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# Insight into the Community: Bee Similes in the Iliad and the Aeneid

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### Insight into the Community: Bee Similes in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*

The Homeric simile is one of the most well-known literary techniques in the *Iliad*. In fact, the Homeric simile is so distinctive that Addison calls it a “relatively autonomous mini-genre” (498). Homer’s extended similes are truly striking. Like Homer, Virgil also uses lengthy similes, but the authors’ similes are distinctly different, even when both poets describe the same subject. This contrast stems, firstly, from a simple difference in style. The wording of Homer’s similes often evokes nature’s unbridled power, such as when he compares Achilles to “inhuman fire” (Homer XX.490-3). The simile expresses the speed and force of a forest fire with striking, direct language. The similes of Virgil’s *Aeneid* are more flowery, reveling in the pastoral scenes of nature. Even when describing the bloody clash between the Trojans and the Latins, Virgil cannot resist an artistic simile about a collision of winds. His polished, masterful style contrasts with Homer’s stark, though still poetic, comparisons (*Aeneid* X.356-60). But the difference between the two poets’ similes is far more than style alone. As rhetorical devices, the similes communicate essential thematic content, and thus differ widely in meaning. Herein lies the contrast between the two authors’ bee similes, which enjoy a prominent place in both epics. In his bee similes, Homer emphasizes the interdependence of the collective, the individual, and the household, whereas Virgil uses bee similes to develop these concepts differently, illustrating his own version of the ideal society, emphasizing the theme of rebirth, and foreshadowing the rise of Rome and her rulers.

In Book II of the *Iliad*, the first extended simile focuses on bees, embracing some of the *Iliad*’s most prominent themes, particularly unity in the midst of diversity. Its prominent placement ought not to be ignored (Willcock 18). Homer notes that as the Achaians gather for a council, they resemble a cloud of bees:

Like the swarms of clustering bees that issue forever  
 in fresh bursts from the hollow in the stone, and hang like  
 bunched grapes as they hover beneath the flowers in springtime  
 fluttering in swarms together this way and that way,  
 so the many nations of men from the ships and the shelters  
 along the front of the deep sea marched in order  
 by companies to the assembly.... (Homer II.87-93)

The simile emphasizes the unity of individuals that make up the Greek fighting force. Homer does not say “like the swarms of bees,” which would emphasize the collective over the individual, but rather “swarms of clustering bees,” which acknowledges the separate identity of each bee in the swarm (II.87). He does not neglect either individuality or diversity. The comparison of bees to a bunch of grapes further reinforces the need for balanced tension between individuality and unity within the Achaian ranks. A cluster of grapes, composed of many separate fruits, joins together at the stem. The bunch is singular and plural at the same time. In much the same way, the “many nations” who have joined the Achaian forces are separate entities under “the shepherd of the people,” Agamemnon (Homer II.86). Such simultaneous unity and diversity is not necessarily a contradiction, as Haarhoff observes: “Yet there is such a thing as individualism among bees.... There is variety and irregularity in the hive work as well as unity” (158). Homer’s first simile affirms that the Achaian forces operate in a delicate equilibrium between unity and diversity.

This paradoxical blend of variety and unity is Homer’s proposed solution to the excessive individuality that rends the Achaian forces. The entire epic focuses on this destructive tendency toward self-reliance, most notably demonstrated by Achilles’ anger, which destroys the delicate

equilibrium between the individual and the community, and inflicts “pains thousandfold upon the Achaians” (Homer I.2). Out of anger and self-interest, Achilles isolates himself from the rest of the Achaians, and refuses to fight because Agamemnon insulted him. His actions clearly go against the principle of the collective upheld in this first bee simile. The disastrous impact of his bitter independence is the focus of the remainder of the epic. Because of Achilles’s selfishness, his friend Patroklos falls in battle and hundreds of Achaians are slaughtered. As Feeney notes, “The pattern of confused and potentially catastrophic action that follows [after the council] is punctuated by a linked chain of similes taken from the natural world in chaos” (194). The first complete Homeric simile illustrates the ideal dynamic for the Achaian forces, in which neither the interests of the individual nor the interests of the collective take too much precedence. According to Homer, a healthy society will maintain a balance between unity and diversity.

