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Listening to the Shield of Achilles: Sound and Movement in Ancient Ekphrasis

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Pause. Read carefully. “Young girls and young men, in all their light-hearted innocence, carried the kind, sweet fruit away in their woven baskets, and in their midst a youth with a singing lyre played charmingly upon it for them, and sang the beautiful song for Linos in a light voice, and they followed him, and with singing and whistling and light dance-steps of their feet kept time to the music.”¹ Without reflecting upon it, the reader of this passage is likely picturing young people dancing and hearing sounds of musical accompaniment and the rhythmic beats of the dance. The reader renders the verbal description visually in order to comprehend it. This description forms part of Homer’s account of the god Hephaestus making the richly decorated shield of the hero Achilles. As a result, generations of readers since antiquity have regarded this as a mere description of a physical shield. To imagine this simply as a picture on a shield fails to do justice to the richness of Homer’s language. In effect, scholars are trapped by a narrow definition of ekphrasis as a description of a work of art.

How can we reconcile traditional discussion of this literary device with a description that has characteristics that are cinematic? The prominence of sound and motion in this passage defy representation on a static object. Homer, who would have performed this work orally, uses words embedded with sound: singing, whistling, music, etc. These words encourage the audience to actively imagine and recreate these scenes. How are we then meant to react when Homer reminds us that it is a solid object he is describing, while simultaneously filling it with a narrative that unfolds through cinematic images? Is Homer’s ekphrasis more inclined to lean towards the object, or towards an almost cinematic narration?

The purpose of this study is to examine the prominence of sound and movement on Homer’s Shield of Achilles, and contrast it with the static vignettes on Vergil’s Shield of Aeneas.

¹ All quotations are from Richard Lattimore’s translation. *Iliad*, 18.567-72.

The modern definition of ekphrasis as a description of a work of art is too narrow to recognize Homer's abundant use of sound and motion. These motifs in the narrative on Homer's Shield of Achilles are not incidental. Their presence complements the unfolding nature of the narrative, creating a fluid surface with animated figures. The cinematic effect of sound and motion forces the audience to visualize the description. Homer's performative aspect stresses the audience's need to listen and translate his words into visuals. By contrast Vergil, who is composing a fixed written text, controls the perceptions of his readers in the Shield of Aeneas, directing their attention to specific images that he describes. Sound and motion are not entirely absent from the Shield of Aeneas, for its design clearly borrows from its Homeric predecessor. Their importance to the narrative, however, is minimized as Vergil directs our eyes and our attention throughout his description. The comparison of the two shields reveals how varied ekphrasis can be when considering such things as a point of view (in the case of Vergil's shield, Aeneas, views the completed shield), or presenting a series of static images that reveal an embedded history intended to stimulate the memory of its audience.

Is it important that the description focus on the physical features of the work of art, or can it also include areas where the poet deviates from what would be imagined as physical features? In response to this problem, Andrew Laird created two categories for defining ekphrasis as either "obedient" or "disobedient." An obedient description allows the viewer consistently to visualize the static images on a solid object, or work of art. A disobedient description breaks free of the object and provides less opportunity for visualizing.² I take issue with Laird's assertion that the Shield of Achilles inclines towards obedient ekphrasis and I argue that the opposite is true.

² See Andrew Laird, "Sounding out Ekphrasis: Art and Text in Catullus 64," *JRS* 83 (1993), 18. The focus of his work is Catullus 64, but he begins with an interesting discussion of two categories of ekphrasis. His categories are used here to draw comparisons and emphasize differences in the Shields of Achilles & Aeneas.

Ekphrasis, in modern scholarship, has become a literary device that scholars have identified in poetic works from Homer all the way to John Keats. Unfortunately, much of what makes Homer's ekphrasis different from later ones has been obscured by modern understanding of the term. This study will investigate descriptions on the shield that highlight the features that pose a challenge to the definition of ekphrasis. Trapped by this narrow definition, scholars lose sight of much of what defies consistent visualization: namely cinematic images that convey a narrative that unfolds over time and cannot be restricted to a static object.

