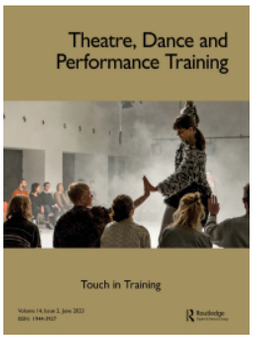

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Unveiling the Hidden Warfare in Maternal Protection Similes of the *Iliad*

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Abstract

Since ancient times, Homeric similes, particularly in the *Iliad*, have been extensively debated. Often treated as separate narrative components, their traditional aspects have been overlooked in favour of their unique images. However, recent studies have emphasised that these similes convey more than just explicit images: they also communicate through their traditional language and repeated themes. The similes centred on maternal protection have been commonly interpreted as tender, portraying a war-free reality. Yet, Kathy Gaca ("Reinterpreting the Homeric Simile of *Iliad* 16.7–11: The Girl and Her Mother in Ancient Greek Warfare," *American Journal of Philology* 129 (2): 145–171, 2008) introduced an alternative view, proposing that the simile in *Il.* 16.6–10, comparing Patroclus to a crying little girl clinging to her mother's dress, might represent a mother fleeing from invading soldiers with her child. Building upon this interpretation, I argue for a war context in the other three similes that have a maternal protection scene: *Il.* 4.130–131 (Athena protecting Menelaus), *Il.* 8.271 (Teucer hiding behind Ajax's shield), and *Il.* 12.433–435 (the balance in battle).

Keywords: similes; war; *Iliad*; war victims; traditional language; audience

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Introduction

Similes are one of the most studied aspects of Homeric poems.[1] They have various reading possibilities and their importance to the narrative has been evaluated in many ways.

The similes of maternal protection, represented in the *Iliad* by both animals and human agents, form a thematic group. Out of many possible ways of reading similes, we adopt here the thematic one, which, as the name suggests, is based on the distribution of similes in the Homeric poems into themes. The groups proposed by Edwards (1991), largely following Redfield (1975), encompass three major spheres: (1) weather and other natural phenomena, (2) hunting and herding, and (3) human technology. In addition to this division, the author suggests a group of similes that do not fit into any of these three themes. According to Edwards (1991, 36), these similes are extraordinary due to their uniqueness and seem to be the "innovation" of the poet, who describes "a little vignette that recently caught his attention as he went about the ordinary business of life", with images "drawn from a field of experience common to all men" (Vieira 2006, 22; my translation). To this last category belong the maternal protection similes with human agents.

What will be proposed here, however, goes against the most common understanding that these similes reflect the peaceful world of the poet and his audience. Following Gaca's (2008) reading against the grain of the simile in *Il.* 16.6–10 (hereafter referred to as "Patroclus' simile"), where Patroclus is compared to a little girl, it will be argued that the other two similes with maternal protection as their theme—in *Il.* 4.130–131 ("Menelaus' simile") and *Il.* 8.271 ("Teucer's simile")—also function in the context of war. Adding to these, we will discuss the simile in *Il.* 12.433–435 (the "widow's simile"). Although Edwards (1991) places the latter simile in the group of human technology,[2] maternal protection is also an important aspect of it.

Formal Definition of Similes and Methodology

As defined by Ready (2017, 24–25), a simile encompasses two basic components in its construction: a tenor (the element of the story being compared) and a vehicle (the element that corresponds to the tenor in the simile). The connection between tenor and vehicle is flexible, since the traditional simile's language, as well as the narrative's, communicates more than what is explicitly expressed.

Scott (2009, 19) argues that every simile contains a background image, referred to as a "simileme", which is not explicit but is constructed by and is present in all the similes

1 This article was written during my research internship abroad, funded by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP, Proc. n. 2022/15498-3). A shorter version of a few of the arguments here presented was published in *Nuntius Antiquus* (see Canazart 2022).

2 Cf. Redfield (1975, 259, n. 60) and Edwards (1991, 35).

that share the same theme, independently of how each one is formulated by the poet. This background image evolves through repetition in performance and it is familiar not only to the poet but also to his audience. Even though Gaca's (2008) article was published prior to Scott's (2009) book, what she seems to be proposing, and what will be done here, is to identify elements of the maternal protection similes that point out to a "simileme" or "background image" of war.

