradition (*PH* 12.306–13). The *Posthomerica* is absolutely crammed with similes: it has 305 of them across its fourteen books, more than either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, which are much longer poems.<sup>11</sup> This density alone suggests that Quintus is continuing the aesthetic tendencies of the Alexandrian poets and of Oppian (who was one of his major models), in using similes to imitate and overtake Homer, to display his skills of allusive engagement and Homeric criticism, and to comment on his own place in the epic tradition. What renders this poem distinctive from its forerunners and

contemporaries, however, is that narratively and thematically, it seems to turn its back on the natural world.

Quintus' Troy is a very sterile space. It is devoid of fertility and fecundity (in stark contrast to the focus on babies and children found in other imperial poetry, not a single person is born)<sup>12</sup> and heavily landlocked and linear. These dynamics are established from the outset of the narrative: beginning without a proem or Muse invocation, Quintus creates an impression of direct Iliadic continuation, of sharp prolepsis to the sack of Troy, and – with the help of a simile – of exhausting, overwhelming claustrophobia:

διή τότε Τρῶες ἔμιμνον ἀνὰ Πριάμοιο πόλῃα  
 δειδιότες μένος ἤν' θρασύφρονος Αἰακίδαο·  
 ἦῦτ' ἐνὶ ξυλοχοισι βόες βλοσυροῖο λέοντος  
 ἐλθέμεν οὐκ ἐθέλουσιν ἐναντία, ἀλλὰ φέβονται  
 ἰληδὸν πτώσσουσαι ἀνὰ ῥωπήια πυκνά·  
 ὥς οἱ ἀνὰ ππολιέθρον ὑπέτρεσαν ὄβριμου ἄνδρα

...

ἀμφὶ δ' ἄρα σφισι πένθος ἀνιηρὸν πεπότητο  
 ὥς ἦδη στονόεντι καταίθομένης πυρὶ Τροίης.

PH 1.2–7 & 16–17

The Trojan forces stayed inside the city of Priam, terrified of the noble might of bold-hearted Achilles, grandson of Aeacus. Like cows which, unwilling to face a grim lion among the thickets, flee pell-mell and cower in the dense undergrowth: just so, inside their city, they shrank from the mighty warrior ... and bitter grief fluttered all around them, as if Troy were already being burned with grievous fire.<sup>13</sup>

The presence of an animalistic simile within three lines of the start speedily signals Quintus' commitment to the imperial penchant for the device (in a typically Quintan paradox, the conceit of being 'still in the *Iliad*' is both upheld and undermined by an excessive Homeric aesthetics: here by using a simile far sooner than the Homeric poet ever did). But the image also greatly contributes to the sense of overbearing density that this opening episode seeks to convey: the subject (βόες, the cows) is conjoined with the aggressor (the grim lion, βλοσυροῖο λέοντος, 1.5); the verbs run together in a mass of *etas* and *thetas* (ἐλθέμεν οὐκ ἐθέλουσιν ἐναντία, 'they were unwilling to go to face' 1.6); the bushy thickets (ῥωπήια πυκνά) shrink into themselves (1.7) ... everything is squashed. The narrative then follows these announced principles, unfolding a tight, end-directed story in which heroes arrive sequentially to fight and die in the war, and where the action, apart from two simultaneously occurring scenes framed by sea voyages (to Skyros and Lemnos, PH 7.169–345 and 9.353–445), all takes place on the arid Trojan battlefield.<sup>14</sup>

The plot is also driven by and centred around anthropic agents. Warfare and agriculture are dominant descriptive *foci*, human (and divine) causation is foregrounded, and its effects are conveyed through human responses and consequences. Where descriptions of landscape and topography do occur, the emphases are selective and telling. Quintus is saliently silent about the permanent natural features of the *Iliad*'s geography of the Trojan plain: the fig-tree (Il. 6.433, 11.167, 22.145), the oak (Il. 5.693, 6.237, 7.22, 9.354, 11.170, 21.549) and the rising plain (Il. 10.160, 11.56, 20.3).<sup>15</sup> Instead, he concentrates on man-made or urban features, such as the temples of Athena and Apollo (PH 6.146, 13.345, 13.421–8, 14.326 and PH 12.481, 517 and 13.434), the altar of Zeus *Herkeios* (PH 6.147,