By comparing the Shields of Achilles and Aeneas, I will explore three issues that challenge the conventional definition of ekphrasis. One, an extensive look at the contents of the Shield of Achilles will reveal how important the embedded narrative is in terms of grasping Homer's enormous ability to visualize. Specifically, I will argue that sound is essential in the unfolding narrative on the shield.³ This complements the difficulty of ekphrasis described by Andrew Becker.⁴ If the description is not easily visualized, then the author must be doing something other than description. I suggest that the "other" is narration; a process that unfolds through time. Secondly, a direct comparison of narration between the Shield of Achilles and the Shield of Aeneas shows that sound and motion are critical and distinctive elements of Homer's ekphrasis. By contrast, Vergil's description appears static and the Roman poet guides his audience in their reaction to the ekphrasis. By contrast, Homer leaves much to the imagination of his audience. Thirdly, the comparison makes clear that the cinematic aspects of Homeric ekphrasis are related to Homeric composition and performance. These elements are not

³ Jenny Strauss Clay, *Homer's Trojan Theater: Space, Vision, and Memory in the Iliad* (Cambridge: University Press, 2011): 9. This will work to bring to the foreground what has received little scholarly attention according to Clay: the presence of sound in the ekphrasis, a medium famous more for its verbal/visual content

⁴ See Andrew Becker, "Contest of Concert? A Speculative Essay on Ekphrasis and Rivalry Between the Arts," *Classical and Modern Literature* 23 No. 1 (2003), 1-14. "If a description seems to be describing features that are *not* easily imaginable as surface phenomena, to be describing motives, reactions, telling a story in response to an image, then it must be doing something other than description."

necessarily imitated by later poets or noticed by scholars. As motion pictures emerged in the 20th century, they added a new element to how we view images. By focusing on specific verbal cues that imply sound on the silent shield, I will propose a broader understanding of ancient descriptions. While the Shield of Achilles deserves to be “the type for all later ekphrases of works of art in ancient literature,” what demands our attention is its ability to evoke images that go beyond the work of visual art.⁵

Ancient Ekphrasis

The ancient doctrine of ekphrasis, according to Andrew Laird, “denoted any poetic or rhetorical description, including descriptions of landscape, buildings, battles and storms.”⁶ The term is now defined by modern scholars as simply a description of a work of visual art. They approach the form in different ways. For example, one scholar frames it as a contest between verbal and visual representation.⁷ Others believe “that the visual and verbal arts can be considered in a complementary relation, in concert not contest.”⁸ It is clear that arriving at an inclusive definition that fills the gaps between examples of ekphrasis is difficult. Comparing two major examples of ekphrasis in Homer and Vergil reveals the limitations of such definitions of ekphrasis. The narrow definition of the literary form has distorted the ancient usage and, in effect, it has unjustly downplayed the elements of the ekphrasis of the Shield of Achilles that make it incompatible with a description of a static picture.

⁵ First quotation from: P.R. Hardie, “Imago Mundi: Cosmological and Ideological Aspects of the Shield of Achilles,” *JHS* 105 (1985), 11. Second quotation from: Becker, 2003: 8.

⁶ See Laird, 1993: 18. Laird’s definition of ancient ekphrasis can also be found in Christopher Chinn, “Before Your Very Eyes: Pliny Epistulae 5.6 and the Ancient Theory of Ekphrasis,” *CP* 102 No. 3 (2007), 265-280. Chinn also footnotes where in antiquity the term ekphrasis is specifically associated with works of art.

⁷ See James Heffernan, *Museum of words: the poetics of ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993), 1.

⁸ See Becker, 2003: 7.

Gotthold Lessing was an important eighteenth-century literary critic for his work in his essay, *Laocoön*. He addressed the problem of painting and poetry and specifically discussed the Shield of Achilles and the Shield of Aeneas. In examining a comparison between the shields, it is necessary to take Lessing's harsh comments with a grain of salt. His views were bound up with the deeply entrenched view of Roman art as imitative and inferior to Greek art. Despite this, his work on the Shield of Achilles contributes to discussion of its description as incompatible with that of a picture. Lessing notes that Homer is "transforming what is coexistent in his subject into what is consecutive, and thereby making the living picture of an action out of the tedious painting of an object."⁹ Although Lessing does not explicitly point this out, the implication of a "living picture" applies to an analysis of the prominence of sound and motion on the Shield of Achilles.¹⁰

In Homer's *Iliad*, there is the extremely brief ekphrasis of Helen's robe, where the physical object is described, along with the images it depicts. "She was weaving a great web, a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians."¹¹ Despite its brevity, we can easily imagine the colorful robe and the figures of men Helen depicts. The robe is an example of Laird's definition of "obedient" ekphrasis. The ekphrasis only describes a physical object which can be consistently visualized by the audience.¹² In Vergil, the short ekphrasis of the Shield of Turnus is another example of an "obedient" ekphrasis. It offers arms that contain Chimaera, "crested with a triple plume" and Io, "chased in gold, her horns uplifted, shown as already shaggy, as already a heifer."¹³ These are

⁹ Gotthold Lessing, *Laocoön* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, INC., 1766 (1962)), 95.