This understanding of the similes and their language ensures that the traditional nature of Homeric poetry is not overlooked. Foley (1999, 23–24) suggests three aspects of traditional poetry: (1) the "performance arena", (2) the "register", and (3) the "communicative economy". The communicative economy is the aspect which is most relevant for our purposes here. It refers to the meanings implied by each "word" in the special register of epic poetry.[3] Foley (1999, 25) summarises this as "a simple part projects a complex whole", and states that the use of certain phrases by the poet will necessarily evoke contexts beyond the present moment. It is in this sense that Muellner (1990, 66) argues: "It is not that the longer Homeric similes are 'extended'; instead, all similes, including the longer ones, are 'condensed'."

Thus, we will analyse similes that have a common theme, namely maternal protection, and verify if their background image allows us to assert that the poet evokes a certain traditional image fixed in the social memory of the audience. As argued by Scott (2009, 39), "to analyze an individual simile appropriately, it is necessary to compare as many similes as possible composed of parallel elements."

Patroclus' Simile (*Il.* 16.6–10) and Gaca's (2008) Reading

Patroclus' simile is uttered by Achilles when the hero sees his friend crying after returning from the Achaean camp (*Il.* 16.2–16):[4]

> Meanwhile Patroklos came to the shepherd of the people, Achilleus,
> and stood by him and wept warm tears, like a spring dark-running
> that down the face of a rock impassable drips its dim water;
> and swift-footed brilliant Achilleus looked on him in pity,
> and spoke to him aloud and addressed him in winged words: 'Why then
> are you crying like some poor little girl, Patroklos,
> who runs after her mother and begs to be picked up and carried,
> and clings to her dress, and holds her back when she tries to hurry,
> and gazes tearfully into her face, until she is picked up?
> You are like such a one, Patroklos, dropping these soft tears.
> Could you have some news to tell, for me or the Myrmidons?

3 We use "word" in the way Foley (1999, 201–202) understands it: not just an isolated word, but also a name accompanied by its epithet, a formular verse, a typical scene, or even an entire poem.

4 All *Iliad* translations are by Lattimore (1951). When discussing the Greek, besides Lattimore's translation, a more literal translation (from the online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek–English Lexicon) will also be provided.

> Have you, and nobody else, received some message from Phthia?
> Yet they tell me Aktor's son Menoitios lives still
> and Aiakos' son Peleus lives still among the Myrmidons.
> If either of these died we should take it hard. […]

Concerning the context, Gaca (2008) highlights the seriousness with which Achilles takes Patroclus' tears. She emphasises that the question about the well-being of his friend's father and his own shows that Achilles does not intend to mock Patroclus with the simile. Patroclus' anguish is due to the fact that the main Achaean leaders are injured and the Trojans have reached the Argives' ships. The advance of Hector and his army is facilitated by Achilles' absence. Patroclus, here, will not succeed in convincing his friend to go back to the battlefield; instead he himself, with the Myrmidons, will take his place and "restart" the battle.

Regarding the simile, Gaca (2008) suggests that the image described refers to a scene common when a city is defeated in war. The mother, in an attempt to escape the violence and rape of the invading army, runs. Her child, however, is not able to keep up with her and is left behind, crying and asking to be picked up. To defend this reading, the author analyses certain words that compose the simile, investigating the context of their other uses in the *Iliad*. First, she mentions the preposition ἅμα (v. 8, "after", on Lattimore's translation, or "together with", "alongside"). The author notices that it implies movement and that both the mother and daughter are running. She then discusses ἐσσυμένην (v. 9, "to hurry", or "to run", "to be put in quick motion") and argues that the participle's uses in the poem imply swiftness: the mother is at full velocity. She also emphasises the girl's tears, reinforcing that they are of grief and anguish, not of "childish humours" (Gaca 2008, 155). It is this same anguish that is present in Patroclus' tears, and the simile highlights that. Finally, Gaca (2008) discusses εἱανός (v. 9, "dress"). She argues that the dress is a sign of wealth, so the mother and daughter are not just a family of two.

Gaca's reading of the simile is accepted and reinforced by Muellner (2019).[5] The author adds that the girl in the simile clings to her mother's dress in order to connect with her: the dress is a metonym for the mother. According to the author's argument, the girl is going through a moment of transition in which she begins to see herself as a separate individual from her mother and the world. The dress, Muellner (2019, 149) states, is a "transitional object" and it allows the child to move from her purely subjective world to the objective one. He emphasises that the little girl's tears also show the fear and trauma which she is experiencing.

