

INTRODUCTION

Metaphors and similes can be powerful rhetorical devices. What are they? “A metaphor compares two unlike objects or ideas and illuminates the similarities between them. It accomplishes in a word or phrase what could otherwise be expressed only in many words.”¹ As long ago as ancient Greece, the value of metaphors was apparent. Aristotle wrote that “The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned from others; it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an eye for resemblance.”² Likewise, similes also compare two unlike objects or ideas. But similes explicitly make the connection by using the words ‘*as*,’ ‘*like*,’ or ‘*as if*.’³

We all use metaphors and similes in our daily language although most of us are unaware of it. “To be the apple of someone’s eye,” “to sit in the catbird seat,” and “to have butterflies in one’s stomach” are commonly used. Similes would include “to be as eager as a beaver,” “to be happy as a clam,” or “to be fresh as a daisy.” The genius of writers is to have the ability to use new and old metaphors and similes creatively and cleverly.

During the debate over ratifying the Constitution both Federalists and Antifederalists repeatedly used metaphors and similes in their letters, essays, and speeches. Hyperbole was common. Elderly Connecticut Federalist Roger Sherman condemned Antifederalists for “all that sublimity of *nonsense* and *alarm*, that has been thundered against [the Constitution] in every shape of *metaphoric terror*.”⁴ In neighboring Rhode Island, a Federalist felt confident that his “countrymen have too much firmness

1. Elyse Sommer with Dorrie Weiss, *Metaphors Dictionary* (Detroit, Mich.: Visible Ink Press, 1996), vii.

2. Aristotle, *De Poetica*, 322 B.C., quoted in *ibid.*, vii.

3. Sommer, ix.

4. “A Countryman” II, *New Haven Gazette*, 22 November 1787.

to be frightened with bugbears, and more good sense than to be dazzled and captivated by a parade of diction, and the pomposity of metaphoric architecture.”⁵

Antifederalists also advised readers to be wary of “the imagery of language, in the glowing colours of eloquence” that lead the “affrighted mind . . . to clasp the new constitution as the instrument of deliverance,”⁶ while an anonymous Philadelphia writer warned his friends

to examine this Magna Charta with their own eyes, and not trust too much to the flow of rhetoric that may be expected.—Oratory can do wonderful things—one of the Athenian sages is reported to have made so moving a speech upon the miseries of human life, that more than half his audience rose from their benches, and went home with a determined resolution to hang themselves before night.⁷

“A Friend to Common Sense,” an Antifederalist essayist in the highly partisan *New York Journal* denounced a Federalist essayist saying that “A monkey has more unexceptionable claims to reason, than the ‘Examiner’ to eloquence or satire.”⁸ Mud was even more widely slung when an Antifederalist compared Federalist poets to a Yahoo in *Gulliver’s Travels*, “whose delight was, after hiding himself among the branches of a tree, to surprise the unwary passenger with a discharge of his excrements.”⁹ Federalist Mathias Bartgis, a German-American printer of six newspapers in western Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, was called “a muddle-headed, puddle-headed booby”¹⁰; while Francis Bailey’s Philadelphia Antifederalist *Freeman’s Journal* was commonly referred to as “Bailey’s Chamber pot.”¹¹ “Cinna,” a critic of the New York ratifying convention’s debates disappointedly reported that the lengthy printed

5. *Newport Herald*, 20 November 1788, RCS R.I., 434.

6. “Centinel” XI, *Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer*, 16 January 1788.

7. *Freeman’s Journal*, 17 October 1787, CC 1, 386. This item was reprinted in seven newspapers: one in New York and three each in Pennsylvania and Maryland.

8. 19 December 1787.

9. *Albany Gazette*, 20 December 1787.

10. *Maryland Journal*, 22 July 1788.

11. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 4 December 1782.

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volume contained but two new metaphors—a clear indication that the speakers did not devote sufficient time and effort to their speeches.