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What is a Greek Source on the Early English Stage? Fifteen New Essays

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou

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"Of gentle and ignoble, base and kings": the Transformations of the Homeric Simile on the Early Modern English Stage

Evgeniia Ganberg

Abstract

The simile is a fundamental element of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Praised by such early modern students of Homer as Jean de Sponde and George Chapman, the simile opens a window into a world beyond the battlefield, contrasting the day-to-day activities of housewives and reapers with those of the warriors. But can it be considered a mode of thought that goes beyond the epic narrative? Early modern drama on the Trojan War – George Peele's *The Arraignment of Paris* (1584), Thomas Heywood's *The Iron Age* (1632), James Shirley's *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses* (1659), Elkanah Settle's *The Siege of Troy* (1707) – repeatedly juxtaposes common, non-heroic Greeks and Trojans with their canonical 'betters'. Highlighting alternative patterns of behaviour, these comparisons help scrutinise the commended epic models and the widespread Renaissance practice of relying on such classical *exempla* for moral guidance. This paper probes whether it is productive to take these recurrent parallels as a response to the Homeric simile rather than as variations of the "servants" subplot; whether thinking with and through comparisons is something inherent to the Trojan myth, appearing independently in its various iterations; and, finally, whether this might provide a case study of how classical forms are unconsciously received alongside plots and characters.

Keywords: Homer; Chapman; Peele; Heywood; Shirley; Settle

Early Modern Drama on the Trojan War and the Reception of the Homeric Simile

Two armies, both alike in potency, stand on the battlefield. The poet sings:

> But as a spinster poor and just ye sometimes see strait-laced
> About the weighting of her web, who, careful, having charge
> For which she would provide some means, is loath to be too large
> In giving or in taking weight, but even with her hand
> Is doing with the weights and wool till both in just peise stand,
> So ev'nly stood it with these foes . . .
> (*Ils.* 12.426-31, corresponding to *Il.* 12.433-6)

In the marginalia to *The Iliads of Homer Prince of Poets* (1611), George Chapman, via whose translation we have just entered the world of the Trojan War, continuously flags up similes akin to this one, which likens opposing forces to weights in a spinster's hand. "Ingenious" and "inimitable", the similes are clearly a feature of the epic dear to the translator (Chapman 2017, 402, 37). So, next to the verses cited above, he writes: "A simile . . . in which comparing mightiest things with meanest illustrating the mightiest, both meeting in life's preservation and credit, our Homer is beyond comparison and admiration" (238). According to Chapman, Homer's talent here lies in juxtaposing the noble and the lofty with the low, the common, and the mundane; similes, cutting across social divides which separate the Greek and the Trojan heroes from, for instance, a labouring woman, are one of the poet's trademarks.

The myth of the Trojan War is a myth of comparisons. Starting with the three goddesses who contend for the status of the most beautiful, it depicts how gods and heroes alike enter battles, whether physical or rhetorical, to distinguish themselves. From individual strifes, often between those on the same side, to the war itself, the Trojan story abounds in such instances of social juxtapositions. This is what many of the epic similes reflect: the warriors in the above quote are first and foremost likened to each other, with the equilibrium of a closely fought battle, in turn, bringing about the comparison with the spinster. Both in action and in language, the myth of the Trojan War displays and debates similitude between people, events, phenomena. Recognising the importance of such juxtapositions, early modern English drama on the Trojan War, I suggest, appropriates the formal epic expression of the Trojan myth's comparative core: it transposes the Homeric simile from the page to the stage.

Considering a gathered corpus of the period's extant plays on this myth, one is struck by a single recurring feature: the appearance of Greek and Trojan commoners. Shepherds or urban dwellers, these characters have no claim to the illustrious pedigree of the myth's heroes, but are, nonetheless, a constant on the early modern stage. Nicholas Udall's *Thersytes* (acted 1537, published 1562), George Peele's *The Arraignment of Paris* (acted between 1581 and 1584, published 1584); William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*

(probably acted circa 1602, published 1609), Thomas Heywood's *The Iron Age* (probably acted circa 1610, published 1632), James Shirley's *The Triumph of Beauty* (published in 1646) and *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses* (published in 1659), John Banks' *The Destruction of Troy* (acted and published 1670), Elkanah Settle's *The Virgin Prophetess* (acted and published 1701) and *The Siege of Troy* (acted between 1698 and 1701, published 1703) – all contain at least one such non-heroic character, leaving George Granville's *Heroick Love* (published 1698) as the only exception to the rule.[1] What is more, in five out of the nine plays which feature the common folk, these lowly men and women are introduced specifically to act as living mirrors or doubles of their canonical 'betters'. Through their actions and, indeed, inaction, they not only offset the choices Trojan and Greek heroes make, but also highlight alternative paradigms or patterns of behaviour. When each of the five plays is explored in isolation, existing critical tools might seem sufficient to explain this dramatic juxtaposition of low- and high-born figures. In individual cases, one can, perhaps, talk of foil characters, thematic parallels, or "that old chestnut of Elizabethan drama, the double plot" (Moir 2010, 110), such as that of servants imitating their masters. However, when the plays are taken together, the above vocabulary becomes inadequate. Instead, as I hope to demonstrate, this recurring phenomenon of early modern drama on the Trojan War gains from being analysed via the Homeric simile. Simply put, the epic's comparisons between, in Chapman's words, the "mightiest" and the "meanest" are not forgotten when the myth is staged. By contrast, early modern playwrights embrace the impulse behind such similes for its potential to scrutinise the comparative urge that lies at the centre of this foundational mythical war of Western literary canon.