13.222 and 13.435–6) and Ganymede’s sanctuary (*PH* 14.325–6).<sup>16</sup> Where objects of nature do occur, they are material for exploitation and extraction: the wood from Mount Pelion, which fashioned Achilles’ spear (5.119), the fir which made the blades used to row and fetch Neoptolemus (6.105), the trees from Ida, which are cut down to make Achilles’ tomb (3.672–7) and the war-ending wooden horse (*PH* 12.125f). Most other natural *loci* in the primary story are new or divinely created phenomena, put there to commemorate fallen heroes and to act as *semata* for human voyeurs yet to come.<sup>17</sup> In a dramatic amplification of the *Iliad*’s approach to human degradation and exploitation of the land outlined in Hall’s contribution, the Trojan landscape and its features are animated in this narrative *only and explicitly* in the service of humans: helping the war efforts and commemorating the heroes, and serving the cultural interests of the future visitor to Troy, and reader of the epic. This anthropic concentration is most fully displayed in the account of the sack of Troy (*PH* 13), which paints the city as an urban spectacle: the Trojans’ drunkenness is enhanced by Odyssean infusions of battle and banquet; fast-paced descriptions of houses, streets, temples and objects make falling buildings collide with sliding furniture and toppled wine jars; and bodily mutilation commingles with destruction of the physical features of the city, and vice versa.<sup>18</sup> A powerful sense of violence, rupture and loss is explored through a resolutely human lens:<sup>19</sup> as Emily Kneebone notes in her contribution, the river Xanthus and the Trojan Nymphs later mourn this destruction of the landscape that was their home,<sup>20</sup> but the landscape itself is not centred or promoted in the reader’s mind: there is scarcely a natural feature mentioned in the whole blood-soaked book.

It may therefore seem unsurprising that the *Posthomerica* has not been a prime candidate from the ancient corpus for ecocritical analysis. If in the Anthropocene, ‘all poetry is going to be “environmental” in some way or another, simply because things just cannot be read in the old way’,<sup>21</sup> and if poetry as a form is particularly potent for eco-conscious expression, then Quintus’ epic seems to offer a limit case for such maximalist thinking. It embraces all of traditional poetry’s enshrined formal features, but resists multiformity and indeterminacy, and centres unapologetically on culture over nature, zooming in even more than its primary model Homer on the human subjects and victims of myth.

However, the most compelling thing about Quintus’ poetics is its sense of self-resistance. Whilst stating his commitment to a tightly framed and human-focused narrative, this poet also reveals a great interest in opening this frame and distorting this focus, to explore the spaces that exist in between the end-directed onslaught of the story and the fulfilment of its primary heroic concerns.<sup>22</sup> This resistance is conveyed most clearly by the storm with which the poem actually ends (*PH* 14.419–658). The tight ring-composition between the opening lines and the sack of Troy is unravelled, as the sack is revealed not to be the poem’s *telos* after all. We end in fact in elemental chaos, a reversal of the structures of both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, which begin in this stormy state, and are confronted with all the turbulent liquidity which was so lacking in the preceding narrative,<sup>23</sup> as nature, mortals and divinities alike cause and confront turmoil, transition and flux.<sup>24</sup>

The *Posthomerica*’s copious similes must be read as a constitutive part of this expansive self-resistance, and such a reading can in turn affirm the wider importance of the simile device to ancient epic’s ecocritical potential. Quintus’ similes exist within the interval between the stated aims and the repressed interests of the poem and reveal a different and more sensitive approach to the Homeric tradition and its Trojan landscape than the

dominant discourse of the main narrative. The simile stories centred on the natural features which are missing from the *Posthomerica's* primary narrative bring the reader into the interval between the human and non-human world, in a temporary and tense moment of immersion. In aggregate, these moments work to anticipate throughout the poem the more capacious epic ecosphere that is unleashed in the final upheaval of the storm.