¹⁰ Ibid, 95. Lessing describes the pictures on the Shield of Achilles as rising "before our eyes out of the bronze, one after the other, beneath the finer blows of [Hephaestus'] hammer."

¹¹ *Iliad*, 3.125-27.

¹² Laird, 1993: 19.

¹³ All quotations are from Allen Mandelbaum's translation. *Aeneid*, 7.1032-37.

frozen images that one can see without knowing the stories that are being represented. It's what is on the shield that is described, not how Io became a heifer, or how she managed to explain to her father, the river god Inachus, how she came to be in such a state. The story of the static figure is known and the audience is meant to fill in the gaps. Io is on the shield because she is a distinguished ancestor of Turnus.¹⁴ Distinguished Roman figures are important throughout Vergil's divinely ordained poem about Aeneas' journey to Italy. Like his shield, there will be figures that are meant to inspire Aeneas to fulfill his destiny as the founding father of the future Rome.

In describing the Shield of Achilles, Homer calls attention to the medium for his narration: a shield: "He [Hephaestus] forged a shield that was huge and heavy, elaborating it about, and threw around it a shining triple rim that glittered, and the shield strap was cast of silver."¹⁵ Homer then launches into a narrative but before long he reminds us again of the shield's manufacture: "The earth darkened behind them and looked like earth that has been ploughed though it was gold. Such was the wonder of the shield's forging."¹⁶ Our imagination that had been so vividly stimulated is restrained by Homer's reminder. This brief passage makes it clear that the boundaries between "obedient" and "disobedient" ekphrasis of the Shield of Achilles are fluid, but it has not been shown whether it inclines towards one end or the other. It's not unusual for ekphrases to have elements of both, as Laird concedes, but the Shield of Achilles is no ordinary ekphrasis.¹⁷

¹⁴ M.R. Gale, "The Shield of Turnus ('Aeneid' 7.783-92)." *G&R Second Series* 44 No. 2 (1997), 177.

¹⁵ *Iliad*, 18.478-80.

¹⁶ *Iliad*, 18.547-49.

¹⁷ Laird, 1993: 19-20. Laird says, "Most fictional ekphrases stand at some point in between the two poles of obedience and disobedience, but they are usually nearer to one or the other pole." This is why he says that the Shield of Achilles can almost be visualized and so it leans towards obedient ekphrasis.

Catullus 64 provides an extreme example of a “disobedient” ekphrasis, where the ekphrasis describes the surface of the work of art, takes off from it and never refers back to the physical object.¹⁸ “Disobedient” ekphrasis, according to Laird, “breaks free from the discipline of the imagined object and offers less opportunity for it to be consistently visualized or translated adequately into an actual work of visual art.”¹⁹ The description of Catullus’s tapestry would be impossible to render visually on a static object. “And there, in the middle, inlaid with Indian tooth and quilted with arras, the divan of the small goddess, the arras ochred with rock-lichen & tintured with stain of rose shell-fish. This quilt is pricked with figures of gods & men, sketches of antiquity in *petit point*!”²⁰ The ekphrasis launches into a long narrative that, by its end, has led the reader to forget that this was an ekphrasis to begin with. A significant way this tapestry deviates from obedient ekphrasis is in its extensive use of direct speech. Ariadne alone is given seventy verses.²¹ Direct speech is an element that cannot cross, for the most part, into the dimension of visual art.²² The ekphrasis wildly departs from describing a work of art and instead reveals itself as an unspooling narrative that ignores the referent. The Shield of Achilles does not depart from its referent in such an extreme way, but its unfolding narrative does make it difficult to visualize the images.

Another Roman poet, Ovid, described an artistic contest that actually provides contrasting examples of an “obedient” and a “disobedient” ekphrasis. Within the same tale, we get a glimpse at how one poet handles the variety of ways a poet can describe a work of art. In the *Metamorphoses*, the tapestry weaving contest between Minerva and Arachne has features of

¹⁸ Becker, 2003: 7-8.

¹⁹ Laird, 1993: 19.

²⁰ Peter Whigham, *The Poems of Catullus* (Penguin Classics, 1995), 142.