In his second bee simile in Book XII, Homer considers the relationship between the household and society, and further develops the relationship between the collective and the individual. Asios, a Trojan warrior, describes the two Achaian warriors defending the entrance to their fortifications as fierce insects defending their nests:

But they, as wasps, quick-bending in the middle, or as bees  
will make their homes at the side of the rocky way, and will not  
abandon the house they have made, but stand up to  
men who come to destroy them, and fight for the sake of their children....

(XII.167-70)

The simile’s immediate application is obvious: the Achaians’ fierce defense of their fortifications compares quite nicely to wasps or bees, which vigorously defend their hive from threats. Beyond the obvious comparison to the immediate events, the simile also summarizes the entire Trojan

conflict and the Achaian values that undergird it. Homer uses this second comparison to examine some of the epic's central themes about the individual, the household, and the community in a different light. The reference to "their children" emphasizes the importance of the individual households that comprise Achaian civilization. In Homer's world, the societal emphasis had not yet shifted to the city-state or nation. Rather, Homer saw the household as the nucleus of every healthy human society. According to *The Homer Encyclopedia*, the household forms "the basis of the family's social identity, individually and collectively" (Thalman). Yet Homer acknowledges that "the household, for all its independence, might be integrated as a fundamental element within communal structures" (Thalman). Thus, Homer has used a bee simile to challenge the Greeks' penchant for excessive independence in a different context. Whereas in the first simile he emphasized the need for the Greeks to fight as a unified body, in the second simile, he emphasizes the need for unity among Greek households by referring to warriors who fight together for the sake of their families (XII.70).

The context of the *Iliad* lends even greater depth to the significance of this simile, especially the reference to those who attack the bees' society (XII.170). Throughout the Trojan War, representatives from countless Achaian families have fought to restore the integrity of one household, whose violation threatened every Greek household. Ten years before the epic begins, the Achaians arrived at Troy to recapture Menelaos's wife Helen, who ran away with Paris, the prince of Troy. The Achaians seek to restore order and honor to the Greek ideal of the household, which has been threatened by the fiasco. The Greeks have doggedly besieged Troy for nearly a decade, challenging the man "who [came] to destroy them," that is, Paris (XII.170). Indeed, the Achaians clearly consider Paris's attack on Menelaos' household to be a symbolic attack on every Greek household, and respond accordingly. In the simile itself and throughout

the epic, Homer commends this show of solidarity as a characteristic of a healthy society. In Book XV, Nestor exhorts the Achaians, "...each one of you remember / his children and his wife, his property and his parents" (662-3). The Achaians are not fighting solely for Menelaos' sake, but also for the sake of their own households. This second simile echoes the themes of the first and highlights Homer's conviction that the Achaian forces must consider the good of the collective, instead of becoming distracted by their own individual interests. According to Homer, each Achaian warrior is actually defending his own personal interests when he defends the collective.

Bee similes figure prominently in Virgil's *Aeneid* as well, appearing first in Book I, then in Book VI, and finally in Book XII. Their careful arrangement suggests that, like Homer, Virgil considered them significant to understanding his work (Leach 3). Indeed, his other works support this inference because they prove that Virgil considered bees to be an example of a well-organized, homogenous, and dutiful society. In his *Georgics* IV, the poet discusses bees and their habits at length. According to Jones, Virgil uses bees "as a paradigm, in a limited sense, of the perfect society – a hardworking, patriotic, thrifty, disciplined community of the likeminded all working towards a single, noble end" (137). Each of the four allusions to bees in the *Aeneid* provides some insight into this type of community, especially emphasizing the collective, the theme of rebirth, and the future founding of Rome.

