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**Jonathan L. Ready, *The Homeric Simile in Comparative Perspectives: Oral Traditions from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 336. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-19-880255-6) \$90.00.**

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the volume to break new ground. Particularly germane would have been objects that show how ‘international’ the production of luxury objects was becoming in this period, such as ostrich eggs that likely made their way to the Mediterranean along Egyptian trading routes, were painted in Cyprus, and finally interred as prized possessions in Etruscan tombs (e.g., British Museum 1850, 0227.9, from the “Isis Tomb”, Vulci).

In sum, the catalogue is a rich trove of material, presented in a way that will engage all manner of readers, from the specialist to students to those with merely a passing interest in the place and people of Egypt in the Classical period. I heartily recommend it to any university or community library.

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Jonathan L. Ready,  
*The Homeric Simile in Comparative Perspectives: Oral  
Traditions from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 336. Cloth  
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In this book, Ready examines an impressively wide range of modern oral traditions as a prelude to explore two speculative questions about Homeric performance, one concerning possible criteria for performative competence, the other concerning the artistry of Homeric similes. The modern material includes quotations from and scholarly discussion of Turkish minstrels, Chinese (prosimetric) storytellers, and Egyptian singers of epic to identify what constitutes “competence in performance” (56) and studies of epics from India, Indonesia, modern Kyrgyzstan, and Serbo-Croatia, as well as lyrics from Saudi Arabia, to consider the artistry of the Homeric simile.

For this reviewer, the first chapter is the weakest and not essential for the subsequent chapters. In it, Ready makes the claim that similes in Homer and modern oral traditions share a number of formal qualities, most notably that two or more similes may appear in a series and that the similes’ tenor may come before or after

the vehicle. Neither feature is at all peculiar to oral poetry; even more concerning, the narrative quality of the modern examples only bear slight resemblance to the similes in Homer.

In the second chapter, comparative study brings out the book's two central points, namely what constitutes competence in oral performance and how oral performers and audiences judged what in Homer studies is usually classified as traditional and innovative elements. Jettisoning these terms, Ready prefers to describe narrative elements that are either shared by other performers or individual. For the latter, he uses the rather ugly word "idiolectal." He also makes the important point that for passages to be considered shared or the "same," they need not be verbatim likenesses; anything that "make[s] use of the same compositional building blocks (lines, scenes, speeches) in the correct order" (74) should be considered "shared." Among the many interesting points gained from these modern examples is the claim that "performers consciously present shared and idiolectal elements" (85) and "a diverse repertoire of shared and idiolectal" phrasings constitutes "proof of [a poet's] skill" (87). Audiences, similarly, judge performers by this diversity: "the knowledgeable tradition-oriented audience member...grasps the poet's modulation between the idiolectal and the shared" (79), and "seeks" both (93). Herein lies the core of Ready's thesis: rather than looking primarily to the virtuosity of singular expressions and viewing traditional passages as the backdrop against which the particular stands out, audience members of oral performances judge excellence and skill by a performer's mastery of both individual and shared elements: "a performer shows competence through the delivery of both" (98). Asking why audiences should value shared, familiar passages, Ready suggests that it is because such passages re-enforce a spirit of community, both by presenting an image of that community and by creating that image in the telling. Audiences judge a shared passage to be in error or a mistake when it does not convey all significant elements and fails to place them in their proper order.

Applying these observations to the construction of similes, Ready illustrates (in chapter three) how performers in five modern oral poetries "use similes to present shared and idiolectal elements" (130), and in two chapters on Homeric similes in Part II he argues by analogy that Homeric audiences also measured a poet's competence by his skilled treatment of both shared and innovative motifs.

