



FRESNO PACIFIC  
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

---

**Homer's trees in life and death.**

Author(s): Honora Howell Chapman.

Source: *Pacific Journal* 3 (2008): 1-15.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/383>

---

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the Fresno Pacific University community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the Web and assures their preservation for the future.

# *Homer's Trees in Life and Death*<sup>1</sup>

HONORA HOWELL CHAPMAN

## *Introduction*

In spring 2004, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger unveiled the design for the reverse side of California's new quarter, featuring John Muir peering off towards Half Dome in Yosemite Valley, with a California condor soaring in between the two. A single redwood tree stands to the far left, dwarfed by the other three main features. State Librarian Kenneth Starr is reported to have said to the press that "Schwarzenegger, who likes to study art, made several suggestions for the design of the final coin, including making the figure of John Muir larger and adding the California condor."<sup>2</sup> I suspect that if John Muir were alive and had any say in this matter, he would be very pleased to see his beloved Yosemite and the condor celebrated,<sup>3</sup> but he also perhaps would have liked to see himself removed altogether, or at least reduced in size and less dominating. The coin's design, however, amply illustrates that we have a governor who likes the idea that people can be larger-than-life action heroes. In many respects Gov. Schwarzenegger is the proponent of a type of heroism that the ancient Greeks would have immediately recognized from their most treasured and influential texts, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer.<sup>4</sup>

The Greeks learned from Homer that humans, regardless of how heroically they may act, are simply one element of nature. Homer taught them about the natural human condition in both life and death through the use of key simile-types. Humans can behave like animals in war, but in battle they also can tower like the trees—especially at their dying moments. In the *Odyssey*, however, Homer transforms the *Iliad's* simile of the dying warrior as a tree being felled into the tree as a living sign and the embodiment of what matters most in life for humans as we struggle along like Odysseus. When examined through a Homeric lens, the California quarter appears to embrace the Greeks' understanding of our place in nature and desire to immortalize the greatest among us through art.

## *Animals*

We should first look at the endangered condor on the quarter. This condor is a type of New World vulture that feeds only on dead animals.<sup>5</sup> Homer and his Greek audience surely would appreciate this were they here, since the

*Iliad* in its introductory lines invokes the goddess to sing of how “the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus, ...hurled many strong souls of heroes away to Hades, and made them prey for all the dogs and birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished.” (*Il.* 1.1-5)<sup>6</sup> Birds of prey never actually eat a single corpse in the *Iliad*, but eagles, falcons, and vultures do appear in similes to represent powerful warriors—as individuals and in groups—in pursuit of the enemy, whether on the battlefield or inside Odysseus’ own home.<sup>7</sup>

In order to capture the fearsome power of individual warriors, however, Homer most often uses similes involving a lion “as hunter or hunted.”<sup>8</sup> The lion, after all, is ‘king of the jungle,’ just as the Homeric warriors singled out to be compared to a lion are kings, like the Greek Diomedes of Argos, son of Tydeus, furious to kill Trojans (*Il.* 5.135-143), or like the Trojan ally Sarpedon, a king from Lycia (*Il.* 12.299-308).<sup>9</sup> These bloodthirsty lions of war seek living animals for the kill, like the California mountain lion, which very easily could have appeared on the California quarter instead. Our mountain lions, however, are only “special protected mammals,” not endangered, and thus not as much a point of pride in terms of conservation. Truthfully, the most appropriate animal for our California quarter would have been the grizzly bear, our official state animal. John Muir himself edited Joaquin Miller’s extraordinary account of encountering a grizzly while out hunting near the Sacramento River. Quite remarkably, Miller recounts:

More than thirty years ago in company with a cultured young man, Volney Abby by name, I went hunting for bear up Castle Creek, about a mile from the banks of the Sacramento. Pretty little dimples of prairie lay here and there, breaking the sombre monotony of pine and cedar, and, as we leisurely walked on, the waters sang among the mossy boulders in the bed of the creek with a singularly restful melody. **My companion took out his Homer and as we sat on a mossy log he read aloud of the wanderings of Ulysses till twilight made him close the page.** Our path, an old Indian trail, lay close by the singing waters that foamed down their steep way of rocks. To our right and up and away from the stream stretched a little crescent of wild clover. As my companion closed the book I caught sight of a pine tree dripping with rosin. The Indians peel off and eat the inner portion of pine bark at certain seasons of the year, and all through the Sierra you can to this day see evidences of this meagre means of subsistence. An Indian had been resting and feasting in this same sweet little clearing by the singing waters only a year or two before. I struck a match, touched

it to the scarred and dripping white face of the pine—and such a light!