However, Gaca's (2008) interpretation is relatively unpopular.[6] Porter (2010) revisits the simile and the discussion proposed by the author and emphasises that she

5 Dué and Ebbott (2012) also accept Gaca's arguments. They apply her interpretation to other similes and propose more reasons for such a reading.

6 Cf. for instance, Le Meur (2009, 601, n. 37) and Brügger (2018, 20).

misinterprets other scholars and overlooks some of the implications of her own proposal. Porter highlights the importance of multiple interpretations of the simile, arguing that they are common to figurative language. Porter (2010, 451) also focuses on certain words of the simile, mentioned by Gaca (2008), and argues that they might have a peaceful context:

> ἀνελέσθαι regularly describes a child being picked up by a mother or other caregiver; ἅμα […] fits a child who simply wants and tries to keep close to her mother. As for ἐσσυμένην κατερύκει (16.9) Gaca herself notes the close parallel in 6.518, ἐσσύμενον κατερύκω, a line where Paris fears he is slowing Hector's return to the battlefield. True, Hector is eager to return to the fray, but the conversation itself is set in Troy, and the most natural translation of Paris' words is "I detain you as you hurry".

Although Gaca's article is the base of our argument, we do agree with Porter about the multiple interpretations of similes. Our proposed reading of the similes discussed below intends to introduce a new perspective for understanding them, rather than replacing the current interpretations.

Menelaus' Simile (*Il.* 4.130–131)

In Book 4, the period of truce between the Achaean and Trojan armies, facilitated by the agreement established between their leaders, is interrupted when Pandarus, incited by Athena, shoots an arrow and hits Menelaus. However, the hero is protected by the goddess herself (*Il.* 4.127–133):

> Still the blessed gods immortal did not forget you,
> Menelaos, and first among them Zeus' daughter, the spoiler,
> who standing in front of you fended aside the tearing arrow.
> She brushed it away from his skin as lightly as when a mother
> brushes a fly away from her child who is lying in sweet sleep,
> steering herself the arrow's course straight to where the golden
> belt buckles joined and the halves of his corselet were fitted together.

The simile is inserted in a context that alludes to the beginning of the Trojan War and the hostility linked to it; the deed of Pandarus evokes and makes visible the transgression of Paris—that is, the kidnapping of Helen and the breaking of the laws of hospitality. In both the instances where Patroclus' and Menelaus' similes are introduced, there is an event that results in the return to battle. This connects the two similes and their contexts.

Immediately after the narrator tells us how Athena kept the arrow away from Menelaus (v. 129), the simile that depicts this protection is introduced. It compares Athena repelling the arrow from Menelaus to a mother trying to keep a fly away from her sleeping child (v. 130–131). Although we can easily establish the relations between tenor and vehicle—Athena is the mother, Menelaus is the child, and the arrow is the fly—the fact that the child is "lying in sweet sleep" does not immediately seem to

be connected with the main story. This being so, we will investigate these words, since, as Muellner (2019, 143) asserts:

> All the words and meanings that specify the relationship between tenor and vehicle may not be on the surface of the simile, and that is also why it sometimes seems as though there are more elements on the surface than we know what to do with. What we are missing and have to reconstruct is the resonance and depth of all the elements that connect tenor and vehicle, both the surfeit and the lack.

Although the word παῖς ("child") appears 169 times and μήτηρ ("mother") appears 103 times throughout the *Iliad*,[7] in the main narrative there is only one representation of the relationship between a young child and their parents: Andromache and Hector with their baby son Astyanax (Book 6).[8] In the simile, the narrator tells us that the child is "lying in sweet sleep" (*Il.* 4.131: ἡδέϊ λέξεται ὕπνῳ) and Astyanax is, in fact, the only child in the main narrative that is shown sleeping. His mother predicts his and her future after Hector's death (*Il.* 22.487–505):

> Though he escape the attack of the Achaians with all its sorrows,
> yet all his days for your sake there will be hard work for him
> and sorrows, for others will take his lands away from him. The day
> of bereavement leaves a child with no agemates to befriend him.
> He bows his head before every man, his cheeks are bewept, he
> goes, needy, a boy among his father's companions,
> and tugs at this man by the mantle, that man by the tunic,
> and they pity him, and one gives him a tiny drink from a goblet,
> enough to moisten his lips, not enough to moisten his palate.
> But one whose parents are living beats him out of the banquet
> hitting him with his fists and in words also abuses him:
> "Get out, you! Your father is not dining among us."
> And the boy goes away in tears to his widowed mother,
> Astyanax, who in days before on the knees of his father
> would eat only the marrow or the flesh of sheep that was fattest.
> And when sleep would come upon him and he was done with his playing,
> he would go to sleep in a bed, in the arms of his nurse, in a soft
> bed, with his heart given all its fill of luxury.
> Now, with his dear father gone, he has much to suffer […]

7 Παῖς is the most common word for "child". Other terms are τέκνον (43 occurrences), τέκος (42 occurrences), γένος (15 occurrences), νηπύτιος (9 occurrences), and γόνος (6 occurrences).