Also in Part II, Ready asks the question what makes for "a good poet" (183) in Archaic Greek hexameter poetry. He identifies eight qualities: a poet who bewitches, delights, sounds good, and uses the phorminx expertly, and poems which possess beauty, have the capacity to divert the audience from its cares, as well as to move

it, while instructing about human woes and significant events. In addition, the performer “must know his story and be able to tell it well and at length” (183), a skill that necessarily combines a mixture of shared and singular moments. This list, however, seems incomplete, especially as it fails to mention the power to bring a community together. Odysseus points to this quality of oral performance when he says that nothing is more pleasing than the well-mindedness (*euphrosunê*) that passes through the community (the *dêmos*) when those at a banquet listen to a bard (cf. *Od.* 9.5-11). For Odysseus, the shared listening to song has the effect of instilling a sense of collective social harmony and joyfulness. The *Theogony* offers a different version of a similar sensibility when it describes how kings, when they speak straight verdicts with the honeyed sweetness and soothing words of the Muses on their tongues, can restore harmony to a community in distress. Such, Hesiod says, is “the sacred gift of the Muses to humankind” (*Tb.* 93). Perhaps this is what Hesiod meant when he described the Muses as being “of like mind” (*Tb.* 60). They make a community at one with itself. Included in this sense of oneness is a song’s modeling of good and bad behaviors, as for example in modeling examples of leadership and social mores, both good and bad. Certainly, another inherent component of a poet’s excellence is the ability, through song, to bring out empathy, as in the example of Odysseus who melted, shedding tears, like a woman weeping over the body of her husband killed while defending the city, when he heard Demodokos sing of the Greeks sacking Troy (*Od.* 8.521-31).

As a last point, even as we recognize the splendid insights into Homer that may be gleaned from studying modern oral comparanda, it is also important to consider the possible limitations of such comparisons. Ready concludes his thoughtful study of ancient and modern performance as follows: “This model allows one to imagine that the things our [Homeric] poets were doing with their long vehicle portions were things done by other poets too” (244). “I do not consider the Homeric case as something apart” (191); “our Homeric poets sought to do what their peers were doing” (194). In some sense this must be true, but not in another. In important ways the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were apart. No other ancient *epea* came close to equaling them in magnitude, and Aristotle adds the important point that *only* Homer’s epics were artistically arranged, subordinating episodes around a single story with a beginning, middle, and end (*Poetics* 1450b-51). Similarly, we need to ask why is it that the Greeks, already in the Archaic period, singled out Homer and Hesiod, only rarely mentioning their many competitors? Yes, these performers were doing what their peers were doing but also, it would appear, they did something different. It is worth considering what that difference may have been.

Such caveats notwithstanding, Ready has done us a great service by evaluating Homeric skill and technique within the context of a vast array of modern oral parallels. His many quotations from other epics and from scholars on those epics will enrich and expand our own vocabulary when discussing Homer artistry. Particularly important is Ready's emphasis on the value of shared elements in oral performance and in the construction of similes.

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Homer, Emily Wilson, trans.,  
*The Odyssey*,

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The *Odyssey*, despite its straightforward syntax and pellucid clarity, is not an easy poem to translate. The further one dares to venture from the literal meaning of the Greek, the greater the risk of incurring the criticism which Bentley famously leveled at Pope's *Iliad*: "It is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope; but you must not call it Homer." A schoolroom crib such as one might find in Bohn's Library may offer a scrupulously accurate translation of Homer—it will also turn off a contemporary reader faster than you can say "helmet-shaking Hector." Robert Fagles recognized this fundamental dilemma when he explained his own method for translating the *Odyssey*: "the more literal approach would seem to be too little English, and the more literary seems too little Greek." And so it is that each translator of Homer confronts the same task: to abandon tedious literality, while capturing in English the rhythm, music, and charming verbal texture of the original Greek. In her *Odyssey*, Wilson succeeds admirably with a version that is lean, clear, direct, and marked by a distinctively forward-moving narrative energy.

Wilson's lengthy and fully comprehensive Introduction is superbly written. It is a useful primer for new readers as well as a welcome feast for professional scholars. She guides the reader through a careful summary of the poem's formal qualities, composition, authorship and reception. She delves into the *Odyssey's* geographical,