**A grizzly! A grizzly! God help us! He came bounding down upon us like an avalanche, fat, huge, bow-legged, low to the ground, but terrible!** He halted, just a second, to look at the fire perhaps, when my companion, bolder than I and more prompt to act, blazed away. The bear rolled over, being badly hit. But he kept rolling and tumbling straight in our direction, and not a tree or stump or stone at hand; only the old mossy log on which we had been sitting. I wanted to run. “We must fight!” yelled my friend. I jerked up my gun and he got at his knife, as the monster with his big red mouth wide open tumbled over the log full upon us, breaking my gun in two at the breech and taking the most of my companion’s red shirt in his teeth as he passed. But he passed, thank heaven, passed right on. He did not pause one second. He did not even seem to see us. I think the fire may have blinded him and so saved our lives. (emphases mine)<sup>10</sup>

It is no wonder that Miller and his friend had this harrowing adventure while reading Homer—it’s straight out of Homer! Miller is a veritable Nestor with his tales of old and a latter-day Homer in his use of a simile to describe the bear as an avalanche. Stories of hunting expeditions and their lasting consequences figure at key moments in Homer’s epics—for instance, in *Iliad* 9, when Phoenix describes to Achilles the morality tale of Meleager, the hero who had killed the Calydonian boar, in order to lure (unsuccessfully) Achilles back to war, and in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus’s scar from a boar hunt becomes one of the key signs for recognizing him when he has finally come home.<sup>11</sup> The grizzly bear would surely have been a favorite for use in similes had Homer known of these monstrous creatures.

As John Heath has so aptly demonstrated in his scholarship,<sup>12</sup> Homer revels in comparing humans to animals in order to show us for the beasts that we are. Yet the poet also reveals how we rise above this primal state through speech and deeds, the two main attributes of the hero (*Il.* 9.443)—such as by praying to Zeus for the success of a son, as Hektor does in Book 6 of the *Iliad*; by reining in emotions and showing compassion for the father of a dead enemy, as Achilles does in Book 24; by staying alive through wily wit in order to be reunited with family and restore his household as Odysseus does; or even by being the steadfast, terribly clever, perfect-match mate that Penelope is. The Greeks spent many centuries after Homer examining critically what kind of animals we humans really are,<sup>13</sup> and their inspiration for this investigation stemmed at least in part from Homer.

## *Trees*

We can look again at the California quarter and consider the lonely coast redwood<sup>14</sup> over on the side: if it were the oldest one standing today, it would have been a sapling about 2,200 years ago,<sup>15</sup> a good 500 years after Homer first composed his poems, sprouting during the Hellenistic Age, when the poetry of Homer was receiving serious scholarly treatment at Alexandria and was learned and sung by young and old throughout the Greek world—even the Romans had jumped on Homer’s bandwagon by then. But this tree’s progenitors would have been just the sort of tree (had they existed in Europe or Asia) to excite the worship of the people who venerated trees in combination with stones in Mycenaean Greece, or trees with “the Menhir or stone pillar” in the Druidic West, or pillars “beneath holy trees” in modern India.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the redwood and Half Dome on the quarter are simply unconscious manifestations of this ancient piety!<sup>17</sup> In any case, hundreds of years after the Mycenaean civilization had come to an end and when Homer’s poems were being sung and handed down, the Greeks were seeking oracular wisdom from the oak trees of Zeus at Dodona. Sacred groves and individual sacred trees, like the Sacred Fig of Demeter on the Eleusinian Way,<sup>18</sup> defined the landscape. It is not surprising at all, then, to hear in Homer that the oak and the wild fig are the key landmarks outside the gates of Troy.<sup>19</sup> Down in Laconia, according to Athenaeus, they worshipped Dionysos “in the form of a fig-tree” as Dionysos Sykitês.<sup>20</sup> Trees, therefore, (along with rocks) could have numinous qualities for the Greeks, just as they did for other Indo-Europeans, as well as Semitic peoples with their “tree of life”<sup>21</sup> (and sacred stones).

Gods in Homer, however, do not act like trees. Instead, they perch in them, like Athena and Apollo becoming vultures in their father Zeus’s lofty oak peering out over the massed troops of Greeks and Trojans (*Il.* 7.58-60: “and Athena and the lord of the silver bow, Apollo, assuming the likenesses of birds, of vultures, settled aloft the great oak tree of their father, Zeus of the aegis”). Sleep, too, poses as a shrill-sounding bird in the tallest pine tree on Mount Ida in order to help Hera in her seduction plot (*Il.* 14.286-291).