Humanists were clearly troubled by Homer's similes. Read against the more reserved and somber Virgil, to whose literary technique they were much more accustomed, Homer's stylistic choices could come across as frivolous and occasionally even vulgar. For instance, Petrarch, while ardently wishing to be charmed by the Greek poet's

1 According to the surviving "backstage plot", Henry Chettle and Thomas Dekker's lost *Troilus and Cressida* (1599) featured "beggars" (see *Lost Plays Database*).

language, cannot but remark on "the inappropriateness of the notorious simile in which Ajax is compared to an ass" (Sowerby 1997, 47). Even more anti-Homer is Julius Caesar Scaliger who, throughout his treatise on poetics, paints the Greek as the less decorous of the two. As Sanford Shepard points out, according to Scaliger, one of Homer's main faults is his lowly presentation of gods and mortals. For example, the way Andromache receives the news of Hector's death is "unsuited" to her status as a noblewoman, whereas the response of Euryalus' mother in the *Aeneid* is faultless (Shepard 1961, 328). Homer's epithets are "often cold, childish or out of place" ("saepe frigida aut puerila aut locis inepta"); how can, wonders Scaliger, a sleeping Achilles be still called πόδας ὠκύς (swift of foot) or a feasting Apollo ἀργυρότοξος (with silver bow) (Scaliger 2003, 4.94)? The similes are likewise inappropriate and debasing, as Scaliger ironically indicates: "Principio cum personae comparantur, earum status, mores, studia exprimenda, . . . vel ipsius Homeri doceamur auctoritate . . . Leoni in stabulis Diomedeum in acie. Muscis in stabulis circum mulctras Graecos et Troianos circum Sarpedonis cadaver. Et Aiacem cedentem fortissimo asino obstinatae lentitudinis" ("At first, when characters are compared, it is their status, nature, inclinations that should be expressed, . . . even as Homer's authority teaches us . . . To a lion in an enclosure, Diomedes in the line of battle. To flies in flocks around milkpails, the Greeks and the Trojans around the body of Sarpedon. And Ajax most mightily beaten to an ass of obstinate sluggishness"; 4.92, 94, translation mine).

Despite such detractors, Homeric similes also received growing support throughout the early modern period. Jean de Sponde's commentary on the *Iliad* (1583), laying the foundation for, among others, Chapman's translation, responds to Scaliger's and other humanists' preference for Virgil's diction by endorsing and defending Homer's. For example, the comparison between Athena's diversion of an arrow flying towards Menelaus and the mother sweeping a fly off a sleeping child's forehead (*Il.* 4.130ff.) is accompanied by the following remark: "Haec est una ex comparationibus humilibus, quas interdum Homerus usurpat ad res grauiores significandas" ("This is one of the lowly comparisons, which Homer occasionally employs to signify greater matters";

Sponde 2018, 1.550-2, translation mine). For Sponde, there is nothing unbecoming or tasteless about the epic picture being interrupted by phenomena that do not belong to it. By contrast, he describes such figures as elegant – "eleganti comparatione" (*Il.* 4.275, 15.410), "eleganter exprimit" (*Il.* 8.306); as admirable and almost inimitable – "admiranda et pene inimitabilis comparatio" (*Il.* 12. 421); as praiseworthy – "laudatur" (*Il.* 12.433) (1.564, 2.100, 604). Chapman, in turn, goes even further in his refutation of other scholars' criticism of Homer. In particular, he contends Sponde's conclusion that Homer's comparisons are subject to the law by which similes always limp on one foot, that is, that one can always discover an incongruity, in modern linguistic jargon, between the simile's tenor and vehicle. For Chapman, Homer's comparison of soldiers and bees – which kindles Sponde's remark on the figure's conventional deficiency – is perfect as it is, but it has, together with other "inimitable similes", suffered "incredible violence" in the hands of humanist writers (Chapman 2017, 73).

Embodying the Similes: the Trojan plays of Peele, Shirley, Heywood, Settle

Whether praised or condemned then, Homeric similes were certainly attended to in the early modern period. Depicting the peaceful, productive, and non-heroic activity of, for instance, reapers (*Il.* 11.63-6), anglers (*Il.* 16.388-92), or curriers (*Il.* 17.335-43), in the *Iliad*, it is largely the similes that introduce the commoners to the epic world. Simultaneously, by their very grammatical structure, the similes reinforce the sense that juxtapositions and comparisons form the nucleus of the Trojan myth. Without the Homeric similes of the "meanest" and the "mightiest", I suggest, it is impossible to fully comprehend the parallels that the Trojan plays, produced for extremely varied audiences over the period of almost a hundred and fifty years, draw between the myth's canonical high-born characters and the newly introduced low-born ones. Not dismissing the importance of the comic subplot which, stemming from the Vice figure of the late medieval morality plays, is undoubtedly a distinctive feature of Elizabethan theatre (see Bevington 1962), I

argue that the contact with the epic simile reconfigures this native dramatic structure. Having recognised this, one starts to discern that most early modern English plays on the Trojan War are, in fact, imbued with a peculiarly Homeric type of parallelism.

