Homer as a Point of Departure: 
Epic Similes in *The Divine Comedy* *

Laurence K. P. Wong**

Abstract

Contrary to the view-current among certain critics—that it is only decorative, the epic simile, starting from Homer and carried on by Virgil and Milton, performs many functions, functions that help to make an epic what it is. In the development of the epic in general and of the epic simile in particular, Homer, Virgil, and Milton, three mainstream epic poets, were linked by a similar tradition and shared close affinities in the way they employed this rhetorical device. While drawing on the Homer-Virgil tradition, using the epic simile as Homer, Virgil, and Milton did, Dante in *The Divine Comedy* took Homer as a point of departure. This paper discusses what functions Dante’s epic similes perform, how they differ from those of Homer, Virgil, and Milton, and how they scale new heights, heights which are beyond the epic similes of the mainstream epic poets, attaining, as Eliot put it, to “the highest point poetry has ever reached or ever can reach.”

Keywords: epic simile, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Divine Comedy*, slow-motion sequence, bulk, sublimity, anthropomorphic, ineffable

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** Professor of Translation, Department of Translation; Associate Dean (Research), Faculty of Arts; Director, Research Institute for the Humanities; The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N. T., Hong Kong. wongkp@cuhk.edu.hk
1. Introduction

Before discussing the epic similes in *The Divine Comedy* in relation to Homer, it is first necessary to address a misconception current even among critics of standing from whom students of literature seek initial enlightenment, as can be seen in the following definition of the term *epic simile*: “An extended simile elaborated in such detail or such length as to eclipse temporarily the main action of a narrative work, forming a decorative digression” (Baldick 1990: 71). An epic simile, whether in Homer, Virgil, Milton, or Dante, is “extended,” “elaborated in […] detail”; very often, it also “eclipse[s] temporarily the main action of a narrative work,” and can be regarded as a “digression” in that it may depart from the main story-line for a while; however, the epic similes in the work of the above poets are anything but “decorative.”

2. Epic Similes in the Mainstream Epic Poets: Homer, Virgil, and Milton

To illustrate my point, let us look at two similes in a row, both taken from Book 4 of the *Iliad*, with which the term *epic simile* is most closely associated:

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1) Dante’s masterpiece, originally called the *Commedia* by the author, later had the word *Divina* added to it; it is often referred to by Dante scholars as the *Commedia* (when it is discussed in English) or *La Divina Commedia*, *la Divina Commedia*, or *la Commedia* (when it is discussed in Italian). In English, it is called either the *Divine Comedy* (by T. S. Eliot, for example) or *The Divine Comedy* (by John D. Sinclair, for example). As this paper is aimed at the general reader, I have adopted the English title, with the definite article *the* included as an integral part of it.

2) Such a misconception is not found in Cuddon’s definition of the term: “An extended simile, in some cases running to fifteen or twenty lines, in which the comparisons made are elaborated in considerable detail (Cuddon 1992: 293).

3) The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the two Greek epics ascribed to Homer, are both great poetry, but they are not great poetry of exactly the same order, with the former often taking precedence over the latter in terms of the critical acclaim they receive. Thus some 18 centuries ago, Longinus already drew readers’ attention to the superiority of the *Iliad* over the *Odyssey*: “It was, I imagine, for the same reason that, writing the *Iliad* in the heyday of his genius he made the whole piece lively with dramatic action, whereas in the