8 However, there are several scenes in which the parent–child relationship is expressed with adult children. The main ones involve Thetis and Achilles (Books 1 and 18) and Priam, Hecuba, and Hector (Books 6, 22, and 24). There is also the relationship between immortal parents and their children, for example Hera and Hephaestus (Book 1), Dione and Aphrodite (Book 5), Zeus and Apollo (Book 5), and Zeus and Artemis (Book 21). Finally, there are secondary narratives that speak of this relationship (or a substitute for it), such as Phoenix's narrative of himself and little Achilles (Book 9) or Diomedes' of Dionysus and Thetis (Book 6).

Astyanax's sleep, as a metonym of security and protection, is lost with the death of his father, the only one who could protect Troy. Replacing such a peaceful sleep is suffering (v. 505).

The word "sleep" (ὕπνος) in the Homeric poems projects an ambiguous meaning through its traditional referentiality, and its use by the poet does not determine an unequivocal outcome for the scene. Foley (1999, 230) explains: "When characters give themselves over to *hupnos* ('sleep') in the epics, they are opening a double possibility: sweet release and vulnerability. […] Which one of the two possibilities will it be—peaceful rest or danger? Which way will the narrative turn? Homer's sign doesn't say." Therefore, the use of ὕπνος in the vehicle portion of Menelaus' simile allows the audience to transfer the idea of vulnerability and danger from the child to Menelaus and vice versa; after all, Menelaus was hit and, when his blood is shed, Agamemnon and the army fear greatly for his life. This vulnerability is also true for Astyanax in the quoted scene, especially after his father's death.[9] In the *Iliad*, ὕπνος is associated with death more than once. In *Il.* 11.241, "sleep" is used as a metaphor for death.[10] These concepts are also associated when the narrator characterises the god Sleep as "Death's brother" (*Il*. 14. 231) and mentions him beside her, his twin sister (*Il.* 16.682), which Hera (*Il.* 16.454) and Zeus (*Il.* 16.672) also do.

Another aspect that might emphasise that Menelaus' simile is not as peaceful as it might look at first is the qualification of ὕπνος: ἡδύς. The adjective ἡδύς ("sweet") always appears in the narrative in contexts that suggest discomfort for at least one of the characters involved in the scene. In *Il.* 2.270, after Odysseus reprimands and strikes Thersites, the narrator says that "sorry though the men [*sc.* Achaeans] were they laughed over him [*sc.* Thersites] happily [ἡδύ]". In *Il.* 8.550–551, the sacrifice of the Trojans has a savoury [ἡδεῖαν] fragrance, "and yet the blessed gods took no part of it"; thus, the sacrifice is made in vain, as it will not guarantee aid for the Trojans. In *Il.* 11.378, Paris hits Diomedes with an arrow and laughs "merrily [ἡδύ]"; later, Diomedes will be mentioned by Patroclus, when seeking help from Achilles, as one of the wounded heroes who can no longer fight. In *Il.* 21.507–508, Artemis is wounded by Hera and, crying, she goes to Olympus and kneels before Zeus. The narrator tells us that "Kronides caught her against him, and laughed softly [ἡδύ], and questioned" who wounded her. In *Il.* 23.784, Ajax, because of Athena, falls into the dung, and the Achaeans "laughed happily [ἡδύ] at him".

The characters also use the adjective in *Il.* 4.17 (Zeus) and 7.387 (Idaios). Zeus uses it ironically to tease Hera; the god proposes that "if somehow this way could be sweet and

9 Astyanax's scene also has similarities with Patroclus' simile. As the girl in the vehicle portion clings to her mother's dress, Astyanax tugs at the mantle of his father's companions. Both children are helpless and try to connect to the one that might come to their aid.