This dramatic doubling of base and royal Trojans appears for the first time in George Peele's *The Arraignment of Paris*. The play shows Paris's relationship with Oenone, his judgement of the three goddesses, and his trial in front of Jupiter and other Olympian gods which is believed to be Peele's invention (see Benbow's introduction in Peele 1970). It also features a miserable lovestruck shepherd, Colin.[2] The corollary nature of this subplot is sometimes noted dismissively: "Colin's unrequited love for Thestylis and his accompanying deadly pain *simply* offer a parallel to the theme of Oenone's love and pain" (emphasis mine; Lesnick 1968, 164). Paige Martin Reynolds, however, demonstrates that the shepherd's affection and Thestylis' subsequent punishment – since the maid's rejection brings about Colin's death, Venus forces her to lovingly pursue "a foul croked Churle" (stage direction after line 721) – foreground the play's central themes of justice and partiality. While blaming Cupid for his "parciallitie" in having wounded Colin but not Thestylis, the goddess shows herself to have a "vested interest in Paris's abandonment of his beloved"; the fact that she overlooks Paris's treatment of Oenone discredits the Olympian trial which charges the prince with the very same fault (Reynolds 2010, 267).

Importantly, not only is the comparison between the two unhappy lovers openly acknowledged in Peele's text – the shepherd Thenot brings it up in his conversation with the lamenting Oenone – but also, when he does, it is, syntactically, a simile: "Poore Colin, that is ill for thee, that art as true in trust / To thy sweete smerte as to his Nymphe Paris hath bin unjust" (Peele 1970, 597-8). The juxtaposition can be seen as distinctly Homeric in its use of dissimilarity as the basis of the comparison. As David H. Porter convincingly shows, many of the *Iliad*'s similes are based around a "vast distance" or "yawning gulf" between the likened phenomena: a young man dying is compared to a blossoming flower heavy

2 On Colin as a literary heir to Colin Clout of Edmund Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* (1579) see Reid 2016.

from the rain (*Il.* 8.306-9); a bleeding wound is compared to the process of colouring an ivory ornament (*Il.* 4.139-47) (Porter 1972, 12). So too, Colin's truthfulness is likened to Paris' unjustness. The simile's gender switch, in which Thestylis is the prince's double and the shepherd Oenone's, is equally Homeric: recall, for instance, the comparison of Penelope to a just king (*Od.* 19.108-14) or of a weeping Patroclus to a crying female child (*Il.* 16.7-11). Finally, looking at this as a simile, i.e. as an active comparison, rather than as an inert thematic parallel or a subplot that can be enjoyed on its own terms, activates the importance of its foreboding nature. When Myrmidons gathering for a battle are likened to a pack of wolves that has already murdered a stag (*Il.* 15.156-66), the simile anticipates what is going to happen. Likewise, the juxtaposition of Paris and Colin not only delineates the status quo but also foreshadows the future: the shepherd's death is a portent for the casualties of the Trojan War. Not allowed to enter the masque's pastoral world and ruin its triumphant conclusion, catastrophe, nonetheless, looms in the periphery. In the prologue, Ate proclaims that "Proude Troy must fall" and "statellie Iliums loftie towers be racet"; later in the play, Apollo, in an offhand comment, calls beauty "the wracke of Priams Troy" (Peele 1970, 8-9, 827). The simile's main function is proleptic: Colin and Thestylis are there to remind the audience of the suffering Paris and Helen will cause their countrymen.

Shirley's play on the judgement of the goddesses also draws a parallel between Paris and one of the shepherds, but contrary to Colin who, by his very presence, discreetly alerts the audience to the myth's canonical dark undertones, Shirley's Bottle is brought on stage to question the tradition and foreground what is usually ignored. Like Peele, Shirley was a university man, and hence must have encountered Homer's works as part of his formal education. What is more, in his capacity as a schoolteacher, he published manuals on grammar and composition, an activity that again presupposes minute attention to language and syntax. Finally, it is important to note that Shirley was, according to Anthony à Wood's *Athenae Oxonienses*, "a drudge for John Ogilby in his translation of *Homer's Iliads and Odysses* . . . with the writings of annotation on them" (Wood 1817, 339-40). One cannot establish whether any of the marginalia that pinpoint and analyse Homer's similes – such as the

"rich Simile of a poor spinster" which the commentator imagines to be an allusion to the poet's mother (Ogilby 1660, 277) – might have been penned by Shirley, and, moreover, the translation is published after his plays on the Trojan War. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine that as a friend and collaborator of Ogilby and, indeed, a man of letters himself, Shirley, did not understand the significance of the similes to the epic corpus. It is then unsurprising that the logic of the Homeric simile, as I will show below, infiltrates his Trojan plays.[3]

The Triumph of Beauty prefaces the contest for the golden apple by showcasing Paris' life on Mount Ida. The pastoral world of Shirley's play differs significantly from that of Peele's: instead of a lovestruck Colin, here one finds a progeny of the mechanicals from *Midsummer Night's Dream* – a band of dramatically inclined shepherds, led by a certain Bottle, want to entertain Paris by staging the story of the Golden Fleece. While the actual performance never takes place, the shepherds succeed, to Paris' growing irritation and dismay, in drawing the lone and self-proclaimed melancholic into conversation:

> PAR. I prethee leave me.
> BOT. Leave my young Prince in a wood? A word to the wise – are not you in love?
> PAR. In love? with what?
> BOT. Nay, I doe not know what wilde beast hath entangled you: but I have a shrewd suspition; for thus simply did I look by all report, when I was in love too, it had almost undone me, for it infected me with Poetrie; and I grew witty to the admiration of all the Owles in Ida.
> (Shirley 1646, 10)

3 Little is known about the actual production of the plays; they might have been written for a performance by Shirley's pupils (see Ashbee 2016) or "at the request of a patron such as Thomas Stanley or the Earl of Newcastle" (Burner 1988, 193), but there is no conclusive evidence for either hypothesis, or any certainty as to how much prior to publication they had been composed. For *The Triumph of Beautie*, Wiggins and Richardson offer 1634 as the likeliest date, following the 'conceptual links' that exist between the masque and Shirley's 'cannon cluster of the 1630s' as well as judging this as the most probable time for a collaboration between Shirley and William Lawes, who set at least one of the play's songs to music (Wiggins Richardson 2012, 2435).