²¹ Laird, 1993: 20

²² Ibid, 20. Laird says, “Static visual media, whether painting, embroidery or sculpture cannot have precise equivalents for all these facilities – contemporary comic strips with captions and balloons are one exception.” Laird also says “Problems are posed by digressions and flashbacks, by descriptions of thought and movement.”

obedient and disobedient ekphrasis. Minerva's tapestry is structured and calculated in its design. It focuses on her victory over Neptune to become the patron goddess of Athens. Significantly, Minerva weaves four scenes in the four corners of mortals being punished by the gods for challenging their authority.²³ It is easy to visualize the construction of Minerva's tapestry because Ovid locates four scenes in the corners of the tapestry. The tapestry of Arachne, on the other hand, is more difficult to imagine. "Ovid does not indicate how these scenes were arranged on the tapestry, though modern critics suggest a swirling spiral, which would certainly be a technical challenge."²⁴ Here, Ovid is breaking free of the discipline of a physical work of art and instead presents a "disobedient" ekphrasis. Arachne's scenes unspool one after another and display the deceptions of the gods in random order. There is no reference back to the tapestry as Arachne weaves it, other than Ovid nodding to the perfection of Arachne's craft.²⁵ Indeed the arrangement is difficult to figure out, but this ekphrasis masks a more complex challenge for the visual artist. How can a painter show you that a bull is not a bull? Can a painter show the pathos of a person inside the body of a stag about to be mauled? According to Laird's definitions, Arachne's tapestry would sit somewhere between "obedient" and "disobedient," but would incline towards "disobedient" since Ovid's description is not easy to visualize as a physical work of art.

The modern treatments of ekphrasis are plagued with linguistic issues. As Laird observes, misuses of the word 'picture' and "vague use of the word 'image' have led to confusion between factual and fictional ekphrasis."²⁶ This contributes to my view that the recent critical idiom of

²³ All translations from Allen Mandelbaum's translation. *Metamorphoses*, 6.67-92.

²⁴ Elaine Fantham, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54.

²⁵ "And each of these – the actors and the settings – is rendered to perfection by Arachne." (*Metamorphoses*, 6.116-140).

²⁶ Laird, 1993: 19. Laird defines fictional ekphrasis as one that is the total product of the imagination. Factual ekphrasis would be like describing Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*. Laird also says that "Critics of Catullus 64 alone

ekphrasis has fractured the description by Homer of the Shield of Achilles by regarding it as a literary device wholly concerned with descriptions that encourage visualization of a work of art.

In other words, defining Homer's ekphrasis as a description of a static object ignores the significance of Homer's unfolding narrative that is *not* easily imaginable on a physical object.²⁷

These cinematic elements of the Shield of Achilles underscore Homer's enormous power to visualize. They emphasize Homer's performative aspect and create a new strategy for reading the shield in context of the rest of the poem.

The Shield of Achilles

Laird concedes that Homer's ekphrasis of the Shield of Achilles displays elements of both obedience and disobedience, but argues that "The Shield of Achilles in the end inclines towards obedience – we could just about visualize how it would be. And the notion that it is a magic shield might help us imagine it, even if there is some temporal sequence and movement in the scenes it contains – perhaps we might conceive of it as a kind of mosaic of little video scenes."²⁸ I disagree that the shield inclines towards obedience. The importance of sound and motion in the descriptions on the Shield of Achilles cannot be overlooked. The cinematic images, brought to life by Homer's unfolding narrative, as well as Homer's ambiguity about the actual design of the shield, will illustrate why this shield is an example of a disobedient ekphrasis.²⁹

provide many good instances of this error (between fictional and factual ekphrasis) when they claim that Catullus poorly describes a picture, forgets he is describing a picture, or that Catullus is not describing a picture at all. Attempts made by other critics to carve up the ekphrasis into those bits which do describe the picture and those which do not, derive from the same kind of misconception.

²⁷ See Heffernan, 1993: 14.

²⁸ Laird, 1993: 20.

²⁹ Heffernan, 1993: 14. Heffernan says, "In spite of diagrams and even works of sculpture such as Flaxman's *Shield of Achilles* [an artistic rendering of the shield], the basic design of the shield is nowhere unequivocally disclosed to us. Exactly what Hephaestus wrought on the shield is ultimately impossible to visualize." Heffernan calls Homer's account of the shield an extreme specimen of notional ekphrasis – the representation of an imaginary work of art. Despite giving precedence to the imaginary aspect of Homer's description, defining it as a work of art is still

The context of the shield's placement in the overall poem is as significant as the description itself. Much of the content of the previous eighteen books is relatable to the scenes on the shield. A number of scenes on the shield evoke episodes that the audience would recall. Their familiarity would help the audience visualize the cinematic description on the Shield. The context of the shield's creation emphasizes the dramatic scenes Homer describes on the shield. It is, in essence, a microcosm of the world in which the *Iliad* takes place. The shield serves as a recapitulation of the story up to that point. With this shield in hand, Achilles curbs his anger towards Agamemnon and will return to battle with a fury that is redirected at Hektor and the Trojans.