10 *Il.* 11.241–243: "So Iphidamas fell there and went into the brazen slumber [χάλκεον ὕπνον], / unhappy, who came to help his own people, and left his young wife / a bride, and had known no delight from her yet, and given much for her".

pleasing [ἡδύ] to all of us [*sc.* gods], / the city of lord Priam might still be a place men dwell in" (*Il.* 4.17–18). The narrator informs us that Hera and Athena are seized with "savage anger" (*Il.* 4.23). Idaios uses ἡδύς in the speech he gives in Paris' name. The herald says that Priam and the Trojans hope that Paris' speech "be found to your [*sc.* Achaeans] pleasure and liking [ἡδύ]". However, the speech brings the information that (1) Paris is offering goods to the Danaans, but that he will not return Helen, and (2) the proposal of a truce so that the funeral rites can be carried out. After Idaios' speech, Diomedes urges the Achaeans not to take the gifts offered by Paris because "the terms of death hang over the Trojans" (*Il.* 7.402).

Only in *Il.* 4.131, Menelaus' simile, and in *Il.* 8.550, the fragrance of the Trojan sacrifice, ἡδύς is not in its formular use with the verbs γελάω ("to laugh") and γίγνομαι ("to be", "to become"). However, even outside the formulas, the adjective seems to maintain the implication of relative pleasure—that is, a pleasure that is not shared by everyone or that is obtained at someone's expense. As shown above, all the contexts indicate an unpleasant situation for at least one of the characters involved in the scene. Since the formulaic adjectives for "sleep" (ὕπνος) in the *Iliad* are γλυκύς (three occurrences) and especially νήδυμος (eight occurrences),[11] both meaning sweet, it does not seem to be by chance or due to metrical restrictions that the poet chooses the adjective ἡδύς in the simile, as it is not used to qualify "sleep" in any other instance. Even if it were for metrical reasons, Foley (1999) argues that the construction of the epic narrative through formulas, typical scenes, and traditional themes should not be attributed solely to meter but also to art (*artis causa*, not *metri causa*). Foley (1999, 7) explains that "meaning and art come first, that stock expressions like the recurrent names for people and gods have resonance not as original creations or situation-specific usages but as traditional signs. The signs themselves may be metrically governed, but their implications are not."

It is also relevant to mention that in *Od.* 13.78–81, sleep is qualified as sweet and is associated with death precisely because of its sweetness:

> They [*sc.* Phaeacians] bent to their rowing, and with their oars tossed up the sea spray,
> and upon the eyes of Odysseus there fell a sweet sleep [νήδυμος ὕπνος]
> the sweetest [ἥδιστος] kind of sleep with no awakening, most like
> death; […].[12]

Thus, the adjective in question seems to project, through traditional referentiality, a certain discomfort implied in the scene. With this in mind, we can argue either that the child's sleep has already been disturbed, even with the mother trying to keep the source

11 Although there is no agreement on the etymology or meaning of νήδυμος, Lacore (1997, 40) writes that νήδυυμος ὕπνος suggests "non la douceur mais la profondeur de l'inconscience, lors même qu'il s'agit d'une métaphore chrétienne de la mort corporelle". For the uses of νήδυμος, see *Il.* 2.2; 10.91, 187; 14.242, 253, 354; 16.454; and 23.63. γλυκύς is used in *Il.* 1.610, 2.71, and 23.232.

12 Translation by Lattimore (1965; modified).

of this discomfort, the fly (μυῖα), away, or that the context is unpleasant for the mother who is trying to protect her child.

Another word in Menelaus' simile worth discussing is μυῖα ("fly", "mosquito"). The word appears at only other five moments in the *Iliad*, and its use seems to indicate that its main traditional projection in the *Iliad* tradition is related to the mutilation of corpses in battle. In fact, De Martino and Vox (1996, 388; my translation) write that "the fly recurs in Homer, almost like a miniature vulture, referring to the danger of death and the dying".

Flies appear twice as a problem for the preservation of Patroclus' corpse (*Il.* 19.23–33). Achilles expresses his fear to his mother, and she assures him that she will preserve his friend's corpse:

> '[…]. Yet I am sadly
> afraid, during this time, for the warlike son of Menoitios
> that flies [μυῖαι] might get into the wounds beaten by bronze in his body
> and breed worms in them, and these make foul the body, seeing
> that the life is killed in him, and that all his flesh may be rotted.'
> In turn the goddess Thetis the silver-footed answered him:
> 'My child, no longer let these things be a care in your mind.
> I shall endeavour to drive from him the swarming and fierce things,
> those flies [μυίας], which feed upon the bodies of men who have perished;
> and although he lie here till a year has gone to fulfilment,
> still his body shall be as it was, or firmer than ever. […]