The first Virgilian bee simile describes Aeneas's first impression of the bustling city of Carthage. Her citizens are actively engaged in a multitude of building projects. Virgil describes their toil as "feverish" (*Aeneid* I.423). Despite their hectic pace, Virgil's word choice implies orderliness by emphasizing the systematic distribution of responsibility in Carthage. Certain

groups of Carthaginians are engaged in certain projects; everyone has his place in the larger schema of the city. The simile relates the scene to a beehive:

Like bees in spring across the blossoming land,  
 Busy beneath the sun, leading their offspring,  
 Full grown now, from the hive, or loading cells  
 Until they swell with honey and sweet nectar,  
 Or taking shipments in, or lining up  
 To guard the fodder from the lazy drones;  
 The teeming work breathes thyme and fragrant honey. (*Aeneid* I.430-6)

It is immediately obvious that Virgil's similes demonstrate a change in perspective. Virgil imbues his subjects with moralistic, human attributes like busyness and laziness, descriptors that were absent from Homer's similes. However, the similes have interesting similarities as well. In the first of their bee similes, both Homer and Virgil reference spring, the season of rebirth and renewal. Dido and her people, forced to leave the ruins of Tyre, have rebuilt their lives in the form of "newborn Carthage" (*Aeneid* I.366). As Leach affirms, the simile is "overtly associated with regeneration" (4). The theme of renewal and immortality unfolds more fully in the bee simile of Book VI, but Virgil suggests it here as well. Yet regeneration is only a subtheme in this simile. Its main thrust, as Leach puts it, is "the singleminded dedication of a people to their task and the resultant sense of joyous order" (2). Indeed, the simile exalts the unison and enthusiasm with which the bees work. Virgil is not the first to suggest that bee colonies ought to be a template for human society: Thomas and Ziolkowski recognize that philosophers since Plato have compared humanity to bees (*The Virgil Encyclopedia* "bees"). However, Virgil's thought has clearly diverged from Homer's in this simile. Virgil makes no reference to the household. He

puts society in its place as the functional unit of mankind. In the simile, the people of Carthage are defined by their devotion to society, not to the household. Moreover, Virgil emphasizes the importance of the work itself over the importance of the workers. As *The Virgil Encyclopedia* affirms, “labor characterizes the bees more than anything else” (“bees”). Virgil’s bees are not a “clustering swarm,” like Homer’s, but a homogenous mass, divided only by their differing tasks, which they perform faithfully and mechanically. Such a devoted and focused society, in Virgil’s mind, is the ideal human civilization. The poet illustrates the importance of the collective in this first bee simile, but dismisses individuality altogether, a shift that sharply distinguishes him from Homer.

Virgil’s first bee simile also recognizes the importance of protecting the hive’s progeny, a theme the Homeric similes share, but Virgil describes the bees’ offspring as the community’s collective responsibility, not each individual household’s. For Virgil, the bees’ offspring are a “communal” responsibility, like any of the other tasks in the hive (“Bees”). The individual household is erased in a beehive; the society works and grows as a cohesive whole. In his similes, Homer distanced himself somewhat from this communal element through careful wording, but Virgil embraces it. Instead of emphasizing the protection and nurture of the household, Virgil emphasizes the importance of society and the need for people to have a place in it. Virgil has replaced the individual household, the cornerstone of Homer’s world, with a nearly exclusive emphasis on the community. Virgil implies in this first simile that the collective should take precedence over the individual household.

In Book VI, during Aeneas’s journey to the underworld, the hero compares the disembodied souls in Elysium to bees, a simile that reasserts the importance of the collective and of duty. As the souls hover above the river Lethe and await reincarnation, they resemble “bees in



tranquil summer meadows / Who move from bud to vivid bud and stream / Around white lilies—the whole field whirs loudly” (*Aeneid* VI.707-9). Aeneas is “enthralled” by the scene, in much the same way that he was fascinated by the hive-like activity of Carthage (*Aeneid* VI.710). However, the aimless cloud of souls contrasts sharply with the orderly, dutiful citizens of Carthage. Although these souls are also described in collective terms, which indicate some sort of grouping or community, they only hover purposelessly. Unlike the Carthaginians, they have no direction and no leader. Virgil does not refer to any division of labor; he implies that the cloud of souls simply “whirs” aimlessly (*Aeneid* VI.709). The souls have no tasks to perform, and no leader to organize them. Without bodies, they simply hover in a cluster and await rebirth. Their lack of direction and organization complicates the simile’s comparison of the souls to bees. However, the obviously un-beelike state of these souls is an important key to understanding certain aspects of Virgil’s understanding of man’s role in society. Perhaps the souls’ aimlessness answers Aeneas’s query as to why some would want to return to the land of the living (*Aeneid* IV.719-20). Just as bees cannot exist apart from an organized hive (*Georgics* IV.213-4), the souls of men must be part of an ambitious, organized society lest they despair because of purposelessness. Put simply, Virgil asserts that men long for the type of dutiful, focused society that bees have, reinforcing his assertion that the individual finds purpose in serving the collective.