Homer saves the tree similes mostly for his heroes: these men either stand tall in battle, like Lapiths Leonteus and Polypoetes, who are like two oaks in front of the gates of the Greek camp (*Il.* 12.127-136), or they fall like great trees when they are cut down in their prime, like Sarpedon, who has the distinct honor of falling like not one but three different types of trees:

Once again Sarpedon threw wide with a cast of his shining spear, so that the pointed head overshot the left shoulder of Patroklos; and now Patroklos made the second cast with the brazen spear, and the shaft escaping his hand was not flung vainly but struck where the beating heart is closed in the arch of the muscles. He fell, as when an oak goes down, or a white poplar, or like a towering pine tree which in the mountains the carpenters have hewn down with their whetted axes to make a ship-timber. So he lay there felled in front of his horses and chariots roaring, and clawed with his hands at the bloody dust; or as a blazing and haughty bull in a huddle of shambling cattle when a lion has come among the herd and destroys him dies bellowing under the hooked claws of the lion, so now before Patroklos the lord of the shield-armoured Lykians dies raging, and called aloud to his beloved companion (*Il.* 16.477-491)

Sarpedon is no ordinary mortal, but instead is the demi-god son of Zeus, and has died in the manner of not just three trees but also a bull. Zeus had weighed the thought of saving his son from dying, as he had before back in Book 5 (*Il.* 5.662), but Hera now in Book 16 insists that Sarpedon is “mortal, one long since doomed by his destiny” (*Il.* 16.441-442). Back in Book 5, Sarpedon had suffered a near-death experience thanks to Herakles’ son, but as Homer relates, Sarpedon’s companions carried him away from the fighting and “laid godlike Sarpedon under a lovely spreading oak of Zeus of the aegis, and strong Pelagon, one of his beloved companions, pushed perforce through and out of his thigh the shaft of the ash spear” (*Il.* 5.692-695). [This rescue was no thanks to Hektor, however, who sped past Sarpedon while the latter begged him for protection.] Sarpedon’s death in Book 16 foreshadows heavily the death of Hektor in Book 22<sup>24</sup> at the hands of Achilles, and there Zeus again will not save a favored mortal after Athena reminds him that it’s not right to go against fate; both heroes will receive lovely funerals—the only proper ritual to mark the end of any person’s existence, especially the hero’s. As for Patroklos, poetic justice comes when Hektor kills him later in Book 16, and at the end of Book 17, Greek comrades strain to carry back to Achilles the corpse of Patroklos like mules trying to “drag...a beam or some big timber for a ship” (*Il.* 17.743-744). Homer has the dexterity to kill Patroklos like a wild boar (*Il.* 16.823) and to transform him a book later into the fallen tree in death that has been reworked for human purposes (reflect-

ing the way that Achilles had used him). Homer's audience, in fact, would feel right at home in California's Sequoia National Forest, with some of the great trees named after famous warrior-leaders, like General Grant.<sup>25</sup>

What Homer observes so poignantly about humans is that they, unlike the gods, *must* die—even the demi-gods such as Sarpedon and Achilles. This is our tragic, unavoidable fate. There is no escape from this fact, run as we might like Hektor being chased by Achilles before the walls of Troy, but Homer grants his heroes the dignity and the wisdom to understand and to articulate this reality in a variety of ways to suit the poetic moment. Sarpedon's great friend Glaukos is given the finest expression of this in Book 6: here the raging Greek warrior Diomedes is trying to figure out who Glaukos is—god or human—so that he can determine whether to fight him. Glaukos “the shining son of Hippolochos” replies:

“High-hearted son of Tydeus, why ask of my generation?  
As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity.  
The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber  
burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning.  
So one generation of men will grow while another  
dies. Yet if you wish to learn all this and be certain  
of my genealogy: there are plenty of men who know it.” (*Il.* 6.145-151)

This peaceful, cyclical view of life as embodied in the tree offers the consolation of a type of immortality through one's children, the new leaves that come out in the spring.<sup>26</sup> It is no wonder that Augustine, over a thousand years after Homer sang, chose to respond to this very powerful Homeric image at the opening of Book 22 of *De civitate dei*, his epic-length theological response to the sack of Rome in 410:

As I promised in the last book, this final book of the whole work will contain a discussion of the eternal bliss of the City of God. This City is not called ‘eternal’ in the sense that it continues its life throughout many ages, and yet is to come to an end at last, but in the sense of the scriptural saying, that ‘his kingdom will have no end.’ Nor will this City present a mere semblance of perpetuity by generations arising to successive generations as they die; as happens in a tree clothed with perennial foliage, where the same greenness seems to persist, the appearance of thick growth being preserved as leaves decay and fall to be replaced by new. But in this City

all the citizens will be immortal, for human beings will also obtain that which the angels have never lost. (22.1)

By contrast, Homer's afterlife as depicted in the *Odyssey* offers little of Augustine's eternal bliss where we are all 30 years old forever,<sup>27</sup> except perhaps on the Isles of the Blest; even great Achilles himself tells Odysseus in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*:

O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying.  
I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another  
man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,  
than be king over all the perished dead. (*Od.* 11.488-491)

Achilles follows this up by asking about the fates of his son and father, who are still on the earth.