Also associated with the corpse of a hero, μυῖα is used in a simile and, for the reflection of the vehicle in the tenor, the flies surround Sarpedon's corpse (*Il* 16.637–644):

> […] No longer
> could a man, even a knowing one, have made out the godlike
> Sarpedon, since he was piled from head to ends of feet under
> a mass of weapons, the blood and the dust, while others about him
> kept forever swarming over his dead body, as flies [μυῖαι]
> through a sheepfold thunder about the pails overspilling
> milk, in the season of spring when the milk splashes in the buckets.
> So they swarmed over the dead man, […]

The fourth use associated with the cadaver is in a simile when Menelaus prays to Athena so the goddess can help him protect Patroclus' body (*Il.* 17.567–575):

> So he [*sc.* Menelaus] spoke, and the goddess grey-eyed Athene was happy
> that first among all the divinities his prayer had bespoken her.
> She put strength into the man's shoulders and knees, inspiring
> in his breast the persistent daring of that mosquito [μυίης]
> who though it is driven hard away from a man's skin, even

> so, for the taste of human blood, persists in biting him.
> With such daring she darkened to fullness the heart inside him.
> He stood over Patroklos, and made a cast with the shining
> spear. […]

Finally, μυῖα appears in a simile in which the tenor is the Achaean army. Although this use is not immediately associated with corpses, it certainly is associated with the violence of war due to its context. The simile is produced when we are presented with the Achaean army marching to the first battle of the *Iliad*. This march evokes, as much discussed by scholars, the beginning of the Trojan War (*Il.* 2.469–473):

> Like the multitudinous nations of swarming insects [μυιάων]
> who drive hither and thither about the stalls of the sheepfold
> in the season of spring when the milk splashes in the milk pails:
> in such numbers the flowing-haired Achaians stood up
> through the plain against the Trojans, hearts burning to break them.

For our purpose, the expression "hearts burning to break" (διαρραῖσαι μεμαῶτες) is also relevant in the scene. The formula shows up another three times in the *Iliad*: twice in Nestor's voice, when he remembers and talks about an attack in the past (*Il.* 11.713 and 733), and once in a simile in which the tenor is related to Patroclus' corpse (*Il.* 17.722–729):

> He spoke, and they [*sc.* Menelaus and Aias] caught the body from the ground
> [in their arms, lifting
> him high with a great heave, and the Trojan people behind them
> shouted aloud as they saw the Achaians lifting the dead man,
> and made a rush against them like dogs, who sweep in rapidly
> on a wounded wild boar, ahead of the young men who hunt him,
> and for the moment race in raging to tear him to pieces
> until in the confidence of his strength he turns on them, at bay,
> and they give ground and scatter for fear one way and another […]

Thus, Menelaus' simile seems to contain words whose traditional projections establish a negative context. By taking into account (1) the traditional referentiality of ὕπνος, ἠδύς, and μυῖα; (2) Gaca's reading of Patroclus' simile, which has the same theme as Menelaus' simile; and, finally, (3) the context in which Menelaus' simile is constructed, which alludes to the very beginning of the Trojan War, it seems possible to propose that Menelaus' simile also has the sacking of a city defeated in war as its traditional background image. With these various negatively connoted expressions in the simile, I further suggest that the scene refers to a mother trying to protect her child's corpse from flies. As Gaca (2008) reminds us, when the sacking of a city was taking place, mothers had only two options: run to escape, which would imply that their child, at some point, would be left behind for not being able to keep up with them; or remain beside their child, which would make both of them victims of the invading army. In either alternative, the children end up being captured.

Teucer's Simile (*Il*. 8.271)

Besides Menelaus' simile, the only other simile of maternal protection with human figures is the brief simile in *Il.* 8.271. After a truce in which the duel between Hector and Ajax took place, followed by funeral rites for the fallen warriors on the first day of combat (Book 7), the Greeks and Trojans resume the battle (*Il.* 8.53–63), and Zeus starts favouring the Trojans (*Il.* 8.68–77). Watching the army being defeated, Agamemnon prays to the god, requesting that he at least allow the Greeks to retreat (*Il.* 8.235–244). Zeus grants it, sending a sign, and the Greeks fight to return to their ships. The narrator then makes a catalogue of Greek leaders, mentioning Teucer. The hero takes cover behind Ajax's shield while shooting arrows and killing Trojans (*Il.* 8.268–272):

> […]. The hero [*sc.* Teucer]
> would watch, whenever in the throng he had struck some man with an arrow,
> and as the man dropped and died where he was stricken, the archer
> would run back again, like a child to the arms of his mother,
> to Aias, who would hide him in the glittering shield's protection.