### III. Quintus' trees: simile worlds

The majority of Quintus' similes (192 of them) are based in the natural world.<sup>25</sup> This fact does not simply align Quintus with the *Iliad* and Apollonius (compared to the penchant for more human-centred similes found in the *Odyssey*) but it also provides a stark contrast with the anthropic subject matter of the primary narrative. As a sub-section of the nature similes, those involving trees provide a particularly productive site for exploring this contrast. Troy is full of trees, but unlike Homer, Triphiodorus, Colluthus and Nonnus, Quintus chooses not to involve them much in his main narrative.<sup>26</sup> The similes which enliven the trees therefore enable, even encourage, the reader to make connections between two groups of beings who live, breathe and often die in Troy – the heroes and the trees – which this epic otherwise keeps apart.

Eighteen similes in the *Posthomerica* have trees or plants as their main vehicle.<sup>27</sup> They are spread across the poem and are found mainly in battle scenes but, on three occasions, appear in non-battle contexts and suggest different forms of interaction. Let us now look in detail at examples from each of these groups, before ending, as Quintus does, in and beyond the fiery destruction of the city.

#### *Fallen heroes, fallen trees*

The first tree simile comes in the opening book of the poem, used for the Greeks slain by the Amazon Penthesilea during her blistering but short-lived *aristeia*:

Ὄς δ' ὄτ' ἐπιβρίσασα μέγα στονόεσσα θύελλα  
 ἄλλα μὲν ἐκ ριζῶν χαμάδις βάλε δένδρεα μακρὰ  
 ἄνθεσι τηλεθόωντα, τὰ δ' ἐκ πρέμνοιο κέδασσεν  
 ὑψόθεν, ἀλλήλοισι δ' ἐπὶ κλασθέντα κέχυνται·  
 ὧς Δαναῶν τότε κείτο πολὺς στρατὸς ἐν κονίησι  
 Μοιράων ἰότητι καὶ ἔγχει Πενθεσιλείης.

PH 1.488–93

Just as at the onset of a roaring hurricane tall trees in bloom are torn up by the roots and flung to the ground, while others are broken in two high up, and the result is a chaotic heap of smashed debris: just so the great host of the Danaans lay in the dust, victims of the will of Fate and the spear of Penthesilea.

This intricate scene establishes dynamics which will recur in the tree similes across the poem. The trees are delayed in the gradual unveiling of the image: we hear first of the storms, which ravages across a whole line, followed by roots, the ground and the hurling, and only then do the trees come, and they droop and fall over the verses as soon as they appear. The evocative language throughout the simile echoes and

distorts two Homeric passages which were famous for their harmony in the face of brutality and loss. τηλεθόωντα ('in bloom') mirrors the ever-blooming trees in the *Odyssey's* Garden of Alcinoos (*Od.* 13.196). There they were actual trees, present in the *locus amoenus*, silent, peaceful and contemplative, but Quintus wrestles them out of that narrative and transplants them into a simile, taking them away from peaceful Phaeacia and 'back' into wartime Troy, a new context which is violent and frightening. The same word also evokes the luxurious forest in Glaucus' famous Iliadic simile about the race of men being like generations of trees (*Il.* 6.146–51), where Homer inserts a charmingly unrealistic pause in the chaos of battle to enable such a gnomic exchange: but here in Quintus, the leaves are re-agonised and messed back up, and the similarities do not work to unite the heroic opponents in the narrative, but to underscore their imbalances of power and emphasise the brutal contrast of temporary victory and permanent defeat. The pivot at the midpoint of the simile (τὰ δε, 'while others ...' 490) extends the bleak story further, and makes vivid the present reality for the trees in a second image which is devoid of all wistfulness, filled with the vertigo of Trojan heights (ὑψόθεν, 'high up', evokes the semantics associated with the lofty towers of Troy)<sup>28</sup> and the claustrophobia which afflicts everyone trapped in this land. There is therefore a twofold sense of pathos produced by this passage: for the Greek youths cut down in their prime and now lying in the dust, of course, *but also* for the trees who have experienced their own trauma as they fall in and into this simile.

Penthesilea is soon brought down by Achilles, and another tree simile is employed to describe her fall:

Εὖτ' ἐλάτη κλασθεῖσα βίη κρυεροῦ Βορέασ,  
 ἦν τέ που αἰπυτάτην ἀνά τ' ἄγkea μακρὰ καὶ ὕλην,  
 οἷ αὐτῆι μέγ' ἄγαλμα, τρέφει παρὰ πίδακι γαῖα·  
 τοίη Πενθεσίλεια κατ' ὠκέος ἦριπεν ἵππου,  
 θηητὴ περ ἐοῦσα· κατεκλάσθη δέ οἱ ἀλκή.

