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Life, Death, and Recycling in the Homeric Simile

Briana Oser '25

Homer does not hesitate to illustrate in vivid language the brutal killings of the Trojan War. In each battle scene in the *Iliad*, he briefly describes the warrior with epithets such as “κορυθαίολος Ἑκτωρ,” which translates to “Hector with glancing helm.” Then, Homer explains in graphic detail the method the warrior uses to kill his victim. This is a common Homeric formula that is only broken during significant moments such as in Homer’s similes, which he often utilizes to make comparisons between a warrior and their deaths through elaborate descriptions or backstories. In these similes, he introduces major themes by establishing connections and making reflections that point to a greater truth beyond what takes place during the battlefield scenes themselves. Two such similes appear in lines 473-490 of Book 4 and in lines 264-273 of Book 11. Despite the chronological separation of the scenes, they share several common messages about the recycling of life and death, displayed through their feminine, naturalistic imagery.

Homer’s simile describing Simoisius’ death brings him as close to birth as possible. Simoisius is a young man whom Homer introduces through a story about his mother and his namesake. Simoisius was killed by Ajax, the son of a king and an experienced warrior. Throughout the simile, Homer’s diction emphasizes Simoisius’ youth. Some of his language is more direct at certain points: for instance, he calls him “ἡῖθεον,” which translates to “unmarried youth.” Homer also describes Simoisius as “θαλερὸν,” which means “sturdy,” or perhaps better yet, “buxom.” “Buxom” is an adjective which the Oxford English Dictionary defines in terms laden with connotations of femininity, such as “Full of health, vigour, and good temper; well-favoured, plump and comely, ‘jolly’, comfortable-looking (in person). (Chiefly of

women.)” In another definition, which the Dictionary now considers to be out of date, the word means, “submissive, humble, meek.” Ajax kills Simoisius by slashing his breast, “στῆθος,” which Fagles more intimately translates to “nipple.” Homer’s womanish imagery illustrates tenderness: infancy at its earliest point. This theme of birth is present in both similes.

In Book 11, Homer describes a battle scene where Agamemnon is badly wounded. Agamemnon is a much more experienced warrior than Simoisius; he is not only advanced in years, but he is also a more talented battle strategist and fighter. Despite this apparent wisdom and strength, Homer feminizes his pain, comparing it to labor birth-pangs. Fagles translates this comparison: “spear-sharp as the labor-pangs that pierce a woman, agonies brought on by the harsh, birthing spirits, Hera's daughters who hold the stabbing power of birth – so sharp the throes that burst on Atrides' strength.” Despite Agamemnon’s capabilities and power, he is still a man, and subject to harsh pain as mothers are at the peak action of their womanhood. Again in this simile, Homer connects life, birth, and death. Even the most experienced warrior cannot escape fate, a reality which Homer emphasizes with imagery of the divine, referring to the Greek goddess Εἰλειθυῖα (Eileithyia) who facilitates childbirth and protects the unborn. The symbol of the divine provides an even starker contrast: Agamemnon is depicted as a powerful, kingly commander, but in reality he is just a man.

Both similes allude to the fragility of the human body. This quality of weakness is more dominant in Simoisius than in Agamemnon, but both warriors are subject to the same fate in their mortality. Simoisius’ story is of a young man who is cut down by Ajax far before he can reach his potential. His death is a tragedy – he is killed before he can accomplish anything, sent into battle at an early point in his maturity to face an untimely end. Agamemnon is a fierce and skilled warrior, the king of Mycenae, but he himself remains at risk in battle due to his mortal

nature and suffers the consequences of this nature. His valor is easily interrupted by his mortality: “But the king kept ranging, battling ranks on ranks and thrusting his spear and sword and hurling heavy rocks so long as the blood came flowing warm from his wound. But soon as the gash dried and firm clots formed, sharp pain came bursting in on Atrides' strength—spear-sharp as the labor-pangs that pierce a woman.”, He is on the same plane as a woman, bound by the same mortal existence as the weakest person. Despite Simoisius' tender immaturity, and despite Agamemnon's exceptional heroism, they must eventually undergo the same fate.