Because this simile is brief, it is difficult to deduce the context of the scene proposed by the vehicle's portion through the analysis of its imagery or lexicon alone. However, Teucer's simile shares with Menelaus' simile not only lexical choices (παῖς, μήτηρ), but also the theme of protection, also found in Patroclus' simile. Furthermore, there is a certain parallelism in the contexts of Menelaus' and Teucer's similes, as Teucer shoots arrows and Menelaus is hit by one. This is enough to assume a war background to Teucer's simile. As argued by Scott (2009, 28), "since simile motifs are often repeated in varied words and phrases, the simileme appears to exercise its force at a level that is nonverbal". Therefore, we suggest that Teucer's simile also has war as its background image. The child in the simile might be running to his mother in an attempt to protect himself from the invading army.

In the *Iliad*, Teucer's protection simile would not be the only one with minimal explicit information that projects a larger traditional referentiality. According to Werner (2008, 14–15), the simile in *Il.* 2.289–290 ("For as if they were young children or widowed women / they cry out and complain to each other about going homeward"), uttered by Odysseus, also projects, through traditional referentiality, a context referring to the consequences of war for the women and children of the defeated city. This simile in Book 2, like the one we discussed regarding Teucer's protection, is brief, and its vehicle does not imply such a projection. However, through the analysis of the occurrences of the word χήρη in the *Iliad* and the content of Odysseus' speech, Werner (2008) argues in favour of such an interpretation.[13]

13 Werner (2008, 15, n. 65), however, alerts us that "there is no way to prove that the mention of χῆραι in that passage is sufficient to trigger off these thematic associations for an archaic audience." *Mutatis mutandis*, his warning also applies to the reading we propose here for the three similes we are discussing.

The Widow's Simile (*Il.* 12.433–435)

Although the theme of the widow's simile is "human technology", the relationship between the mother and her children is no less important in it. Its tenor is the balance of the battle and the firmness of the Achaeans on the battlefield (*Il.* 12.430–438):

> Everywhere the battlements and the bastions were awash
> with men's blood shed from both sides, Achaian and Trojan.
> But even so they could not drive panic among the Achaians,
> but held evenly as the scales which a careful widow
> holds, taking it by the balance beam, and weighs her wool evenly
> at either end, working to win a pitiful wage for her children:
> so the battles fought by both sides were pulled fast and even
> until that time when Zeus gave the greater glory to Hektor,
> Priam's son, who was first to break into the wall of the Achaians.

The simile's image is emotionally charged, as the adjective ἀεικέα (v. 435, "pitiful", or "shameful", "meagre") has a strong evaluative aspect in the *Iliad*. In the narrator's voice, ἀεικέα occurs only six times (out of a total of twenty-one occurrences),[14] three of which have embedded focalisation. The other two uses by the narrator are in formulaic verses and qualify the groans of the Trojans. It is only in this simile that the construction is not formulaic, making the moral judgement of the adjective more evident. It qualifies the humiliation inflicted on the widow (Hainsworth 1993, 362). The same applies to the adjective ἀληθής (v. 433, "careful", or "true", "real"), which only appears in the narrator's voice in this simile.

Concerning widows in the main narrative, Werner (2008, 14) states the following: "At least in the *Iliad*, a widow is bound to a dead hero, and her lament signals that the fall of his city, the annihilation of its male population, and the enslavement (or even death) of the ἄλοχοι καὶ νήπια τέκνα will soon follow." Although we do not have information about the woman in the simile, her being a widow is enough to bring to the audience's memory the referentiality of the image. In fact, Porter (2010, 449) argues that the language used in the simile opens up "the possibility that the woman is a war widow trying to feed her now fatherless children".