Before the shield is created, Achilles laments the Greeks being pushed back and fears Patroklos has died. Sure enough, Antilochos, son of Nestor, arrives with the grim news.³⁰ Like glass shattering, Achilles' demeanor changes suddenly. He bursts into tears over the violent death of his beloved friend; he represents such violence by tearing out his hair and defiling his body in the dust.³¹ Achilles desires to rush out into the battlefield, without the protection of any armor, and save the corpse of Patroklos from the bloodthirsty Hektor who is eager to cut the head off from the soft neck and set it on sharp stakes.³² Before his onslaught begins, his mourning mother, Thetis, arrives and convinces the raging Achilles to wait patiently while she asks for divine armor from the smith-god, Hephaestus. As Achilles rises up and steps outside, another

restrictive and does not leave much room for cinematic description. An imaginary work of art still forces us to think in terms of a static object. "All we can see – all that really exists in this passage – is Homer's language, which not only rivals but actually displaces the work of art if ostensibly describes and salutes." Heffernan does not deviate from the idea of ekphrasis being a literary device; his work *Museum of Words* describes ekphrases from Homer to Ashbery.

³⁰ *Iliad*, 18.18-21.

³¹ *Iliad*, 18.26-7.

³² *Iliad*, 18.176-77.

immortal god, Pallas Athena, arrives to give him help. She unleashes a cry and “drove endless terror upon the Trojans.”³³ The main narrative has now paused and another narrative begins.

Homer’s ekphrasis is a description of how the god Hephaestus forges the Shield of Achilles.³⁴ Thetis tells Hephaestus about all of the fighting that had taken place up to that point, like a reprise of the main narrative. “I sent him away in the curved ships to the land of Ilion to fight with the Trojans...he refused himself to fight the death from them....he put his own armour upon Patroklus and sent him into the fighting...if only Phoibos Apollo had not killed the fighting son of Menoitios there in the first ranks after he had wrought much damage, and given the glory to Hektor.”³⁵ Hephaestus agrees to forge armor for Achilles, though he knows it will not save him: “I wish that I could hide him away from death and its sorrow at the time when his hard fate comes upon him.”³⁶ As Heffernan notes, “The shield is no more immortal or indestructible than the short-lived Achilles for whom it is made.”³⁷

The prelude to the actual making of the shield involves an important element of creation: fire. Hephaestus turns toward the fire as it “blew on the crucibles, from all directions blasting forth wind to blow the flames high.”³⁸ The shield’s craftsman, Hephaestus, is the god of fire. “He wrought for him a corselet brighter than fire in its shining.”³⁹ Fire is the element that sets the making of the shield in motion. Its presence in the making of the shield adds more emphasis to the unfolding narrative that relies on sound and motion to make the shield a disobedient ekphrasis. It cannot be incidental that the element fire is associated with Hephaestus’ creation

³³ Iliad, 18.217-19.

³⁴ Iliad, 18.457-461.

³⁵ Iliad, 18.438-456.

³⁶ Iliad, 18.463-65.

³⁷ Heffernan, 1993: 11.

³⁸ Iliad, 18.470-71.

³⁹ Iliad, 18.609.

and Achilles' rage. The Greek noun for fire, associated at first with Hektor's efforts to set fire to the Achaean ships, later becomes exclusively associated with Achilles after Athena causes a blaze to emanate from Achilles' head.⁴⁰ "About his head circled a golden cloud, and kindled from it a flame far-shining."⁴¹ Later, Homer uses a simile involving fire as Achilles puts on the armour made by Hephaestus: "As when from across water a light shines to mariners from a blazing fire."⁴² This noun is also used when describing the external glare of the armour, "His eyes glowed as if they were the stare of a fire."⁴³

Fire is living and breathing, and like Achilles, has a short life span, but it is the source upon which the Shield of Achilles is wrought. Heraclitus said that Hephaestus, the god of fire, is "an allegory for the demiurgic fire which creates the universe; the account of the making of the circular shield is an allegory of cosmogony, of the creation of the spherical universe."⁴⁴ In other words, fire is an appropriate way to begin the ekphrasis of the Shield of Achilles. Homer uses the element because it sets the state for the creation of the cosmos, instantly emphasizing the importance of cycles featured throughout the shield's narrative. He achieves this by underscoring sound and motion throughout the creation process of the shield's narrative.