Achilles, however, need not worry in the underworld about his mother—unlike Odysseus who has just seen his own dead mother—since Achilles' mother is the sea goddess Thetis, daughter of the Old Man of the Sea. It is she, instead, who worries over him from Book 1 of the *Iliad* onward, acting as the catalyst for the Zeus-granted Trojan success that will kill Achilles' own best friend, Patroklos, all because her son, having suffered disrespect at the hands of Agamemnon, is angry and seeks revenge. When the Greek embassy attempts to entice Achilles back into battle with all the material possessions and signs of honor a man in this Homeric world could hope for, Achilles forcefully rejects the offer and instead places a higher value on his own life, as he tells his fellow Greeks of his choice of fates:

For my mother Thetis the goddess of the silver feet tells me  
I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death. Either,  
if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,  
my return home is gone, but my glory shall be everlasting;  
but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,  
the excellence of my glory is gone, but there will be a long life  
left for me, and my end in death will not come to me quickly. (*Il.* 9.410-416)

Achilles, however, will stay at Troy, reentering battle in order to get revenge for the death of Patroklos.

His mother Thetis twice in identical passages uses tree imagery to bemoan her son's misery and fated death in Book 18 before she procures him new armor for battle.<sup>28</sup> Her simile fits the pattern we have observed of warriors as trees, but with the added maternal poignancy of viewing him as a sapling before full growth: <sup>29</sup>

Ah me, my sorrow, the bitterness in this nest of child-bearing,  
since I gave birth to a son who was without fault and powerful,  
conspicuous among heroes; and he shot up like a young tree,  
and I nurtured him, like a tree grown in the pride of the orchard.  
I sent him away with the curved ships into the land of Ilion  
to fight with the Trojans; but I shall never again receive him  
won home again to his country and into the house of Peleus.  
Yet while I see him live and he looks on the sunlight, he has  
sorrows, and though I go to him I can do nothing to help him.  
(*Il.* 18.54-62, identical again at 437-443)

By employing this tree image for her sisters, the Nereids, to picture in their minds, and then cradling Achilles' head in her arms after she reaches her grieving son, Thetis is both figuratively and ritually placing her son already at death's door, thus taking on her role as *mater dolorosa* well before his actual death.<sup>30</sup> Like another sorrowful mother, the goddess Demeter, in the later *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*,<sup>31</sup> Thetis will eventually don a dark-blue veil, which Homer emphasizes as the darkest garment to exist (*Il.* 24.93-94), when she travels to Olympos to hear Zeus' command concerning the return of Hektor's body in Book 24. Achilles, however, here in Book 18 is not an oak, poplar, pine, or ash, like the other men who fell in battle [or the actual trees that provided his father's magnificent spear,<sup>32</sup> or the ship he went to Troy on, or the scepter passed from king to king in assembly, or the wood burning in the pyres for Patroklos and Hektor], but instead a tree growing in an orchard, thus fruit-bearing, which only heightens the senselessness of his life being snuffed out so young.<sup>33</sup>

When Achilles then bemoans his own lot in life, but holds out the idea of returning home after killing Hektor, his mother abruptly predicts his death, as Mark Edwards has observed, "in a prophecy probably invented for this occasion":<sup>34</sup>

Then I must lose you soon, my child, by what you are saying,  
 since it is decreed your death must come soon after Hektor's.  
 (*Il.* 18. 95-6)

Achilles despairingly wishes he were dead, but then later in the same speech insists he will meet his fate whenever Zeus and the other deathless gods wish (*Il.* 18.116). In a beautiful scene in Book 24, Achilles will philosophize to King Priam about how Zeus apportions good and bad for mortals from his two large urns, but Achilles will curiously ignore his mother's own sorrow when he declares:

Such is the way the gods spun life for unfortunate mortals,  
 that we live in unhappiness, but the gods themselves have no sorrows.  
 (*Il.* 24.525-526)

This certainly strikes an odd chord, considering the sorrow Thetis has expressed repeatedly over having to marry a mortal, thereby bearing a mortal child doomed to die. How quick to forget his mother, who has done everything in her power for him!<sup>35</sup> But the remarkable scene is understandably focused on fathers and sons,<sup>36</sup> since these two enemies are brokering the exchange of the son Hektor's body for the father Priam's ransom.