In fact, this Paris is not in love: Shirley's version of the story does not include Oenone, and the prince is yet to learn of Helen and be enamoured with her beauty. Rather, what he laments in the woods of Mount Ida is his abandonment and banishment. However, Paris's countenance as well as the burden of the pastoral tradition convince the shepherd that the prince is suffering from love. Proposing to cheer Paris with the dance that he has prepared with his fellow countrymen, Bottle also reminisces about his own youth, explaining that what had saved him was a beating: "But I thank my dutifull father, hee cur'd me with a Flaile, and most learnedly thresh'd blinde Cupid out of my sides" (11). Subtly and almost surprisingly, Paris's lack of parental guidance, which he has been bemoaning, is brought to the forefront. The play engages with the canonical image of Paris as lover, but does not reflect it tragically like Peele's masque did. Instead, *The Triumph of Beauty* humorously imagines what could have been if Priam was a "dutifull father" as Bottle's was. The resulting comparison between Bottle and Paris is inconspicuous but effective; it forces us to look differently at an element of the myth – Paris' abandonment by his parents – that is brushed aside by the more conventional narratives.

Shirley's other Trojan play, *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses*, similarly uses doubling of low and high-born characters to present alternatives, if not to say outright challenges, to the assumed models of epic or heroic behaviour. Having taken the basic story of the contest for Achilles' armour from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Heywood's *The Iron Age* (see Ochester 1970), Shirley significantly expands the material, adding numerous new characters, including the pages Didimus and Lysippus. Attending Ulysses and Ajax respectively, the pair gets almost as much on-stage time as their renowned lords. At first, their story seems to unfold along the lines of a typical servants' subplot – like that of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, for example – with the pages keen to imitate their masters. When Ajax and Ulysses are about to debate who is more worthy of Achilles' armour, their servants heatedly discuss who is superior among their two lords:

> Ly. You know me Sir?
> Di. For one that wants good manners; yes, I know

Your name, and best relation, you attend
A Page on Ajax Telamon.
LY. And you
In such an office wait upon Ulysses,
But with this difference, that I am your better,
In reference to my Lord, as he exceeds
Your Master both in Fortitude and Honour.
(Shirley 1659, 97-8)

As the play progresses, however, the servants gain dramatic independence, deciding that, unlike Ulysses and Ajax, they can reconcile. Didimus tells Lysippus that "we may now be friends", explaining that he is "not / the more exalted for [his] Masters triumph" and, moreover, is ready to respect Ajax for his brave deeds (119). Lysippus agrees and proclaims that thanks to this newly struck friendship he too "will love Ulysses" (ibid). The original similitude between servants and masters gradually and surprisingly dissolves.

As soon as they make up, the men find a new enemy which unites them further. A character named Polybrontes (i.e. "of much thunder" from πολύς + βροντή) comes on stage to brag of his military achievements such as the purported slaughters of Hector and Paris; the former, of course, has been killed by Achilles and the latter, at this moment in the war, is still alive, as the pages cheekily acknowledge.[4] The men's merry banter is interrupted by the appearance of Ajax who beats up the braggart. By including this conventional comic punishment of a *miles gloriosus* in a play which revolves around the recital of heroic deeds, Shirley makes the audience question the validity of the heroes' contention. Afterall, while some of the statements they make have real-world evidence, others, especially Ulysses' assimilation of Achilles' deeds – he is the one who brought the hero to the war, who "arm'd Achilles first" (111) and, therefore, according to his logic, has a claim to all of the former's achievements – come dangerously close to Polybrontes' assertions. Taking from Ovid Ulysses' deft manipulation of the facts, such as

4 Polybrontes' status is unclear. The character list refers to him as a "small Souldier", which might, however, equally apply to his height or to his position in the army since he is later jokingly addressed by Lysippus as "my Low, and Mighty Polybrontes" (120).

the above idea that none of Achilles' feats would have been possible without Ulysses (see *Met.*13.162ff.), Shirley displaces the speech by having Polybrontes present other heroes' martial triumphs as his own. Together with the pages' agreement to eschew enmity, this bending of truth and reality to one's advantage problematises the portrayal of the Greek lords, painting them as similarly quarrelsome and deceitful to their inferiors, but significantly more obstinate.

This comparison between the servants and their masters can also nuance our understanding of the play's solemn conclusion. Standing over Ajax's body, Calchas proclaims a poem which, while originating with Shirley and this play, is "frequently anthologised" without any reference to *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses* (Ownbey 1951, 54):

> The glories of our blood and state,
> are shadows, not substantial things
> There is no armour against Fate;
> Death lays his icy hand on kings:
> Sceptre and Crown
> Must tumble down,
> And in the dust be equal made,
> With the poor crooked scythe and spade.
> Some men with swords may reap the field,
> And plant fresh laurels where they kill . . .
> (Shirley 1659, 128-9)

The oracle describes death's power to eliminate all social differences. The nobles' various martial successes, like those recited by Ulysses and Ajax during the contention, inevitably come to naught.