The two similes contrast kingship with brute strength. In examining these similes together, we find a contrast not only between Simoisius and Agamemnon, but also between Ajax and Agamemnon. Ajax, known as the “bulwark of the Achaeans,” was a Greek of incredible strength and power. In the scene with Simoisius he does not get much description, beyond the well-known epithet “Τελαμώνιος Αἴας,” referring to his father. He is there to kill Simoisius, which he does presumably with little effort. Taking the similes in this way, we see that Simoisius actually has more in common with Agamemnon than Ajax does: they are both subject to harm and react by dying or suffering a serious wound. Again, this reduces the difference between them by emphasizing their mortality.

Another notable theme in the scene with Simoisius is that of natural life. At the beginning of the simile, Homer delves into Simoisius' pastoral origins: his birth along the bank of the Simois river as his mother is tending to a flock of sheep. In this scene, Ajax is described as “μεγάθυμος,” which literally means “great-hearted,” but which Fagles fittingly translates to “lionhearted.” Later, Homer compares the moment when he collapses at the hands of Ajax to the felling of a poplar tree. The natural imagery brings to mind growth and the cyclical nature of life.

Rivers are the source of life for the creatures and plants around them. Trees provide oxygen, shelter and nutrition. Simoisius' similarity to a black poplar tree, "αἴγειρος," is especially significant – they are rapidly growing trees, tall and straight in shape, but they are also thin and live short lives. Most men in some stage in their adolescence experience rapid growth spurts that sometimes outpace the rate at which they gain weight, which can leave them appearing rather emaciated until they reach puberty and their metabolism begins to slow down. At this point in his life, Simoisius has not reached full strength. As the poplar tree is cut down and shaped into a chariot for the purposes of battle, Simoisius' life is taken from the realm of men and his body returned to the earth.

Homer reinforces the shared fate of mankind with a comparison between human mortality and nature elsewhere in the *Iliad*. In Book 6, Hector meets Glaucus, a Lycian captain, in battle, and after Hector inquires about where he is from he tells the story of his family. Glaucus questions his interest. He compares leaves to men: as the seasons pass, so do the generations of leaves, and as the years pass, so do the generations of men. All life on earth is temporary, but it is also cyclical and continuous. He sees no purpose in exploring his lineage, because it is constantly being replaced, by generation after generation. Still, he explains it anyway, because it circles back to him; it is a relational cycle.

At the end of the simile, Homer abruptly switches from imagery of nature's thriving to imagery of man's domination of nature. Homer's descriptions of Simoisius' birth and death are borderline idyllic and romantic. This is already striking enough because of the scene's context, but then Homer contrasts it with sheer utility. Nature is no longer beautiful for its own sake. In a way, this is still consistent with the nature of living things – after all, it is constantly in competition with itself. The poplar tree is not left to rot peacefully. It is struck down to serve the

purpose of the man who kills it. The final four lines of the simile with the “ἄρματοπηγός,” the chariot-maker, symbolize a recycling of purposes: from Fagles’ translation, “A chariot-maker fells it with shining iron ax as timber to bend for handsome chariot wheels and there it lies, seasoning by the river.” As a poplar tree is felled for chariot making, Simoisius’ death also serves a purpose, to advance the victory of the Greeks, and to demolish the hope of the Trojans. Each death is a reminder of life’s inevitable end. The chariot itself is also a symbol of that cycle: its movement is propelled forward by the circular motion of its wheels, advancing into battle and looking back to the context of the scene.

The themes of the natural and of femininity, or human nature, also point to beauty. In Simoisius’ simile, the poplar tree is recycled into “περικαλλεῖ δίφρῳ,” which literally translates to “very beautiful chariot board.” Fagles appropriately translates this phrase to “handsome chariot,” which draws us back to Simoisius and his boyhood. Imagery of the feminine does not only bring to mind fragility, but also beauty. In his simile, Agamemnon is made feminine, but this reality does not only call to mind Agamemnon’s human weakness, but also reminds us that Agamemnon *has* a body: “αἶμα’ ἀνήνοθε,” translating to “the blood gushed forth,” a very graphic and vivid reminder about the nature of possessing a body.

Homeric battle scenes are often quick and violent. When Homer expands on them, or produces imagery beyond a simple description, they introduce a deeper significance into the rest of the story. In this case, two of Homer’s similes bring together a common theme of life, birth and death. Within these themes are important sub-themes and reflections on nature and beauty. The connection between the similes serves to underscore the fundamental connection that all living things share, whether you are a young man, a great king, or a little black poplar tree: the inescapable fact of our mortality.

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