In the *Iliad* the imagery of trees marks a warrior at the time of death, but in the *Odyssey* Homer uses the same simile to confound death and then goes one step further by having actual trees embody and symbolize the *living* generations of the family of Odysseus. After Odysseus returns to Ithaka, the simile familiar from Thetis' speeches in *Iliad* 18 appears when Eumaios explains the threat of death for Odysseus' son Telemachos:

But now I grieve unforgettingly for Telemachos, the son  
 born to Odysseus. The gods made him grow like a young tree,  
 and I thought he would be among the men not one inferior  
 to his dear father, admirable for build and beauty;  
 but some immortal upset the balanced mind within him,  
 or else it was some man. He went after news of his father  
 to Pylos the sacrosanct, and the haughty suitors are lying  
 in wait for him as he comes home, to make Arkeisios'  
 stock and seed perish all away and be nameless in Ithaka.  
 (*Od.* 14.174-182)

Eumaios' grief, unlike Thetis', however, will be turned to joy when this ambush is unfulfilled, and Telemachos the young tree grown to manhood will live, surviving the battle with the suitors. The only other young person compared to a tree in the *Odyssey* is the princess of Scheria, Nausikaa, whom Odysseus envisions as a "such a slip of a beauty taking her place in the chorus of dancers" (*Od.* 6.157) and then compares to the "stalk of a young palm shooting up" (*Od.* 6.163).<sup>37</sup> This makes sense, since palm trees not only have royal associations in lands other than Greece where they grow<sup>38</sup> but also bear dates as fruit, and Nausikaa is destined for a fine marriage, as Odysseus later says.

Trees in the *Odyssey* become the living, actual signs of prosperity, good marriage, and the lasting relationship between fathers and sons. When Odysseus reaches the palace of Nausikaa's father, Alkinoös, he sees a marvelous, flourishing orchard, with pears, pomegranates, apples, figs, olives, and grapes, and magically "never is the fruit spoiled on these, never does it give out" (*Od.* 7.117). Such are the estates of kings in both epics: thriving and filled with life, just as depicted on the shield of Achilles (*Il.* 18.541-572). Unlike on the shield, however, the island of Scheria suffers neither slaughter nor grief; its people only hear of it and sympathize. With their help, Odysseus reaches home, and after reuniting with his son and cleaning house of the suitors and their accomplices, he must now win back his wife, circumspect Penelope. She being her husband's match, however, tests him by asking her nurse to bring out their handcrafted marriage bed as a guest bed for Odysseus. Odysseus angrily replies that the bed could hardly be moved, except by a god, since it was constructed out of a living olive tree, and ends by wondering "whether my bed is still in place, or if some man has cut underneath the stump of the olive and moved it elsewhere" (*Od.* 23. 203-204).<sup>39</sup> Penelope finally gives in, and the living olive tree, having served its purpose as a sign for the test, then hosts the couple's conjugal bliss.

Trees again will be the final proof for a family reunion, this time with Odysseus' father, Laertes, after Odysseus finds him in his "well-worked orchard" (*Od.* 24.226). His scar from a boar hunt not being enough visible proof, Odysseus adds further living proof by reminiscing about a gift from his father:

Of come then, let me tell you of the trees in the well-worked orchard, which you gave me once. I asked you of each one, when I was a child, following you through the garden. We went among the trees, and you named them all and told me what each one was, and you gave me thir teen pear trees, and ten apple trees, and forty fig trees; and also you named the fifty vines you would give. Each of them bore regularly, for there were grapes at every stage upon them, whenever the seasons of Zeus came down from the sky upon them, to make them heavy. (*Od.* 24.336-344)<sup>40</sup>

Laertes immediately recognizes the signs, and father and son embrace, just as had husband and wife. Odysseus uses the very sign—the trees—that meant the most to his father; after all, Odysseus' dead mother had explained to him at the underworld that Laertes had been using the leaves fallen from these trees as his bed during warm weather—and presumably as a comforting reminder of Odysseus—so stricken with longing for his son's return. (*Od.* 11.194-195) The *Odyssey's* trees sustain and renew relationships through the generations, recalling the beauty of Glaukos' words in *Iliad* Book 6.

### **Conclusion**

We should look finally at the following description of the sequoia tree from John Muir's, *The Mountains of California*:

Between the heavy pine and Silver Fir belts we find the Big Tree, the king of all the conifers in the world, "the noblest of a noble race."...But the finest block of Big Tree forest in the entire belt is on the north fork of the Tule River. In the northern groves there are comparatively few young trees or saplings. But here for every old, storm-stricken giant there are many in all the glory of prime vigor, and for each of these a crowd of eager young trees and saplings growing heartily on moraines, rocky ledges, along watercourses, and in the moist alluvium of meadows, seemingly in hot pursuit of eternal life.<sup>41</sup>