Read out of context, this lamenting viewpoint of nobility seems all there is. But if one returns the poem back to the Trojan world of the play, a different, richer interpretation emerges. There is, in fact, nothing lamentable or frightening to this post-mortem equality. First, the poem's juxtaposition of sceptres and spades is strongly reminiscent of one Homeric simile:

> And as upon a rich man's crop of barley or of wheat,
> Opposed for swiftness at their work, a sort of reapers sweat,
> Bear down the furrows speedily, and thick their handfuls fall,
> So at the joining of the hosts ran Slaughter through them all
> (*Ils* 11.63-6, corresponding to *Il.*11.67-71)

According to the epic poet, it is not only in death that warriors and harvesters are alike but also in life. What is conspicuously absent from this analogy is the anxiety about social status and prestige that Calchas voices. While the heroes struggle for distinction, the *Iliad*, to the disappointment of some of its early modern readers (e.g. Scaliger), does not always concern itself with demarcating the ways in which heroes differ from common men and women. Singing and glorifying the deeds of the warriors, the epic nonetheless persists in putting the life on the battlefield into the context of life beyond it. In Shirley's play then, the mode of thinking realised in the Homeric simile's capacity to reach across the social divide confronts the presumptions which underlie the masters and servants' subplot: the simile calls into question the latter form's adherence to the notions of rank or degree.

Attending to the early modern perception of Hades further complicates a straightforwardly tragic interpretation of Calchas' poem. Given the popularity of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* (see Kenward 2018, Temple 2021), it seems right to assume that in early modern England the Greek underworld is not terrifying, but everyday and, occasionally, even funny. In *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses*, the scene of Polybrontes' beating clearly reflects this vision of hell:

> AJA. Art thou not dead?
> POL. Oh yes Sir, I am dead,
> Give my Ghost leave to walk a little.
> . . .
> POL. I were best to make haste, Sir, Charon stays for me,
> And I shall lose my tide.
> AJA. Then vanish.
> POL. Presto. *Exit.*
> (Shirley 1659, 124)

By the time the audience witnesses Ajax's self-demise and hears the oracle's reflection, it will have already laughed at the above exchange. There is little gravity to the prospect of dying; to side with Calchas and bemoan the loss of distinction becomes, if not completely impossible, then at the very least challenging.

Choosing to dramatise the contention, which his Agamemnon

calls "the difference between these great Competitors" (Shirley 1659, 100), Shirley focalises one of the myth's underlying concerns. As an archetypal story of war in the Western literary canon, a war supposedly triggered by the act of juxtaposing the three goddesses and comparing them in terms of beauty, the Trojan myth explores how individuals and groups search for 'difference' via constant acts of comparison. The playwright's profound understanding of just how deep-rooted comparative practices are to the Trojan War becomes much clearer if we approach his plays with the idea of the simile rather than solely that of the double plot of masters and servants. Shirley's plays on the Trojan War alert us to the fact that thinking with and in similes is constitutive to the Trojan myth. Furthermore, the way he uses such comparisons helps expose the social and classist biases that early modern audiences (and, indeed, twenty-first-century ones) might be unconsciously bringing to Homer.

The cases of Peele and Shirley begin to illuminate how the comparison of the "mightiest" and the "meanest" emerges in early modern drama on the Trojan War both in language – in the actual use of similes – and in action – in the correspondence of plots. This, as I hope to demonstrate, is likewise true of Shakespeare's and Settle's treatment of the myth. Heywood's *The Iron Age*, however, a play that was one of Shirley's sources for *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses* and thus very likely affected his portrayal of the commoners, presents a noteworthy exception to this general trend. Here, the parallel is not so much linguistic or structural, but visual. By utilising theatre's main affordance – the fact that the Trojans are literally embodied on stage – Heywood shows the juxtaposition to be integral to the characters' very appearance. This, I think, further testifies to the idea that the comparative thinking encapsulated in the Homeric simile becomes an inalienable part of how the myth of the Trojan War is presented beyond the epic medium.

With the horse brought into the city, Heywood's Greeks, led by Pyrrhus, try to surpass one another in producing gory images of exactly how Troy shall fall and its people suffer. Responding to what Synon has called a "braue show" – boats swimming through rivers of Trojan blood – Menelaus specifies that this blood will flow "From thousand Springs / Of gentle and ignoble, base and Kings" (Heywood 1874, 380-1), darkly foreshadowing what is about to happen not

only to the royal family but also to the common folk. An alarm sounds, and the audience sees what Claire Kenward, describing Heywood's mixing of classical and medieval sources, considers his most compelling addition to the tradition: two common Trojan citizens appear only to perish almost immediately at the hands of the Greeks. For Kenward, the husband and wife serve as an onstage reflection of the audience. They are the "anonymous citizens sacrificed to the pursuit of heroic fame, whose deaths will not be recorded in Pyrrhus' note, the English chronicles, or Homer's epic"; the theatregoers of Troynovant witness and reflect the demise of their classical forebears (Kenward 2017, 96).