Because of the comparison to souls, this second Virgilian simile strongly emphasizes rebirth and renewal and anticipates the future founding of Rome. The communal significance of the comparison between souls and bees becomes clearer in the context of Virgil’s *Georgics* IV:

Therefore, though a short life limits each individual  
bee, for it never lasts longer than the seventh summer,

the species remains immortal, and the fortune of the house  
lasts many years, with ancestors' ancestors accounted for. (206-9)

Virgil understands a beehive to be an illustration of human civilization. Though the individual will pass away, the legacy of the community will endure. Over and over again, the hive is reborn as a new generation of insects rises to take the place of the old one. Thus, the theme of renewal in Virgil's second simile explains the emphases of the first simile. Everyone should contribute all he can to the future, because immortality and happiness come from self-sacrifice for the good community, which will continue even after the individual dies. To Virgil, the individual is irrelevant because only the community lasts. The souls in Elysium understand this principle and eagerly await their opportunity to return to the land of the living and contribute to the future Roman Empire (*Aeneid* VI.717). Horsfall affirms that Virgil's word choice suggests some imminent renewal: "there is something portentous about both bees and souls" (44). He suggests that the simile might prefigure the swarm of bees in Book VII, which the augur explicitly interprets as a sign of Aeneas's arrival in Italy (VII.68-9, Horsfall 44). Virgil's bee simile in Book VI signifies rebirth in general, but also alludes to the birth of Rome.

The final bee simile appears in the last book of the *Aeneid*, and completes Virgil's illustration of the ideal human society while describing Aeneas' attack on the Latins:

As when a shepherd tracks bees to the crannies  
Of a pumice cliff and fills it with sharp smoke  
Making them swarm in their wax citadel,  
In terror and loud-buzzing, sharpening anger;  
A black reek billows through their home; inside,  
It's whirring shrilly as the smoke pours out. (XII.587-93)

In this simile, the shepherd represents Aeneas, and bees represent the Latins. The smoke, according to Leach, is a “calculated unkindness” intended, ultimately, for the benefit of humanity (9). Aeneas has set the town on fire to induce the Latins to surrender. The simile suggests, however, that Aeneas does not intend to harm them. Ultimately, he intends to incorporate them into the new nation, as destiny has predicted they will be (VII.270-1). Much like the shepherd, who can only obtain honey by angering the bees with smoke, Aeneas has been forced to use military power to press the Latins to follow destiny. The simile shares a number of characteristics with the previous similes, chief among them the emphasis on the community and the city. This simile is perhaps the most civic of the three, with its direct reference to the “wax citadel,” which clearly compares apian society to human society. However, this simile introduces a significant, final aspect of Virgil’s ideal society: the shepherd, or leader of the people. According to Virgil, the ideal society must have a ruler. Again, *Georgics* IV provides an explanation, using the bees’ devotion to the queen as an example. The bees work hard because of the queen; when she dies, the hive collapses and the bees destroy their own work (IV.210-17). Likewise, a ruler’s guidance preserves the people’s purpose and unity.

Through their bee similes, the two poets communicate their divergent ideas of the ideal human society. For Homer, maintaining a complementary balance between unity and individuality is vital. He acknowledges that the Greeks must choose to obey their leaders, but never loses sight of the importance of the individual. Moreover, his similes focus on defending the household and the Greek way of life. Virgil’s intention is much different. Through his bee similes, he too sets forth principles of the ideal society, but emphasizes the interests of the ruler and the collective over the interests of the individual. He also adds a layer of symbolism to his bee similes by emphasizing the insects’ ties to rebirth and renewal. The contrast between the two

poets' use of simile provides an intriguing vantage point from which to analyze the epics' differing themes.

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