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Epic Simile: A Window to the Past

by Corey Czopek

(English 1159)

In *The Iliad*, Homer often uses a literary device known as epic simile. He uses this device to give greater emphasis to the events and emotions as they occur. Often he will liken something to a natural event, such as a great storm or a river flowing. He will also sometimes use allusions to everyday life that the common people would understand, such as chopping down a tree or fitting the bricks of a building. In using these comparisons, he allows people that may have never experienced war to picture the events as they unfold. While you can simply say that two great armies clashed on a battlefield, the image of waves crashing on rocks can bring your audience farther into your story. Now while epic simile is used elsewhere in the story I will be focusing mainly on its uses to describe events on the battlefield. Epic simile helps the audience understand the battlefield by comparing army formations to a stone wall, Diomedes' fighting to a torrent, and an Argive breakthrough to a storm.

Firstly, Homer compares the formation of the Argive army to the bricks of a stone wall. Homer sings, "Hearing the king's command the ranks puller closer, / tight as a mason packs a good stone wall, / blocks on granite blocks for a storied house / that fights the ripping winds-crammed so close / the crested helmets, the war-shields bulging, jutting / buckler-to-buckler, helm-to-helm, man-to-man massed tight / and the horsehair crests on glittering helmet horns brushed / as they tossed their heads, the battalions bulked so dense" (16. 250 – 257). One of the things about the ancient battlefield that people often misunderstand is how the fighting actually occurred. Fighters were generally not spread out in a wild melee, or hacking through the enemies one at a time. Ancient armies tended to use a formation called a phalanx. In this formation the soldiers would line up shoulder to shoulder and overlap their shields, creating a strong barrier between them and the other army. This was quite effective as anybody who has heard the story of the battle of Thermopylae probably knows (Mark). While often these stories will describe heroes who fearlessly rushed out to engage the enemy by themselves, this was rarely the case. In reality if a man had broken from the ranks to attack the opposing army, he would have hit this wall and been either impaled on a spear or trampled by the army. He would also have left a gap in his side's formation and the opposing army would have smashed right through them. So why is this comparison important? It helps the reader to understand just how close and compact the army really was. It would have been an almost claustrophobic experience to be in this formation as the soldiers packed together; with the only thing keeping them alive being their strength and the strength of the men beside them. The imagery of bricks packed so tightly that they don't even require mortar to stay together is perfect for this. They would be able to understand the strength the soldiers would have together, ready to shrug off a wave of attackers. Much like a brick house can remain standing even when the winds tear at it. In this way Homer uses this comparison to help the audience understand what a battle was like.

Secondly, Homer compares Diomedes fighting the Trojans to a winter torrent. Homer sings, "Down the plain he stormed like a stream in spate, / a routing winter torrent sweeping away the dikes: / the tight, piled dikes can't hold it back any longer, / banks shoring the blooming vineyards cannot curb its course / a flash flood bursts as the rains from Zeus pour down their power, / acre on acre the well / dug work of farmers crumbling under it / so under Tydides' force the Trojan columns panicked now, / no standing their ground, massed, packed as they were" (5. 96 – 103). Now as I have said, ancient fighting usually took place in a phalanx. However, as this story includes fights

with heroes favored by the gods, we don't always see this. In chapter five we see Diomedes, empowered by Athena, killing many of the Trojans by himself. His onslaught is compared to a torrent, unstoppable. He was sweeping through the enemy lines and no one could hold him back. This imagery was perfect for the audience as it was something they could understand. Many of the common people who heard the story would have seen this exact thing happen in a rainy season. They would know what it looks like when a flooding river breaks through a dike and sweeps out over a field, destroying the crops and structures. Having observed this, it would be simple for them to imagine the enemy forces being swept away by Diomedes. It would also enable them to experience the fear the enemy army would feel as they saw him coming. They knew that when faced with a flash flood, there is nothing you can do about it. You can't fight it, you can't stop it, all you can do is try to get out of the way. This is exactly how the enemy force would have felt as well. In using this comparison, Homer helps common people to understand the fury of this battle.

Lastly, Homer compares an Argive breakthrough of the Trojan army lines to a storm. Homer sings "An Argive breakthrough / bright as the moment Zeus the lord of lightning moves / from a craggy mountain ridge a storm massing dense / and all the lookout peaks stand out and the jutting cliffs / and the steep ravines and down from the high heavens bursts / the boundless bright air... so now the argives drove the ravening fire clear of the warships" (16. 348 – 354). While Homer used the imagery of a rushing torrent to describe Diomedes' offense, here he uses a storm coming down from a mountain. This is because the two battles would have had a very different feel to them. In this battle the Trojans were rushing the Achaeans, who had their backs to the sea and their ships. Much like being at a mountain's peak, the only way to go is back down the way you came. With their ships under fire, the Achaeans would have had only one option, push the Trojans back. Now to a Trojan warrior this would have had a very powerful effect. He's rushing in, ready to burn their ships and wipe them out. He knows that they have nowhere else to go. Then suddenly, he and his brothers are being pushed back. He's no longer advancing, he's just trying to not give up ground. He can feel the force of the opposing army throwing his back, even if just a little. A storm would be a good representation of that as it wasn't wanton destruction that was occurring but a deadlock. The Trojans aren't losing much ground, but they simply cannot advance further. This is similar to trying to walk against a strong wind; while it doesn't push you to the ground, you do lose a step before you find your balance. In this ways Homer helps the audience to understand this particular moment in the battle.

In conclusion, Homer's use of epic simile helps the audience understand the battlefield by comparing army formations to a stone wall, Diomedes' fighting to a torrent, and an Argive breakthrough to a storm. Now some of these images don't carry over as well to modern times. Many people nowadays have never seen a flood in real life, much less lived through one. When we build something it is usually out of concrete or steel, not brick with no mortar. Modern readers also have one other thing going against them: they're used to seeing a story. Whether it's T.V. or movies, people usually can't picture a battle without it being shown to them. Luckily, Homer's use of epic simile allows you to form a complete picture of every aspect of the story. When you read through *The Iliad* you can envision every event. All the characters look and sound exactly how you think they should. You create the world of the story in your head, perfect in every detail. You find yourself transported to ancient times, standing among legends.

Works Cited

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