While not discarding Kenward's reading which associates the members of the audience with the nameless Trojans, I suggest that the chiasmic switch in Menelaus's prophetic line on "gentle and ignoble" indicates that the play itself draws a direct parallel between the Trojan commoners and Troy's ruling family. The stage directions to the scene with the nameless couple offer the following instructions: "Enter a Troian in his nightgowne all unready" and, a while after, "Enter his wife as from bed" (Heywood 1874, 381). On its own, the description of the citizens' appearance is not surprising – it belongs to the early modern convention of marking night scenes. As Alan C. Dessen writes, with "no way to dim his stage" the early modern playwright had to rely on other recognisable visual or audible cues, such as the actor's words, the use of torches or "appropriate costumes, especially nightgowns" (Dessen 1980, 3). However, at the beginning of Act 2 the same stage direction is applied to a different and very distinguished character: "Enter Priam in his night-gowne and slippers" (Heywood 1874, 385). The king's gown might have been adorned to indicate his high status or the prop from the previous scene might have been used again. Either way, the same type of dress appearing in the two scenes clearly establishes a visual link between the Trojan man and the king. Further, the dialogue between Priam and the women of the royal household is replete with verbal echoes of the scene between the citizen and his wife. In both, an appeal "Oh Heauen" (381, 385) and a pleading question about a place to hide precedes the slaughter; Pyrrhus concludes both episodes by evoking imagery of noise and fire – "flye the word along . . . / fire-brands tosse" (382) and "Then

Trumpets sound / Till burning Troy in Troian blood be drown'd" (394). If the members of the audience recognise themselves in the nameless Trojan citizens, as Kenward argues, the following scene foregrounds that in the end, in the eyes of the Greeks, the difference between low and high birth means nothing. Like Calchas' lament at the end of *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses*, *The Iron Age*'s matching scenes present death as an ultimate equalizer between various social strata.

In a late seventeenth-century dramatization of the Trojan myth – *The Siege of Troy* – this similitude of the "meanest" and the "mightiest" is, finally, realised not in death, but in life. While the nobility's quest for distinction is already problematised in *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses*, it is Settle's Trojan play that, as I will try to demonstrate below, completely does away with differentiating between heroes and commoners. Historically, Settle's work, including his turn-of-the-century Bartholomew Fair hit *The Siege of Troy*, has been largely ignored: the plays were primarily remembered for their playwright's appearance in Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* (1728) where he is portrayed as the newly deceased king in the empire of dullness (see Rogers 1975). Edith Hall, however, has recently encouraged critics "to reject the time-honoured tradition of aesthetically condemning Settle's droll as trivial and ephemeral", arguing that paying attention to the Bartholomew Fair play will benefit the study of classical reception and help bridge the chronological gap between Dryden and Pope (Hall 2018, 459).

Written significantly later than all other plays studied in this article, Settle's comic take on the Trojan War mocks the tradition – which has existed from antiquity but was revitalised in the early modern period – of recalling the heroes for purposes of moral *exempla*. In the droll, the commoners, like Shirley's pages, seem eager to copy the behaviour of those above them, but the paradigms they choose are clearly presented as questionable. So, as the Trojan mob feasts and drinks in the scene that precedes the city's fall, Bristle, the newly elected captain to the mob, openly voices the idea that his fellow countrymen should adhere to the models set by their rulers: "And we his Loyal and Obedient Subjects after his own pious Example, walk uprightly, and live soberly. and are all drunk

for Joy" (Settle 1707, 18). Personally, he explains that he will "keep a Whore like Prince *Paris*" (ibid). To this his wife, sharing a joke with the audience, replies "Thou shalt keep me, my Dear" (ibid). In the beginning of the droll, as the audience knows, she and Bristle fight because he prevents her from "galloping amongst the Mob" to visit the miracle horse (6). When he and most of the citizens depart, the wife, making the acquaintance of another Trojan citizen and encouraging his amorous advances, finds "comfort" elsewhere (7).

Although never articulated by any of the characters, this similitude between Bristle's wife and Helen is evidently implied. The episode culminating with the kiss between the wife and the unnamed Trojan citizen is followed by the appearance of Helen, Paris, and Cassandra. As the prophetess shouts abuse and shames the couple's "vile Adultery" (8), she offers a frame of reference which applies to the previous scene as much as to the current one. Further, while in his moralistic epilogue, warning the female part of the audience against extramarital affairs, Ulysses names only Helen, the speech cannot but evoke the play's other adulteress. Finally, the similarity is reinforced by the fact that the cobbler's wife shares Helen's tragic fate and punishment: Bristle tells the other citizens that his spouse has burned alive during the city's siege, whereas Helen's suicidal leap into the fire is witnessed onstage. Throughout the play then, the wife continuously thwarts her husband's self-fashioning. Although Bristle is included in a love triangle like the one which has brought about the Trojan War, it is not in a role of his choosing; he is not Paris, but Menelaus.