The simile is not the only occurrence in the poem of a free widow struggling to take care of her children. Hector predicts the same fate for Andromache after his death (*Il.* 6.450–458):

> But it is not so much the pain to come of the Trojans
> that troubles me, not even of Priam the king nor Hekabe,
> not the thought of my brothers who in their numbers and valour
> shall drop in the dust under the hands of men who hate them,

14 In *Il.* 1.341, 398, 456; 2.264; 4.396; 9.70, 495; 10.483; 11.142; 12.435; 14.13; 15.496; 16.32; 19.124, 133; 21.20; 22.336, 395; 23.24; 24.594, 733.

as troubles me the thought of you, when some bronze-armoured
Achaian leads you off, taking away your day of liberty,
in tears; and in Argos you must work at the loom of another,
and carry water from the spring Messeis or Hypereia,
all unwilling, but strong will be the necessity upon you;

Although the noun ἀνάγκη is associated with enslavement, as is the participle ἀεκαζομένη,[15] the necessity that Hector mentions in his speech may be related not only to the future enslavement of his wife but also to the role Andromache will assume as the protector of her son. Ἀνάγκη appears with this same meaning in *Il.* 8.55–57, referring to the reason why the Trojans fight: "the Trojans took up / their armour, fewer men, yet minded to stand the encounter / even so, caught in necessity, for their wives and their children" [χρειοῖ ἀναγκαίῃ, πρό τε παίδων καὶ πρὸ γυναικῶν]. With Hector's death, both Astyanax and Andromache lose their protector. It will be up to her to console her son when he is beaten and abused (as quoted above, *Il*. 22.487–505). As Andromache predicts, she will not be able to take care of Astyanax properly; the boy's sleep will no longer be peaceful, as only the father could protect him. This inability of the mother to help her son is present in the widow's simile, where all she can achieve through her work is a "shameful wage" (ἀεικέα μισθὸν, *Il.* 12.435).

Returning to the discussion of a possible shared traditional referentiality in the widow's and Menelaus' and Teucer's similes, it is clear that the contexts in which they appear, and their vehicles, are different. Furthermore, based solely on the expressed content in the similes, it is not possible to claim an immediate similarity between them. In Menelaus' simile, we have the image of a mother protecting her child from immediate discomfort or danger, which also seems to be the case in Teucer's simile. In the widow's simile, on the other hand, we have an allusion to the prolonged care of a mother for her children, without necessarily implying protection as its main theme. However, as we discussed earlier, the simile evokes an image of a post-war period, since a widow tends to be someone who has lost her husband in combat, which could also be the case in Menelaus' simile. Furthermore, as discussed by Foley (1999), the same "word" will always evoke a cohesive traditional image, if not the same one, regardless of its immediate context. If the maternal protection image is a "word" that has the sacking of defeated cities as its traditional referentiality, the contexts in which it appears and the particular words used in the scene are not essential to evoke the traditional meanings in the audience's memory.

Therefore, the similes may have a connection through their simileme—that is, the image not explicitly expressed but projected due to their traditional referentiality. If all three similes discussed imply a context in which the main focus is on widows and children

15 Cf. Stoevesandt (2016, 163–164) regarding the noun, and Graziosi and Haubold (2010) regarding the participle.

affected by war, then they share a common traditional projection and evoke the same subject within their respective contexts.

Final Remarks

As is the case for most new proposed readings of the Homeric poems—and, particularly, the Homeric similes—our approach to the maternal protection similes is one more to add to the possibilities of interpretation. The reading of a peaceful context and how it would emphasise the suffering of the warriors on the battlefield remains an option, since neither it nor the reading here proposed can be, in fact, confirmed.

Homeric similes are complex and have always been a major subject of discussion exactly because they have many possible readings. Tsagalis (2008, 280; my emphasis), analysing the horses' similes in Book 22 of the *Iliad*, argues that

> *similes defy strict interpretation*. While staring through this hypertextual window, the audience will have to discover for itself the covert message of the simile: why are Achilles and Hector compared to racing horses (ἀεθλοφόροι ἵπποι) and not to regular ones? Since listeners have different perceptions of racing horses and their image-mappings of such a scene will be colored by personal experience, it is fair to say that *there are as many answers as there are listeners*.

Reading the maternal protection similes as having war as their background image might demonstrate to the audience that the suffering that they are moved by when listening to the *Iliad* is not limited to great heroes of the past, but is the condition of all of those who are affected by war. Priam's, Hecuba's, and Andromache's laments might talk about their personal experience, but they are also the reality of the elderly, women, and children in any city defeated in battle and taken over by the victorious army.

Although approaches that facilitate the interpretation of a war background in the similes discussed are mobilised, such as the one based on traditional referentiality provided by images and not only by words (Scott 2009; Tsagalis 2012), the explicit semantic content of the similes does not make a war context clear. However, as quoted above, the Homeric similes are all concise due to the "tacit conspiracy of meaning and conventions develop[ed] over time between traditional poet and traditional audience" (Muellner 2019, 142), so they might suggest a war context implicitly, based on the traditional referentiality of their image.

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