

Walls, *Menis*, and Time in *Iliad* Book 12

Book 12 of the *Iliad*, the so-called *teichomachia*, opens with a perplexing image: the narrator introduces the fighting at the Achaean wall not by describing the wall, but by narrating its future destruction by Apollo and Poseidon, who feared that the wall's *kleos* would eclipse his own *kleos* (7.451-3, 458). This attribution of *kleos* to the Achaean wall has caused many scholars to comment on the connection between the wall and the *kleos* of poetry. The narrator indeed invites this comparison by emphasizing the coterminous existence of the wall and the *menis* of Achilles, the focus of our *Iliad* (ὄφρα μὲν Ἐκτωρ ζωὸς ἔην καὶ μῆνι Ἀχιλλεὺς καὶ Πριάμοιο ἄνακτος ἀπόρθητος πόλις ἔπλεν, τόφρα δὲ καὶ μέγα τείχος Ἀχαιῶν ἔμπεδον ἦεν 12.10-12). Ford (1992) interprets the passage as an admission of the Homeric narrator's doubt about the possibility of literary immortality. Clay (2007) sees a demonstration of 'what the poet builds, he can destroy,' since the 'wall of words' exists only in his poetry. Boyd (1995) understands the wall as representing the individuality of the *Iliad* poet, who distinguishes himself against a Trojan tradition that contains no wall. These investigations, however, examine the signification of the wall apart from its placement in book 12.

This paper seeks to understand the function of the wall episode in the text as a whole. Specifically, I focus on the word *menis* and how the poet fits the episode into the *menis* discourse. *Menis* is only used 4 times in the voice of the poet at significant points in the narrative, at the beginning (1.1), when Achilles withdraws (1.488), in the digression on the wall (12.10), and when Achilles ceases from anger (19.76). The singer's use of *menis* is therefore a marked term and draws attention to the context of its appearance. By situating this recapitulation of the *Iliad*'s theme amid an authorial jump from the narrative present to the future, in which the singer steps out of narrative time and displays his inspired knowledge of future events, the singer focuses attention on the performative present and his activity as poet, singing the wrath of Achilles. I suggest that this strategy of manipulation of time is also at work in the problematic first-person statement at 12.175f (ἀργαλέον δέ με ταῦτα θεὸν ὡς πάντ' ἀγορεύσαι) which likewise serves to pull the reader out of the moment and to focus on the larger narrative. The metaperformative statements focus the audience on the significance of the wall: there would be no fight at the wall if Achilles were present and without *menis*. In this sense, the wall acts as substitute for Achilles and exists because of his anger. It materializes Achilles' absence. The *teichomachia* is no mere battle scene, but a pivotal moment in the Achilles story arc: the Greeks are on the verge of defeat, and the reversal of fortune makes way for Patroclus' and Achilles' return to battle.

The wall is not simply an object used to focus the audience on the narrative arc as I have suggested, but it also acts as a means of focusing on poetic *kleos*. Karen Bassi (2005) notes that in Greek narrative, objects such as walls "constitute a category for conceptualizing the meaningfulness of time" and that objects are metonymic for events. If the existence of the wall is coterminous with Achilles' *menis* and the *Iliad*'s action, its destruction means that the Greeks have won, the Trojan war is over, and Achilles has achieved *kleos*. The wall's destruction is metonymic for the events that have won Achilles *kleos* and by extension, the *Iliad* itself. In this way the narrative of the wall's destruction is placed directly against and enables the continuance of poetic *kleos* through time as well as encapsulates the success of the poet's undertaking.

Bibliography:

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