When it comes to the matters of state, Bristle has more success in following royal *exempla*. In the beginning, having referred to himself as "the second Man in the Nation", he compares himself with Priam: "I'd have you to know that I am the Man that put such a stout pair of Soles upon the King's last Neat leather Shoes, that he has kickt the whole *Grecian* Army quite out of the Kingdom, and his Majesty and I are the two great Savers of the Nation" (7). As the droll comes to an end, Bristle's earlier claim suddenly turns prophetic, once again recalling the proleptic nature of some epic similes. Settle's Menelaus, acting, to my knowledge, without any precedent in the myth's long history, decides to pardon the war's survivors. With the royal family killed, he tells the commoners:

"Here I have finished my Revenge. Enjoy Your Lives and Liberties, go and rebuild your Troy" (23). The mob shouts "huzzah" and the war concludes with a song and dance. What seems to enable this new order is Bristle's profession. As Alison A. Chapman convincingly demonstrates working with various texts from the end of the sixteenth and the first part of the seventeenth century, the king and the cobbler were, in fact, linked in early modern England. In the period's cultural imagery, the feet and the head of the body politic were both endowed with a power to affect "calendrical and ritual order" (Chapman 2001, 1467). In other words, when Bristle explains that his labour makes him the king's equal and that he has helped end the war, he might, for the time being, miss the mark as regards the war's conclusion, but is, nonetheless, perfectly right to assert his similitude with Priam. In the end, a new order is, indeed, established: the ruler, Priam, has died, but a new one, Bristle, immediately takes his place. Registering the mechanics of Homeric comparisons, Settle's droll gives them closure; what starts off as a simile – a cobbler is *like* the king – turns into a metaphor, the cobbler *is* the king.

As I have tried to demonstrate, throughout the early modern period, dramatists working with the myth of the Trojan War on the English stage followed Homer in juxtaposing the "meanest" and the "mightiest". The parallels, as we have seen, were realised in multiple ways and for multiple purposes. Akin to the Homeric simile, the comparisons drawn between the newly introduced commoners and the myth's actual heroes could be proleptic, foreshadowing what is about to happen, as was the case with Peele and, to an extent, Heywood. Furthermore, the comparative logic behind the figure of the simile could help scrutinise the social and hierarchical presuppositions of conventional comic subplots, with Heywood, Shirley, and Settle, further using it to interrogate the notions of status and social differentiation. Finally, and most importantly, such cross-class comparisons allowed the playwrights to challenge the ideas and assumptions that have crystallised around the Trojan myth itself: is the heroes' quest for distinction worthy of our praise and imitation?

Comparative Thinking in *Troilus and Cressida*

William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* does not stage such cross-class comparisons of the "mightiest" and the "meanest". The two added low-born characters – Cressida's and Paris' servants – do not come across as even remotely interested in being like their masters; there are neither implicit, nor explicit comparisons between them. Indeed, this unwillingness to "follow" a princely model emerges when Paris' servant deliberately misconstrues Pandarus' question:

> PANDARUS Friend, you! pray you, a word: do not you follow
> the young Lord Paris?
> SERVANT Ay, sir, when he goes before me.
> (Shakespeare 2015, 3.1.1-3)

Likewise, while Shakespeare's Thersites undoubtedly challenges epic paradigms, he does not mirror any of the heroes.[5] It is his metacommentary, his crude and direct remarks, that encourage the audience to question the heroic tradition. Nonetheless, I suggest that *Troilus and Cressida* does attend to epic juxtapositions, further testifying to the period's profound engagement with the myth's underlying comparative practices as well as their particular linguistic manifestation in the simile.

By studying *Troilus and Cressida* in context, that is against the backdrop of other contemporary dramatic treatments of the Trojan War which have been explored above, one gets a better grasp of the exact ways in which Shakespeare went against the flow and conceived new interpretations of this perhaps timeworn myth. In particular, it becomes clear that while Shakespeare was not alone in recognising comparative thinking as a force behind many of the events of the Trojan War, he was unique in questioning what effect this might have on one's psyche. As I will try to show, presenting comparisons as constitutional to both action and thought – they motivate individuals and determine their very identities –

5 In a sense, it is he who gets such a mirror in "the bastard son of Priam", Margarelon or Margareton, whom Shakespeare takes from Lydgate or Caxton.

Shakespeare's take on this myth asks whether an overdependence on comparative thinking, in fact, effaces all meaning and essence.

Richard Levin, one of the most meticulous students of double and triple plots in early modern English drama, classifies *Troilus and Cressida* as a play of "equivalence plots" (1971, 160). The two matching or "equivalent" plots of the play are, of course, that of love and war: in the love plot Troilus and Diomedes fight for Cressida in the same way that in the war plot Hector and Achilles fight for honour and distinction (161). However, more germane to our discussion of the early modern dramatic reception of Homeric similes is the general description Levin gives to such plots: in them he detects a "universal impulse . . . to construct or discover satisfying connections among the disparate aspects of our experience by the sort of analogical reasoning", an impulse which is likewise present in "primitive myth and ritual", "folk and proverbial lore", and "the metaphorical language of everyday life and poetry" (149).

What Levin calls "universal", I would like to redescribe as epic. Put simply, it is hard to imagine an *Iliad* or an *Aeneid* without numerous instances of "analogical reasoning"; the likening of disparate people or phenomena, including, but not limited to, the specific Homeric case of the "mightiest" and the "meanest" on which this article has focused, is widely recognised as an important element of epic expression. While one can, perhaps, suggest that the very plot structure of *Troilus and Cressida* is, in a sense, a simile which likens the quest for love to the quest for honour – something Troilus partially does when he proclaims "As much as I do Cressid love, / So much by weight hate I her Diomed" (5.2.174-5) – it would not advance our understanding of the play or of the period's response to this epic figure.