PH 1.625–9

Like some fir tree destroyed by Boreas' freezing blast – a tree nurtured near a spring by the earth which it adorned, the tallest tree in all the tall valleys and forests – so Penthesilea fell from her swift steed, still beautiful but with her strength destroyed.

The connections with the earlier simile clearly align Penthesilea with the Greeks that she has killed: the tree *comparandum*, the smaller details (κλασθέντα, 'broken/destroyed' from 1.491 is repeated here with κλασθεῖσα) and the sympathetic effects all work to make Penthesilea 'appear like one of her own victims'.<sup>29</sup> But the fir tree itself is also brought into this chain of reverberations: the word μακρὰ ('tall') of 626 creates its own verbal echo with the earlier simile story of the trees (the 'tall trees', δένδρεα μακρὰ at 1.489) and the expansive image of line 627 not only corresponds the fir tree with Penthesilea (who is θηητὴ περ ἐοῦσα, 'still beautiful') but also creates a sense of internal connection between the characters in this natural story-world: the tree delights the earth, which nourishes it back with its spring, with the careful balance of the line offering a miniature portrait of harmonic symbiosis and mutual enrichment. The dialogue created by these similes unites characters in the epic who are otherwise deeply divided: male and female, Greek and Trojan, individuals and collectives. But the trees are more than the tools for drawing such links: they are part of the link, as the resonance of their own interconnected stories and

the verbal echoes with the primary narrative draw them into the theatre of the Trojan war, as sentient beings who also experience and respond to the forces of violence and chaos.

In a later battle-scene tree simile, the damage inflicted upon the ‘real’ trees of Troy by the ongoing war is suggested even more strongly, as humans become the agents of destruction within the tree simile story too:

Ὡς δ’ ὅτ’ ἀν’ οὖρεα μακρὰ θορῶν εἰς ἄγκεα βήσσης  
 δρυτόμος ἐγκονέων νεοθηλέα δάμναται ὕλην,  
 ἄνθρακας ὄφρα κάμησι κατακρύψας ὑπὸ γαῖαν  
 σὺν πυρὶ δούρατα πολλά, τὰ δ’ ἄλλοθεν ἄλλα πεσόντα  
 πρῶνας ὑπερθε κάλυψαν, ἀνήρ δ’ ἐπιτέρπεται ἔργῳ·  
 ὧς ἄρα Δηϊφόβοιο θοῆς ὑπὸ χερσὶν Ἀχαιοῖ  
 ἰλαδὸν ὀλλόμενοι περικάππεσον ἀλλήλοισι.

PH 9.162–8

Just as when up in the high mountains a woodcutter plunges into the hollows of a glen and without delay begins to tame the fresh-budding woods so that he can make charcoal by burying a good number of logs in a fire pit; and that wood, lying fallen in random profusion, forms a covering over the rocky ground, and the man delights in his work: just so the Achaeans dying in crowds at the agile hands of Deiphobus fell confusedly one upon another.

The deforestation, which occurs in the primary narrative as the Greeks build a tomb for their fallen heroes and fashion the horse, is here inverted and reversed: it moves into the simile world, and is used against the Greeks, to describe their destruction rather than their constructions.<sup>30</sup> The character of the woodcutter plays a major role in this simile scene: he is full of action and haste, and his thoughts and intentions are focalised – we are told not only what he is doing, but why he is doing it. There is a ferocity to his activity which is volatile and foreboding: the verb δάμναται (‘tame’) especially when combined with fire (πυρὶ) brings us back into the bleak scenario conjured in the poem’s opening with the taming of horse-taming Hector (Εὐθ’ ὑπὸ Πηλείωνι δάμη θεοεἶκελος Ἴκτωρ, PH 1.1), and foreshadows the city on fire (1.17), the final onslaught which will claim Deiphobus’ own life. But in this context, the strong anthropic connotations of δαμνάω gain further force: this is man asserting his control on the natural world, taming its wildness, and coercing the will of the trees just as a rider breaks a horse, or a man subjugates his wife.<sup>31</sup> The focus on the woodcutter is framed by moments which emphasise the effects of this subjugation and shift the perspective to the trees themselves. νεοθηλέα (‘fresh-budding’, 163) produces the same sense of pity for the trees’ wasted youth as it was found in the first simile – they are attacked and brought down at a moment of rejuvenation. Then, with the same pivot τὰ δε (165, cf. 1.490), Quintus continues with what happens after this point of destruction: the emphasis again is on mess and proliferation (ἄλλοθεν ἄλλα πεσόντα, ‘lying fallen in random profusion’), as the trees are no longer verdant in the woodland, but still take up new space, now by covering the ground on which they lie. Once again we see how trees are not just a vehicle picked up and discarded by the poet to form his simile: we are brought into the experience of this human assault on their life and spend time with them before and after they are commodified. In this respect, the return to the human sphere in the final clause of the simile (ἀνήρ δ’ ἐπιτέρπεται ἔργῳ, ‘the man delights in his work’) is darkly significant: the woodcutter is no longer described by his occupation, but