Homer would have understood Muir's lovely description of the young trees' yearning—they both observed nature so keenly.<sup>42</sup> By placing humans within nature so constantly through similes, Homer's poetry has educated millennia

of listeners and readers about what it truly means to be human.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps we can all agree now that the images on the California quarter have far more cultural meaning than any student will ever imagine as she pops five of them into a machine for a 20 oz. Pepsi before heading off to class. And let's hope that we can internalize the Homeric wisdom of recognizing our intrinsic place within the larger natural world, finding a way to control our violent, animalistic impulses while nurturing all the "trees" in our lives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to the memory of my great-aunt, Josephine McNerny Smith (1887-1988), who lived in Yosemite with her husband, Dr. Jack Smith, after they were married in 1911; she met John Muir, who admired her garden in Merced, and shared her love of Yosemite with generations of family members. I composed a version of this paper for the Living Well conference, California State University, Fresno, April, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> L. Gledhill, "California coins conservation for new U.S. quarter," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 31, 2004, B3, and photo of the governor with coin by R. Pedroncelli, Associated Press.

<sup>3</sup> J. Muir, *Picturesque California*, 1888-1890, chapter 4, "Yosemite Valley," [at [http://www.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/writings/](http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/)], on the condor when first seen in spring: "In May, when the travel to Yosemite begins, the snow is still deep in the upper forest through which the roads pass, but the foothill region is already dry and forbidding....The noisy magpies, jays, and ravens gather beneath the best shade trees on the ground, with wings drooped and bills wide open, scarce a sound coming from any one of them during the midday hours. These curious groups, friends in distress, are frequently joined by **the large buzzard, or California condor** as it is sometimes called, while the quail also seeks the shade about the tepid alkaline water-holes in the channels of the larger streams, now nearly dry." (emphasis mine)

<sup>4</sup> He may have played Conan the Barbarian and the Terminator, but Gov. Schwarzenegger does display a kinder, gentler side in his views on what the California quarter embodies: "John Muir, for instance, has been a model for generations of Californians and conservationists around the world....Also on the coin is the California Condor, which once almost was extinct and now it's protected and has had an amazing comeback....I am proud that these three images will show California's wildlife, our majestic landscape, and our commitment to preserving our golden state for future generations" [with a photo of the governor with the new coin design at [http://www.governor.ca.gov/state/govsite/gov\\_htmldisplay.jsp?sCatTitle=Press+Release&sFilePath=/govsite/links/QuarterRemarksExcerpts.html](http://www.governor.ca.gov/state/govsite/gov_htmldisplay.jsp?sCatTitle=Press+Release&sFilePath=/govsite/links/QuarterRemarksExcerpts.html)].

<sup>5</sup> According to the Arizona Bureau of Land Management [at <http://www.blm.gov/az/asfo/wildlife/Condor.htm>], "They belong to the New World Vulture Family (Cathartidae), a family of scavengers whose members feed only on dead animals (carrion). Scientists know them by their Latin name: *Gymnogyps californianus*. They are among the largest living birds capable of flight in the world."

<sup>6</sup> Translations of Homer in this paper are either directly from R. Lattimore or slightly altered, as here.

<sup>7</sup> W. C. Scott, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974, 78), observes: "Odysseus and his men attack the suitors like vultures (Od. 22.302)." Also, see C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), 135-139 on bird imagery in the *Odyssey*.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Odysseus is also a lion when returning home: Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems*, 139-141.

<sup>10</sup> J. Miller, "Game Regions of the Upper Sacramento," from *Picturesque California*, ed. by J. Muir, 1888-1890, [at <http://www.siskiyous.edu/shasta/lit/mil/jmill8.htm>].

<sup>11</sup> Humans can also be pictured in Homeric similes as victims of the hunt, as when Achilles mourns Patroklos "like some well-bearded lion" whose cubs have been taken by a hunter out of the dense woods (Il. 18.318-322); see C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems*, 105-106, on this passage and in contrast to a similar simile at involving Ajax at Il. 17.132-135.

<sup>12</sup> J. Heath, *The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2005. Also see J. Heath, "Disentangling the beast: humans and other animals in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*," JHS 119 (1999) 17-47, and J. Heath, "The Omen of the Eagles and Hare (*Agamemnon* 104-59): from Aulis to Argos and Back Again," *CQ* 51.1 (2001) 18-22.

<sup>13</sup> For a fascinating anthropological view of humans as animals, see R. Wrangham and D. Peterson, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (New York: Houghton Mifflin), 1996.