Rather, what I find significant is the fact that the play openly mocks the simile and, moreover, does this via a tongue-in-cheek reflection of an outsider to the nobility – Cressida's man Alexander:

> This man, lady, hath robbed many beasts of their particular additions; he is as valiant as the lion, churlish as the bear, slow as the elephant . . .
> (1.2.19-21)

Alexander starts his description of Ajax, "the very man per se" (1.2.15), by piling together comparisons between the hero's traits and the conventional characteristics of various animals. The result, reminiscent of the picture with which Horace opens his *Ars Poetica* – "Humano capiti cervicem pictor equinam iungere si velit, et varias inducere plumas undique collatis membris, . . . spectatum admissi risum teniasis, amici?" ("If a painter chose to join a human head to the neck of a horse, and to spread feathers of many a hue over limbs picked up now here now there . . . could you, my friends, if favoured with a private view, refrain from laughing?"; Hor. *Ars.* 1. 1-3, 5) – is deliberately absurd. So, registering our as well as her own amusement, Cressida wonders: "But how should this man, that makes me smile, make Hector angry?" (Shakespeare 2015, 1.2.31-2). At least when amassed, the play seems to suggest, similes do not enhance one's understanding but, by contrast, turn men into comic monsters.

In addition to creating this incoherent image which clearly debases the epic hero, Alexander's overabundant usage of animal analogies brings to the surface the play's awareness of the place comparative thinking occupies in the Trojan story. As scholars have shown in various ways, *Troilus and Cressida* revolves around emulation. For instance, Joel Fineman notes that the term itself not only recurs "some eight times", but, moreover, always appears "as the explanatory center of the play's images of sullied violence" (1980, 94): it is there in Ulysses' diagnostic speech on how Achilles' behaviour is influencing the other Greeks in the camp; in Hector's refusal to meet Ajax in a single-combat; in Diomedes' aggrandising description of his upcoming fight with Aeneas. Perhaps echoing factionalism, an emulative court policy orchestrated by Elizabeth which encouraged rivalry between courtiers to ensure that they did not unite against the monarch (see Mallin 1990), Ulysses' stratagem to pit Ajax and Achilles against each other further reinforces the idea that it is such juxtapositions of supposedly heroic behaviour that make up the Trojan myth.

Emulation is likewise central to the play's second plot: Pandarus repeatedly draws comparisons between the lovers-to-be and the renowned Greeks and Trojans to kindle the former's feelings. For example, speaking of Cressida to Troilus, he remarks that "Because

she [i.e. Cressida]'s kin to me, therefore she's not so fair as Helen: an she were not kin to me, she would be as fair on Friday as Helen is on Sunday" (1.1.71-3), while to his niece Pandarus tells that "Hector is not a better man than Troilus", that "Paris is dirt to him [Troilus]; and, I warrant, Helen, to change, would give an eye to boot" and that he "had rather be such a man as Troilus than Agamemnon and all Greece", (1.2.77, 230-1, 36-7). Comparative thinking, according to Pandarus' logic, incites desire; by learning that Helen would prefer Troilus to Paris, Cressida will become more enamoured with Troilus, similarly, by hearing Cressida valued above Greece's most beautiful woman for whom two countries are now at war, Troilus will fall more for Cressida. And while this does indeed happen, in the light of the description Cressida's servant gives to Ajax, Troilus' own amorous rhetoric of similitude – "As true as steel, as plantage to the moon, / As sun to day, . . . / As true as Troilus" (3.2.172-3, 77) – falls short. Overwhelmed, the listener might be persuaded through amplification but not through a revelation of hidden meaning, of the object's or the idea's – in this case truth's – essence.

Ultimately, Linda Charnes seems right to call the Trojan war an "institutionalised official "difference"", with Helen used by the Greeks and Trojans as a "touchstone against which value is judged", as a means towards self-identification (Charnes 1989, 425). This however, as Charnes further explains, deprives Helen of "any inherent value, of any value that is not itself *produced by the comparison* [emphasis original]" (ibid). Shakespeare's Ulysses, I believe, is covertly making the same point when he retells to Achilles what he has just read the "strange fellow" put forth:

> That man . . .
> Cannot make boast to have that which he hath,
> Nor feels not what he owes, but by reflection;
> As when his virtues shining upon others
> Heat them and they retort that heat again
> To the first giver.
> (Shakespeare 2015, 3.3.97, 99-103)

Value is endowed in a circular manner; one can only know oneself by juxtaposing one's own qualities with others, by becoming one of the two sides of a simile. Ulysses, relying once again on analogies

with the natural world as he has already done in the "degree" speech, drills in the idea that "no man is the lord of any thing" unless he engages in comparative thinking, unless he "like a gate of steel / fronting the sun, receives and renders back / his figure and his heat" (3.3.116, 122-4).

As I have argued throughout the article, early modern playwrights, like Homer before them, exploit parallelism to demystify the lofty and defamiliarise the well-known: they turn to the epic simile as a means of interrogating both the Trojan myth itself and the preconceptions that audiences might bring to it. In the extant corpus, five plays on the Trojan War physically stage, embody, the Homeric simile of "meanest" and the "mightiest". By introducing low-born characters who copy and mirror or, conversely, markedly differ from the myth's canonical high-born ones, Peele, Heywood, Shirley, and Settle, all challenge the very idea of heroic distinction as well as the subconscious desire, expressed by some of their contemporaries, to read the period's own understanding of social differentiation – the notions of rank and degree – into the myth. This, of course, is also true of *Troilus and Cressida*. In addition, Shakespeare also examines the figure of the simile itself, ultimately showing that comparative thinking might not only mask the absence of meaning, but, even more alarmingly, erase the meaning and knowledge of the self that already exist.

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