becomes simply ‘man’, stripped back to his anthropic base state, an exemplum of mankind’s more general tendency to exert its will upon the landscape. That he not only undertakes this work but rejoices in it underscores the invasive entitlement of this activity: the bleak and brutal events which we have just experienced in the simile – the trees, young and fresh, cut down and soon to be incinerated, and now lying in broken chaos – are entirely irrelevant to him who views them only as a source of fuel and material, and effects their destruction with a self-satisfied smile.

### *Leaning trees: collapse and support*

The similes considered so far convey the grim mutuality of human-to-human violence, and its more one-sided impact on the natural world. Quintus, however, also employs tree similes to offset this belligerent despair of the present with some tentative gestures of hope. Later in the same book as the Deiphobus-as-woodcutter scene, deforestation occurs again in a simile, this time to describe the arrival of Philoctetes, the Greek hero who was abandoned on the island of Lemnos after suffering an agonising snakebite in the early phases of the war, and whose return to the battlefield was prophesised as a vital step for the capture of Troy. The simile describes that moment of return, as he disembarks shakily from the ship which conveyed him from the island where he had languished in pain for so long:

ἦύτ’ ἐνὶ ξυλόχοισιν ἐς ἥμισυ μέχρι κοπεῖσαν  
 φηγὸν ὑφ’ ὑλοτόμοιο βίης, ἢ πίονα πεύκην  
 τυτθὸν ἔθ’ ἔστηϋϊαν, ὅσον λίπε δρυτόμος ἀνήρ  
 πρέμνου ὑποτμήγων λιπαρὸν δάος, ὄφρα πέληται  
 πίσσα πυρὶ δηθεῖσα κατ’ οὔρεα, τὴν δ’ ἀλεγεινῶς  
 ἀχθομένην ἀνεμός <τε> καὶ ἀδρανίη ποτικλίνει  
 ἔρνεσιν εὐθαλέεσσι, φέρουσι δέ μιν βαρέουσιν·  
 ὡς ἄρ’ ὑπ’ ἀτλήτῳ βεβαρημένον ἄλγεϊ φῶτα  
 θαρσαλέοι ἥρωες ἐπικλι<ν>θέντα φέρεσκον  
 Ἀργείων ἐς ὄμιλον ἀρήιον.

PH 9.451–9

Just as when in some coppice there is an oak half cut through by a strong woodsman or a resinous pine just remaining upright on the small amount left by the woodcutter in chopping away the resinous part of the trunk to make a log to be consumed by fire up in the hills, so as to make pitch; the tree is vexed with pain, and the wind combined with its own weakness makes it lean on blooming sturdy trees, which carry it as it weighs them down: just so those valiant heroes supported him, weighed down by intolerable pain, and brought him to the warlike Argive army.