The shield's narrative starts at the beginning: the creation of the cosmos. From there Homer brings us down to the cities of mortal men, describing one with various festivals and marches comprised of songs and dances. Homer focuses our attention on a dispute within the city and here he gives us an example of implied speech. The narrative grows more complex as Homer turns his attention to the other city, describing the situation by simultaneously telling us the

⁴⁰ Stephen Scully, "Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight." *HSCP* 101 (2003), 35.

⁴¹ *Iliad*, 18.205-06.

⁴² *Iliad*, 19.375-76.

⁴³ *Iliad*, 18.365-66.

⁴⁴ Hardie, 1985: 15.

perspective of both the armed men waiting out the city and the citizens inside who are preparing for an ambush. Homer moves on to the landscape, specifically a river presumably near the city. The pride of the ploughed land is described next, with Homer's description of the earth as gold as a reminder of the shield Hephaestus is forging.

Sound and motion keep the narrative moving with the description of the children picking up cut swathes in front of the "silent" king. Homer describes young girls and men dancing to the sounds of a beautiful song played on a lyre, further distorting our visualization of a static shield. The mini narrative of the cattle, the lions and the herdsmen unfolds next, and Homer makes a tribute to a fellow craftsman, Daedalus. The final scene of the shield, and one that figures most prominently in discussion of sound and motion throughout the narrative, features more singing and dancing, but in a far more intricate fashion. The dancers form rows and crisscross one another. A snapshot of a dance would allow us to imagine motion, but it would be difficult for the image to evoke a motion that is as intricate as the crisscrossing in this scene. The description of the shield ends with the Ocean River running around the rim, reminding us one last time of the moving pictures and the unfolding narrative that have "run" throughout the creation of the Shield of Achilles, evoking fluid images that are not to be thought of as "static" or "obedient."

Evidence of sound and motion on the Shield of Achilles is embedded throughout the description:

He cast on the fire bronze which is weariless, and tin with it and valuable gold, and silver, and thereafter set forth upon its standard the great anvil, and gripped in one hand the ponderous hammer, while in the other he grasped the pincers. First of all he forged a shield that was huge and heavy, elaborating it about, and threw around it a shining triple rim that glittered, and the shield strap was cast of silver. There were five folds composing the shield itself, and upon it he elaborated many things in his skill and craftsmanship. He made the earth upon it, and the sky, and the sea's water, and the tireless sun, and the moon waxing into her fullness, and on it all the constellations that

festoon the heavens, the Pleiades and the Hyades and the strength of Orion and the Bear, whom men give also the name of the Wagon, who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion and she along is never plunged in the wash of the Ocean.⁴⁵

After laying the foundation of the ekphrasis, Homer has Hephaestus begin crafting the shield. It is at this very moment that “the direct objects now extend the focus beyond the workshop and work of Hephaestus to the world represented by these images.”⁴⁶ Hephaestus makes the earth, the sky, the sea’s water, the tireless sun, the moon, the stars of the Pleiades and Hyades, and the constellations of Orion and the Bear. The world in which the Iliad takes place is set at the center of the shield.⁴⁷ Hardie looks at these astronomical features as further evidence for the popularity of the heavenly bodies as an ornament of shields both real and imaginary.⁴⁸ Hardie does not focus attention on the importance this description of the cosmos takes on at the conclusion of the shield. In fact, the representation of the cosmos sets the stage for the story of the world that is to come.

Notice how these astronomical features display the importance of cyclical movement and change on the shield, a shield that is full of images that change and move about. In a cycle, there is neither a beginning nor an end, just constant motion. The cyclic imagery begins in the creation of the cosmos, but it encompasses both the overall construction of the physical shield and the rest of its embedded narrative. In a description such as the “moon waxing into her fullness,” the full moon not only implies a circular object, like the shield, but also underscores the cyclical movement, which is what a moon is doing as it “waxes.” Other images emphasize similar

⁴⁵ Iliad, 18.478-489.

⁴⁶ Andrew Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 102.

