

Picturing Song:
Metapoetic Ekphrasis in *Iliad* 18

In the ekphrasis of Achilles' Shield in *Iliad* 18, the poet describes an experience of song that exceeds the capacities of the plastic arts (570-1). While young men and women gather grapes for wine, a youth with a "clear-toned" lyre played "charmingly" and "sang the beautiful song of Linos with a light voice" (λίνον δ' ὑπὸ καλὸν ᾄειδε / λεπταλέῃ φωνῇ). While the poet does mention other sounds in the ekphrasis, only the song in the vintage scene depends exclusively upon aural perception.

Scholars have recognized the poetic significance of the ekphrasis as a whole (Bouvier 2003; Marg 1991; Becker 1995; Reinhardt 1961), but the literal "seeing" of a "sound" in the vintage scene in particular has not been fully appreciated. In this paper, I explore how the poet accomplishes through poetry what would be impossible for the plastic art he describes in the ekphrasis: the experience of his art. I argue that this unique vignette is metapoetic and that the poet purposefully draws attention to the fact that what we are *hearing* could not simply be *seen* as an engraving upon a shield.

I begin by examining the placement of the song in the vintage scene within the ekphrasis of Achilles' Shield. Then I contrast this scene with the two other major musical scenes in the ekphrasis: the wedding song in the city at peace (491-6) and the dancing scene at the end (590-606). Specifically, the vivid audible details of the song described in the vintage scene sets it apart from the rest. In conclusion, I show that this metapoetic vignette reveals the power of oral poetry not only in the immediate ekphrasis of Achilles' Shield, but also in the larger context of the *Iliad* as a text assembled from an oral tradition.

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