There are several echoes of the earlier deforestation simile: the attention given to the woodcutter’s force, action and intention, his definition both by occupation and by anthropism (here combined in δρυτόμος ἀνήρ, ‘woodcutter man’) and a pivot from a human focus to an elaboration on the trees. But this deforestation story has a different arc and ultimately conveys a more ambivalent tone. The first part of the simile stresses the partiality of the destruction: the oak is half cut through (ἐς ἥμισυ μέχρι κοπεῖσαν, literally ‘cut as far as the half’) and some pine remains (τυτθὸν ἔθ’ ἔστηϋϊαν,

literally ‘a little still stands’): a miniscule survival, but still a survival. Then, after the pivot away from the woodcutter (τὴν δε, ‘but this [tree] 455), this scene does not return to him again like the previous passage did, but rather ends in and with the forest. There is sorrow and frustration in the details of the broken tree’s pain, in the drooping syntax and straining near-tautology of τὴν δ’ ἀλεγεινῶς | ἀχθομένην (the tree ‘is vexed in pain’), and the frank doublet ἄνεμός <τε> καὶ ἄδρανίη (‘the wind and its own weakness’) which underlines how the debilitation triggered by human action is now exacerbated by natural forces, including the tree’s internal condition. But in the final line of the simile story (456), we also see a more positive aspect to this chain of deterioration. The injured tree leans on younger, stronger members of the forest, and whilst it weighs them down, they also lift it up. The succinctness and balance of the clause φέρουσι δέ μιν βαρέουσιν (‘they carry it as it weighs them down’) conveys this sense of efficient reciprocity, and the compound εὐθαλέεσσι (‘blooming’) offers another word for fecundity to join those found in earlier similes, but with a crucial difference: these fresh trees are still standing, whereas before their virility was emphasised only at the point of their demise. The harmony and symbiosis of the woodland environment which we glimpsed momentarily in the background of the simile describing Penthesilea’s fall (the tree delighting the earth, the earth nourishing the tree) here becomes the main outcome of the simile story. As a reflection on the main narrative, it promotes the possibility of reunion between Philoctetes and the Greeks, who were responsible for his prolonged pain and suffering. But as an immersive story with the trees as the embodied actors, it also delivers a powerful message of woodland collaboration in the face of collapse. As a result of forces beyond their control, the trees are brought into a closer communion and achieve a tense and expedient interdependence which requires diminishment and sacrifice but can help to ensure their survival.<sup>32</sup>

### *Trees at the sack of troy*

Both the positive and negative dimensions of Quintus’ tree simile story world – the sorrow of brutalising destruction and the precarious optimism afforded by survival and support – are activated in the depiction of the sack of Troy. There are no trees whatsoever in the urban primary narrative of book 13. There are, however, two tree similes, which work to extend the consequences of the carnage into the forests surrounding the city. The first represents the Trojans as trapped animals, echoing the image and actualising the prolepsis of the poem’s claustrophobic opening scene:

ἤυτ’ ὄρος λασίησιν ἄδην καταειμένον ὕλης  
 ἐσσυμένως καίηται ὑπαὶ πυρὸς ὀρνυμένοιο  
 ἐξ ἀνέμων, δολιχαὶ δὲ περιβρομέουσι κολῶναι,  
 τῷ δ’ ἄρα λευγαλέως ἐντείρεται ἄγρια πάντα  
 Ἥφαιστοιο βίηφι περιστρεφθέντα καθ’ ὕλην·  
 ὣς Τρῶες κτείνοντο κατὰ πόλιν· . . .

PH 13.488–95

Just as when a mountain in bushy forests blazes rapidly with fire fuelled by the wind, as tall peaks echo the crackling sound and all the wild creatures suffer a cruel death, trapped in the forest by the fire god’s force: just so were the Trojans massacred throughout their city.

Woodlands fill the mountain and frame the simile: in ὕλης ... ὕλην ('forests' ... 'forest') they structurally enclose and contain the animals, and with λασίησιν ('bushy'), they also share their traits (λάσιος in Homer often refers to the shaggy fleeces of sheep or goats).<sup>33</sup> This choice of setting at this moment in the narrative cannot fail to signify: alongside and beyond the narrated human massacre, trees are burning, and non-human beings are dying, and the possibility of a shared experience between the tenor, vehicle and setting of this simile helps to create a more expansive panorama for the sack, as the reader is invited to imagine how the targeted assault on the cityscape rises up and leaks out onto the vast Trojan landscape.<sup>34</sup>

The other tree-based simile during the sack describes the *absence* of destruction, as an individual death is suddenly but permanently averted. After searching for Helen throughout the burning city, Menelaus finally discovers her hiding in the palace. He is about to kill her in a fit of jealous rage, but Aphrodite (as a divinity *ex machina* and/or a metaphorical manifestation of his *eros*) stops him in his tracks:

ἀλλ' ὡς τε ξύλον αὔον ἐν οὔρει ὑλήεντι  
 εἰστήκει, τό περ οὔτε θοαὶ βορέας θυελλαι  
 ἐσσύμεναι κλονέουσι δι' ἠέρος οὔτε νότοιο·  
 ὡς ὁ ταφῶν μένε δηρόν, ὑπεκλάσθη δέ σι ἀλκή  
 δερκομένου παράκοιτιν.