<sup>14</sup> J. Muir, *Picturesque California*, chap. 4, "Yosemite Valley," on the trees: "Fifteen to twenty miles farther on, at the height of from 2,000 to 3,000 feet above the sea, you reach the lower edge of the main forest belt, composed of the gigantic sugar-pine, yellow pine, incense-cedar, Douglas spruce, silver-fir, and sequoia. However dense and sombre the woods may appear in general views, neither on the rocky heights or down in leafiest hollows will you see any crowded growth to remind you of the dark malarial selvas of the Amazon and Orinoco with their boundless contiguity of shade, nor of the monotonous uniformity of the Deodar forests of the Himalaya, or of the pine woods of the Atlantic States. These giant conifers wave in the open sunshine, rising above one another on the mountain benches in most imposing array, each species giving forth the utmost expression of its own peculiar beauty and grandeur with inexhaustible variety and harmony. All the different species stand more or less apart in groves or small irregular groups, through which the roads meander, making delightful ways along sunny colonnades and across openings that have a smooth surface strewn with brown needles and cones. Now you cross a wild garden, now a ferny, willow stream, and ever and anon you emerge from all the groves and gardens upon some granite pavement or high bare ridge commanding glorious views above the waving sea of evergreens far and near."

<sup>15</sup> R. Lanner, *Conifers of California* (Los Olivos: Cachuma Press, 1999), 242, on the redwood: "A maximum age of about 2,200 years has been recorded, though such old trees are very rare."

A. Evans, "Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and Its Mediterranean Relations," JHS 21 (1901), 99-204, here p. 106. He comments on tree and rock worship in Greece in comparison to other ancient cultures. The classic treatment is J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, 1890 (1981 ed. by Avenal Books), chap. 1, "The King of the Wood," pp. 1-108. On the death of the god Attis being marked by in a ceremony of cutting down a pine tree and bringing it to the "sanctuary of Cybele, where it was treated as a divinity" on the day of the spring equinox, see pp. 296-301, quote from p. 297.

<sup>17</sup> J. Muir, *Picturesque California*, chap. 4, "Yosemite Valley," on sequoias as gods: "There is something wonderfully telling and impressive about sequoia, even when beheld at a distance of several miles. Its dense foliage and smoothly rounded outlines enable us to recognize it in any company, and **when one of the oldest patriarchs attains full stature on some commanding ridge it seems the very god of the woods.** Full-grown specimens are about fifteen and twenty feet in diameter, measured above the swelling base, and about two hundred and fifty feet high. Trees twenty-five feet in diameter are not rare, and one is now and then found thirty feet in diameter,

but very rarely any larger. The grandest specimen that I have measured is a stump about ninety feet high, which is thirty-five feet, eight inches in diameter, measured inside the bark, above the bulging base. The wood is dull purplish red in color, easily worked, and very enduring; lasting, even when exposed to the weather, for hundreds of years. Fortunate old trees that have passed their three thousandth birthday, without injury from lightning, present a mound-like summit of warm, yellow-green foliage, and their colossal shafts are of a beautiful brown color, exquisitely tapered, and branchless to a height of a hundred and fifty feet. Younger trees have darker, bluish foliage, and shoot up with tops comparatively sharp.” (emphasis mine)

<sup>18</sup> See Evans, “Mycenaean Tree,” 104. Also, classicist Jacques Bromberg has reminded me (in personal email, 4/9/2004), “there was a sacred poplar tree which defined the seats at the earliest theater of Dionysus in Athens—and in fact, there’s an old Athenian proverb ‘view from the poplar’ (in Suda and Hesychius) referring to the nosebleed seats at any spectacle”; U.C. Berkeley’s Tighwad Hill is a cultural descendant.

<sup>19</sup> Homer, *Il.* 6.237: “Now as Hektor had come to the Skaian gates and the oak tree,” and at *Il.* 6.433-434 Andromache pleads: “But draw your people up by the fig tree, there where the city is most open to attack, and where the wall may be mounted.” Achilles will mention the oak at *Il.* 9.352: “And yet when I was fighting among the Achaians Hektor would not drive his attack beyond the wall’s shelter but would come forth only so far as the Skaian gates and the oak tree.” Hektor will pass the fig tree when he runs for his life at *Il.* 22.145: “They raced along by the watching point and the windy fig tree.”

<sup>20</sup> Evans, p. 104, and n. 3 on Athenaeus 3.14. There also was at least one sacred fig tree in the Roman Forum, as depicted on both panels of the Plutei Traiani; see D. Dudley, *Urbs Roma* (Phaidon Press, 1967), plates 23-25.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, S. Parpola, “The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52.3 (July, 1993), 161-208, and B. Porter, “Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II,” *JENS* 52.2 (April, 1993), 129-139.

<sup>22</sup> Greek heroes and their men, however, can also be found destroying the opposing Trojan army, which is described in a group as trees; see, for example, Agamemnon and the Argives, *Il.* 11.155: “as when obliterating fire comes down on the timbered forest,” and for Ajax as a swollen river taking out many dry oaks and pine trees, see *Il.* 11.489-495. The army as a whole, and not just individual heroes, may be viewed as trees, then; V. Hanson has remarked in “The Classical Greek Warrior and the Egalitarian Military Ethos,” *The Ancient World* 31.2 (2000), 111-126, here p. 122: “Yet in the shadows of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, we can detect the presence of the *plêthus*, the mass who fight in shock collisions, but who are otherwise of little interest to the poet.”