⁴⁷ Hardie, 1985: 12. “The whole shield is a highly imaginative literary composition, but of the two groups of subjects it is the first that comes closer to the possibilities of real shield decorations.” It is easy to think of static images of the cosmos, but after finishing the shield’s description the creation of the cosmos takes on a much larger, and more ambiguously visual role. What Homer does here is create the beginnings of the world he will later describe. This becomes more evident as the narrative continues to unfold. Homer is not simply placing the moon, the sun and the Earth on the shield as decorative pieces.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 12.

motion: “the Bear, whom men give also the name of the Wagon,” an object that features circular wheels, “who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion and she alone is never plunged in the wash of the Ocean.”⁴⁹ The phrase “turns about in a fixed place” implies movement in a cyclical fashion. Homer mentions that the constellation never plunges into the Ocean, making explicit the cycle as well as foreshadowing the Ocean River which will cycle around the uttermost rim of the shield.⁵⁰ All of these examples contribute to Homer’s shield being disobedient. A static image can represent a constellation but without language it cannot represent turning in a fixed position, looking at another constellation or telling us where it is not going.

Elsewhere in the *Iliad* Homer uses an astronomical simile in describing Hektor carrying his shield in the foremost, “as among the darkened clouds the bale star shows forth in all shining.”⁵¹ Stars adorn the breastplate worn by Achilles’ ill-fated friend, Patroklos: “Afterwards he girt on about his chest the corselet starry and elaborate of swift-footed Aiakides.”⁵² Homer also likens Paris in his armor to the sun.⁵³ In the cosmological creation scene on the shield, Homer describes the sun as “tireless.”⁵⁴ There is another point in book 18 where there is a description of the actual sun: “Now the lady Hera of the ox eyes drove the unwilling, weariless sun god to sink in the depth of the Ocean, and the sun went down.”⁵⁵ The two descriptions in the translation are similar, meaning that the description on the shield is meant to evoke the actual

⁴⁹ *Iliad*, 18.487-89.

⁵⁰ *Iliad*, 18.606-07.

⁵¹ *Iliad*, 11.61-63.

⁵² *Iliad*, 16.133-34.

⁵³ “So from uttermost Pergamos came Paris, the son of Priam, shining in all his armour of war as the sun shines” *Iliad* 6.512-13.

⁵⁴ Becker, 1995: 103. Becker examines the phrase used to describe the sun. The phrase is virtually identical in Greek and opens a line in book 18 in a description of the sun itself, not a depiction, as Becker notes. “The effect is to hold both image and referent before our attention, creating a more complex aesthetic stance.”

⁵⁵ *Iliad*, 18.239-41.

sun, not necessarily a static image of the sun. As Becker notes, “This congruence encourages us to imagine the sun on the shield as we would imagine the sun itself.”⁵⁶

Vivid description in Homer is not limited to the Shield of Achilles and this living, breathing sun serves as a precursor to the moving and musical images that will follow.

On it he wrought in all their beauty two cities of mortal men. And there were marriages in one, and festivals. They were leading the brides along the city from their maiden chambers under the flaring of torches, and the loud bride song was arising. The young men followed the circles of the dance, and among them the flutes and lyres kept up their clamour as in the meantime the women standing each at the door of her court admired them.⁵⁷

The narrative begins with two cities of mortal men. The introduction to the first city is full of sound and moving images. The description of the bride song as being “loud” underscores the sound that the audience is intended to imagine. The next fifty-one lines are dedicated to this narrative, while the craftsmen and the object itself are set aside and silenced.⁵⁸ The imagination of the poet is beginning to unfold. In this opening passage, Homer breaks free from the discipline of describing an actual, physical shield and moves away from being an “obedient” ekphrasis, where the audience can visualize the earth, the sun, the moon and four constellations. However, by the completion of the ekphrasis, the cosmic images become more abstract when considering the context of narrative on the shield. As the poet’s description begins, the pictures turn into stories that unfold over time.⁵⁹

Homer continues to invoke sound and movement effortlessly in the next passage, as he deepens his narrative.

⁵⁶ Becker, 1995:103.

⁵⁷ *Iliad*, 18.490-496.

⁵⁸ Becker, 1995: 107. “After this opening phrase, the work and the artist are all but ignored for fifty-one lines as the poem describes events first in a city at peace and then in a city at war.”

⁵⁹ Becker, 1995: 109. “With these phrases the description moves more boldly into the scenes and away from the surface appearance of the depiction. It begins to turn pictures into stories.”

