

## Harshing Zeus' μέλω: Reassessing the Sympathy of Zeus at *Iliad* 20.21

Shortly before the *Iliad*'s final day of battle commences, Zeus convokes the gods to Olympus, where he will command them to join the battle in order to prevent Achilles from massacring the entire Trojan army and potentially even destroying the wall of Ilios. At the beginning of the meeting, Zeus succinctly states the reason for which he has called the gods to assembly:

Earthshaker, you know the plan in my heart,

the reason why I gathered you: μέλουσί μοι ὀλλύμενοί περ. (*Il.* 20.20-21)

Critics and translators have generally taken μέλουσί μοι ὀλλύμενοί περ at *Iliad* 20.21 as an expression of Zeus' compassionate distress over the many deaths of the *Iliad*'s story. Despite the popularity of this interpretation, it poses a number of interpretative problems. Why, for instance, does Zeus follow this apparent expression of compassion by stating that he will watch the ensuing carnage with joy (τέρψομαι, *Il.* 20.23)? And why, if Zeus empathizes with humans, does he continue his deliberate and sustained efforts to increase their suffering and cause their deaths, a role that he appears to relish throughout the poem (*Il.* 8.51–52, 11.81–83)?

This paper argues for a new interpretation of the line in question, and suggests that the misapprehension of the meaning of μέλω has led to a misunderstanding of Zeus' role in the *Iliad* as well. μέλουσί μοι ὀλλύμενοί περ is not an expression of sympathy or compassion, but a succinct statement of the βουλή (*Il.* 20.20) that has animated Zeus throughout the poem and perhaps long before: to make human deaths his interest, responsibility, and prerogative. The human deaths of the *Iliad* 'preoccupy' (μέλουσι) Zeus not only because their dying entertains

him (τέρψομαι, *Il.* 20.23), but also because he has made it his intention (βουλή, *Il.* 1.5; βουλήν, *Il.* 20.20) to kill them off.

The first part of the paper establishes the *communis opinio* by surveying previous interpretations of the phrase in question. The second part of the paper examines *Il.* 20.21 in its immediate context, and the third part of the paper situates it in the context of the narrative as a whole. In part four, I survey the different uses of μέλω in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to show that the verb does not denote ‘sympathy’ or ‘compassion,’ as is often assumed, but rather ‘attention,’ ‘interest,’ ‘notoriety,’ ‘prerogative,’ and ‘responsibility.’ The final section of the paper situates Zeus’ speech before the theomachy (*Il.* 20.20-30) in its mythological context, arguing for the coherence of my proposed interpretation of μέλουσί μοι ὀλλόμενοι περ both within the *Iliad* and within the mythological tradition with which it engages.