PH 13.395–9

Just as on a wooded hillside a dried-out tree keeps standing, unmoved by the strong blasts of Boreas or Notus gusting through the air: just so he stood long rooted to the spot in amazement, and as he gazed at his wife his strength gave way.

This simile is unusual compared to the other tree comparisons in the *Posthomerica* in many respects: it is the only one used in a romantic context, to describe the results of an emotional response, and it is the singular instance where the tree resists the elemental forces which are acting upon it. It seems to be adapting a memorable simile from Apollonius' *Argonautica*, where Jason and Medea gaze at one another like trees unmoved by the wind, in a moment of wonderment and erotic anticipation (*Argon.* 3.968–72). And like the Apollonian duo, both Helen and Menelaus survive beyond the trauma of their 'love' story and continue into a new phase of myth. Menelaus' comparison to a tree can also function as a comment on that survival, by gesturing back to the Philoctetes simile (where a tree is battered but still leans and lives) and looking forwards to the final plant simile in the poem, which is also centred on this couple, as Menelaus and Helen are sexually reunited and bodily entwined like ivy and vine, coiled together so tightly that even the wind cannot separate them (PH 14.175–8).<sup>35</sup>

The charred tree in the book 13 simile is the third character in this story: it too is a survivor of this cataclysmic war. The hilly, wooded setting (ἐν οὔρει ὑλήεντι, 'on a wooded hillside') anchors the image to the Trojan landscape and the epithet αὔον ('dried out') is suggestive of the fire which is currently depleting that landscape, destroying heroes, buildings and trees alike. However, like the half-felled tree in the Philoctetes image, this tree is still standing. It is dried out and damaged but alive. In the story world of simile, its halting stillness and endurance offer a glimmer of a timescape beyond the scorched present of Troy, a moment after this carnage

where green life, like the surprising new virility of Menelaus, can escape the flames and try to begin again.

### Coda: breathing space

I began this article by suggesting how Quintus is not a poet of the natural world. This reading has not attempted to deny or apologise for the *Posthomerica's* deeply anthropic narrative. Rather, I think that precisely because this is a text which responds so directly to Homer, and which intensifies so brazenly the exploitation of the Trojan land set out within the *Iliad*, the presence of nature *beneath* that narrative is both surprising and important. The entangled and emotional portraits of environmental interaction found in the poem's structures of analogy and language of figuration, suggest another way in which epic poetics can grapple with the volatile relationship between human society and the natural world. Quintus does not morph humans and trees into one another, and he does not persistently blur the boundaries between these species. Rather, through a mediating piece of literary form, he creates miniature spaces for his reader to ponder some shared and contrasting experiences of war, and to confront the possibility of a more shifting dialectic of violence and vulnerability between the conflict's perpetrators and its victims. Through the allusive energy and storytelling power of the simile, this imperial Greek Troy swells in space and time, and the raw material of the inherited Homeric tradition is messily extracted and disturbingly redistributed and dispersed.

### Notes

1. Clark (2019, 60).
2. Formulation from Knickerbocker (2012).
3. A development from the influential work in cognitive linguistics (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980) on the need to view metaphor as a part of everyday language and thought.
4. Burt (2014, 17).
5. Burt (2014, 17).
6. See, for example, Coole and Frost (2010) on material agency as a process by which matter can become a text that is open to a critical analysis in order to explore its lyricism, which suggests that the representation and positioning of nonhuman capacities in multimodal texts (through devices like the simile) should be seriously studied. A recent ecolinguistic study by Kordjazi (2019) has taken up this suggestion and analyses similes in four nature books to argue that similes can enforce sustainable thinking, by intensifying certain features attributed to different species over the planet, enabling language learners to write about nature, and providing them simultaneously with the tools to practice using creative similes that fit ecological contexts.
7. Beck 2023, 1.
8. Beck 2023, 15.
9. See Greensmith 2020, 141–1. A similar penchant is detectable in late antique Latin poetry: see e.g. Greensmith 2020, 140 on Prudentius and Maciver 2012, 127 on Claudian.
10. Kneebone 2020, section 3, quotation from 209.
11. Further details in section III. Quintus thus firmly disproves Beck's claim that 'Homeric epic has more similes than later epics' (Beck 2023, 10), which is not true beyond the time period of her book.
12. Contrast the many births and transformations in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

