

Structure and Theme in Poseidon's Intervention in the Iliadic Battle Narrative

Amid the long, complex third day of fighting in the *Iliad* (Books 11–18), Poseidon's extended intervention (*Il.* 13.1–15.219) represents a thematically coherent whole integrated into the larger narrative structure. Poseidon enters and exits battle at well-defined points: after Hector, said to be invincible barring divine intervention, has broken through the Greeks' wall (12.465–66); and after the Trojans have been forced back beyond the wall (15.1–3). Thus Poseidon's intervention against Zeus' will retards the plot by delaying the Trojan attack on the Greeks' ships, yet it also leads to and will be countered by Apollo's intervention at Zeus' command (Books 15–17), which resumes the attack. For instance, when Poseidon finally tilts battle toward the Greeks, the poet catalogues their victories over eight named Trojans (14.508–22); but this will be counterbalanced by another catalogue of victories over eight named Greeks when Apollo shakes the aegis against them (15.318–42). Much as Poseidon defends the Greeks' ships and stuns Alcahous, Apollo will defend Troy's walls (16.698–709) and disable Patroclus (16.788–805).

Poseidon's actions at the beginning of his intervention reflect well-known aspects of his divinity: he makes wooded mountains tremble (*Il.* 13.18); he yokes, unyokes, and fetters horses (13.23, 34–37); he is recognized as master by the sea and its creatures (13.27–29); and he acts to save the ships (e.g., 12.470–71 with 13.1–16, 15.44). These very attributes are emphasized by the god's brief Homeric Hymn: mover of earth and sea, the earth-shaker was allotted twofold honor as tamer of horses and savior of ships (*hom.h.* 22.2, 5). These characteristics, which are reinforced by etymologizing interpretations of Poseidon's name, also surface in later incidents on the battlefield, particularly his "taming/overmastering" of Hippodameia's husband Alcahous

(13.434–44), and his protection of Antilochus from Adamas (13.554–65). The ancients found Poseidon’s name obscure, as shown by three rather different etymologies tentatively proposed in Plato’s *Cratylus* (420d11–403a3), including (a) “Feet-Binder” (*Poseidōn*) and (b) “Shaker” (*Poseidōn*). Broadly comparable etymologizing interpretations were apparently already familiar to the Iliadic poet: (a) *Il.* 13.34–36, cf. 13.429–38, 23.584–85; and (b) 13.18–19, cf. 13.71–72, 20.57–59.

While divine actions are generally difficult for mortal characters to perceive and understand, those of Poseidon here seem especially cryptic, since he acts furtively to escape Zeus’ notice. Ironically, as Zeus turns his attention toward Thracian “horse-herders” and milk-eating “Mare-milkers” (*Il.* 13.4, 6), he fails to see Poseidon’s “horses” being driven toward Troy at the beginning of that god’s intervention (13.23, 31, 34). Zeus also watches the land of the close-fighting Mysians (13.5), while the Mysian leader Hirtius will perish at Troy in a rout caused by Poseidon toward the end of his intervention (14.511–12).

Indignant at Zeus (*Il.* 13.15–17), Poseidon strengthens or encourages various groups of Greek heroes, three times in Book 13 and twice in Book 14, explicitly in mortal guise in all but the final incident. The last two incidents, occurring immediately before and after Hera’s Deception of Zeus, provide a nice frame for that amusing interlude (14.153–353). During his penultimate inspiration of the Greeks, Poseidon raises so much noise that Hera notices and also becomes indignant at Zeus (14.153–58). She deceptively obtains magical charms from Aphrodite to seduce Zeus, who will then be “tamed/overmastered” by love and sleep (14.215, 316, 353), which allows Poseidon to encourage and aid the Greeks even more openly (14.354–93). Hera’s Deception of Zeus has been thematically prepared in preceding incidents when a warrior’s undoing is associated with his love-life: Imbrius and Medesicaste (13.170–80), Othryoneus and

Cassandra (13.363–82). Hera's Deception of Zeus has also been prepared by the erotically charged description of Alcaethous' death, when he is enchanted and tamed/overmastered by Poseidon.

Most of the named Greeks enlisted by Poseidon will slay at least one individualized Trojan during his intervention; those enlisted will slay all but two of the Trojans killed during his intervention; and the enlisted are named roughly in order of deadly prowess: first heroes who will slay only one, two, or three victims; then three heroes who will slay four victims each. So the apparently random killings on the battlefield are actually prepared well in advance. The exception is Menelaus, the only Greek victor here not explicitly roused by the god. As Helen's aggrieved husband, Menelaus complements the preceding motif of the man undone by love. After killing Peisander, he blames all Trojans for taking his wife and complains that a reputedly "mindful" Zeus still favors those sinners against hospitality (*Il.* 13.631). This complaint anticipates Hera's imminent deception of Zeus' "mind" (14.165, 294), which will eventually allow Menelaus to slay Hyperenor, the last named victim of Poseidon's intervention (14.516).