<sup>23</sup> Scott, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile*, 70-71, for other examples.

<sup>24</sup> At *Il.* 14.409-432, Hektor falls like an oak after Telamonian Ajax hits him with a rock (14.414-415: “as a great oak goes down root-torn under Zeus father’s stroke”), but he lives after comrades save him and does not fall like a tree when Achilles lays him low in Book 22.

<sup>25</sup> This particular sequoia is our national Christmas tree, perhaps an echo of ancient tree worship in civic guise.

<sup>26</sup> Apollo at *Il.* 21.462-465 says to Poseidon: “‘Shaker of the earth, you would have me be as one without prudence if I am to fight even you for the sake of insignificant mortals, who are as leaves are, and now flourish and grow warm with life, and feed on what the ground gives, but then again fade away and are dead.’” A rather pessimistic vision of man’s life in comparison to the life cycle of a tree appears the Hebrew book of *Job*, chapter 14, in which the protagonist laments that “there is always hope for a tree: when felled, it can start its life again; its shoots continue to sprout” (14:7), whereas man “dies, and lifeless he remains; man breathes his last, and then where is he?” (14:10). In *Job* 29:18-20 he compares himself in his former grandeur to a palm tree.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *De civitate dei* 22.15: "They will be of the same age, the same prime of life, which Christ, as we know, had reached. For the most learned authorities of this world definite the age of human maturity as being about thirty years; they say after that period of life a man begins to go downhill towards middle age and senility." His argument stems from his interpretation of *Ephesians* 4:13.

<sup>28</sup> Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems*, 106, n. 48, strangely chooses not to analyze this imagery but does point the reader to compare the use of the word *ernos*, young shoot, at *Od.* 6.163 and 14.175.

<sup>29</sup> Sapling imagery is anticipated in 17.53 with Euphorbus, as Scott, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile*, remarks on p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> M. Edwards, *Homer, Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987, 271), reports Beye's "*mater dolorosa*" and remarks on the ritual, but does not discuss the tree imagery.

<sup>31</sup> L. Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis* (Berkeley: U.C. Press), 1991, 85-105.

<sup>32</sup> On this spear as a gift, see J. Heath, "The Legacy of Peleus: Death and Divine Gifts in the *Iliad*" *Hermes* 120 (1992), 387-400.

<sup>33</sup> In Book 17, Euphorbus, too, would have provided produce as an olive.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *Homer, Poet of the Iliad*, 272.

<sup>35</sup> There is no comment on this point in either Edwards, *Homer, Poet of the Iliad*, or C. W. Macleod, *Homer, Iliad Book XXIV* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1982.

<sup>36</sup> Achilles' instructional story of Niobe does, however, bring in the mother theme tangentially.

<sup>37</sup> Scott, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile*, provides these references on p. 71 and in n. 12, but remarks: "The closest parallel context is the warrior who dies young, but it must be admitted that this comparison does not seem to fit the contextual categories cited for the tree similes." Scott, therefore, does not see Homer's flexibility in transforming this image for a new epic.

<sup>38</sup> Porter, "Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II."

<sup>39</sup> The phallic imagery was not lost on Homer's audience.

<sup>40</sup> J. Henderson, "The Name of the Tree: Recounting *Odyssey* XXIV 340-2," *JHS* 117 (1997), 87-116, comments on these trees in a very playful but at times almost unintelligible way.

<sup>41</sup> J. Muir, *The Mountains of California*, with introduction by E. Hoagland (New York: Penguin, 1985) (originally published in 1894), 128-129.

<sup>42</sup> Hoagland remarks in his introduction to the Penguin Nature Classics series in which this Muir volume is found, "In this series we are presenting some nature writers of the past century or so, though leaving out great novelists like Turgenev, Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner, who were masters of natural description, and poets, beginning with *Homer (who was perhaps the first nature writer, once his words had been transcribed)*." (emphasis mine)

<sup>43</sup> B. Thornton, *Greek Ways: How the Greeks Created Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), p., 189, observes: "Most of Greek intellectual life, including politics, was carried on verbally in the open, sunlit spaces of the city: in the market, the amphitheater, the porticoes, the gymnasias, and the Pnyx, the hill where the assembly met." Thornton remarks that Socrates, though a student of Homer if there ever was one, "preferred speech to the beauties of nature that many of us moderns consider a source of enlightenment," and then cites *Phaedrus* 230d: "I am a lover of knowledge, and the men who dwell in cities are my teachers, and not the trees or the country." This antithesis with respect to education continues to plague us even today, though organizations such as Outward Bound and schools that promote an awareness of and respect for nature through growing vegetable gardens on campus and taking outdoor field trips attempt to bridge this divide.