13. Translations of Quintus are adapted from Hopkinson 2018.
14. This is of course an intensification of the story space of the *Iliad*, which is highly concentrated but also very expansive in its panorama and thematizations of Troy. See Tsagalis (2012) and Tsagalis 2024, Strauss Clay 2011, Purves 2010, and Hall's contribution in this issue.
15. See Carvounis 2014, 185 n.25.
16. Discussion of these episodes in Carvounis 2014, 185–207.
17. Carvounis 2014, 193–6, Vian 1959.
18. These aspects have been superbly analysed by Avlamis 2019.
19. In the build-up to the sack in the previous book, as the horse is brought into the city and the Trojans refuse to heed any warnings of doom, the laurel trees which, we are now told, previously flourished around Apollo's temple spontaneously wither and die (*PH* 12.516–7) as one of a series of ominous portents (*PH* 12.498–520). This brief appearance underscores the absence of these trees from the previous narrative in their previously verdant state, and they are never mentioned again.
20. *PH* 14.71–4. Significantly, this lament comes after the sack, and the other two similar moments occur proleptically before it (at 8.345–6 and 11.243–6): there is no natural outcry in *PH* 13, as the sack is being narrated in real time.
21. Clark 2019, 58.
22. This idea is central to my reading of Quintus' 'poetics of the interval' in Greensmith 2020.
23. Both the earlier sea journeys (to Skyros and Lemnos, in *PH* 7.169–345 and 9.353–445) are eerily calm and stress free.
24. Athena causes the storm, but soon loses her sense of empowerment, and her final scene in the poem presents her at a loss about where her allegiances should be (*PH* 14.629–31).
25. Full data on Quintus' similes in Maciver 2012, 127–8, who groups them into the following categories: elemental similes, mythological similes, and 'all others'. Way 1913, 627–8 splits the similes which are covered in Maciver's third group into bodily states, occupations and buildings.
26. See Kneebone's contribution for trees and other features of nature in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*.
27. *PH* 1.249–53, 1.488–93, 1.613–21, 1.625–29, 3.279–81, 4.248–9, 4.248–9, 4.439–42, 6.377–82, 8.89–92, 8.130–3, 8.204–7, 9.162–7, 9.451–8, 11.122–6, 11.308–15, 13.395–8, 13.488–93, 14.175–8.
28. ὑψίπυλος is twice used as an epithet for Troy (*Il.* 21.544 and 16.698) and after the *Teichoscopia* Aphrodite finds Helen πύργω ἐφ' ὑψηλῶ (*Il.* 3.384).
29. Maciver 2012, 143.
30. The simile also inverts the 'real-time' woodcutting in the *Iliad*, particularly at *Il.* 23.110–28 as the Greeks fell high oak trees and amass logs for the building of Patroclus' pyre.
31. δάμνημι is used in Homer (and later literature) for taming animals and people, and in marital or erotic contexts to mean subjugate or seduce. See Autenrieth 1995 s.v. δάμνημι, δαμνάω.
32. See especially the work of Kohn 2013 on the dynamic communities of forests as perceived in the Runa of Ecuador's Upper Amazon.
33. It is also used in Homer for human heroes to describe their heart (*Il.* 2.851) or chest (e.g. of Achilles, *Il.* 1.189). These connotations could provide a subtle note of personification in the Quintan image.
34. Quintus also gives this panoramic perspective through the 'view from afar' motif. See Greensmith 2021 and Greensmith 2024.
35. I discuss this episode in detail in Greensmith 2022, 70–3.

## Acknowledgment

I am grateful to the editors of this special issue for their efforts and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Thanks also to the audience at the Cambridge Classical Literature seminar in Autumn 2025 for their feedback, and to Tom Phillips for his perceptive remarks on the first draft.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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