The people were assembled in the market place, where a quarrel had arisen, and two men were disputing over the blood price for a man who had been killed. One man promised full restitution in a public statement, but the other refused and would accept nothing. Both then made for an arbitrator, to have a decision; and people were speaking up on either side, to help both men. But the heralds kept the people in hand, as meanwhile the elders were in session on benches of polished stone in the sacred circle and held in their hands the staves of the heralds who lift their voices. The two men rushed before these, and took turns speaking their cases, and between them lay on the ground two talents of gold, to be given to that judge who in this case spoke the straightest opinion.⁶⁰

The violent imagery juxtaposed with the joyful sounds of flutes and lyres work on the imagination and offer an escape from visualizing a pictorial work of art. Like instruments in an orchestra, instruments of sound blend in and out in order to disrupt the consistency of visualization. Although there is no direct speech involved, there are implied speeches embedded in the narrative. The one man making a promise in a *public* statement clearly implies an audience and invites us to take part in listening. The “speaking” of the two men has a dynamic quality that invites the audience to hear the speech. In discussing Catullus 64, Laird claims that “direct speech is not to be found in the narration of any other ancient ecphrasis,”⁶¹ but the audience can discern and even hear (imaginatively) the man’s promise and the other man who refused any restoration.⁶²

Moreover, a template for how a verbal quarrel works has already been laid out for the audience in the main narrative: the epic’s most crucial dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon. The context of this verbal quarrel, which began the epic, makes it easier for the audience to imagine the tension and the sounds of the men arguing. The movement that would be implied and other details would complicate an “obedient” description. Another scene in the *Iliad* that serves as a template for the audibility of the speeches in the ekphrasis is the embassy to Achilles. Each member of the embassy takes turns presenting gifts and speaking their case to the

⁶⁰ *Iliad*, 18.497-508.

⁶¹ Laird, 1993: 20.

⁶² *Iliad*, 18.499-500.

“judge,” Achilles. The direct speeches of Odysseus, Phoinix and Ajax are essential to the context of Book 9. The scene unfolds over time and through the text we can visualize the scene, listen to each person speak and watch Achilles’ reaction. On the Shield of Achilles, the audience recalls this embassy scene in order to fill in the details between the two men who speak their cases and the judge who speaks the straightest opinion.

The quarrel scene and the scenes that follow effectively use sound and motion to move the images from one point in time to the next. Homer’s description departs from obedient ekphrasis, as well as the narrow definition of ekphrasis as a work of art. The scenes can more appropriately be described as cinematic. In discussing the trial scene Martin Winkler notes, “Its agitated nature, expressed on a screen in rapidly intercut shots of the different participants from various angles, is conveyed in the text through verbs and conjunctions.”⁶³ The language of the text allows for the audience’s perspective to shift from one area to the next. It also allows Homer to freely move the narrative in space and time. Homer uses a conjunction like “But [a word corresponding to a cut in a film]” and an adverb like “meanwhile [a transitional panning shot in a film to a different view of the court.” These cinematic narratives cannot be visually imagined on a solid object. Arguably, it is poetry that is the form that belongs to temporal sequence, whereas paintings or pictures cannot be “cinematic.”⁶⁴ This is important to the ekphrasis as actions in progress compromise obedient ekphrasis. The audience visualizes the crowded movements and hears the sounds of shouting voices that are defending each man in the quarrel. Active visualizing and listening are consequences of Homer’s oral performance.

⁶³ Martin Winkler, *The Iliad and the Cinema. Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, Edited by Martin Winkler (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 60.

⁶⁴ Strauss Clay, 2011: 29-30. Strauss cites Lessing, “Poetry, since it belongs to the sphere of actions in progress, is the art of temporal sequence.”

As Jenny Strauss Clay notes, “The poet who works in an oral tradition takes the verbal component of his story and actually sees it playing like a movie in his mind’s eye and then is able to translate this vision into words that allow his audience to share in his vision.”⁶⁵ Being able to visualize the images consistently is usually associated with the modern definition of ekphrasis, but this definition breaks down through sequences that emphasize speech and the passage of time. Significantly, Homer does not conclude this quarrel scene, and instead changes perspective and cuts to his next subject: the second city of mortal men.

But around the other city were lying two forces of armed men shining in their war gear. For one side counsel was divided whether to storm and sack, or share between both sides the property and all the possessions the lovely citadel held hard within it. But the city’s people were not giving way, and armed for an ambush. Their beloved wives and their little children stood on the rampart to hold it, and with them the men with age upon them, but meanwhile the others went out. And Ares led them, and Pallas Athene. These were gold, both, and golden raiment upon them, and they were beautiful and huge in their armour, being divinities, and conspicuous from afar, but the people around them were smaller. These, when they were come to the place that was set for their ambush, in a river, where there was a watering place for all animals, there they sat down in place shrouding themselves in the bright bronze.⁶⁶

Active listeners and attentive readers cannot fail to translate this passage into a sequence of images. As Winkler notes “Their imagination, prompted by the clues in the text, turns them into their own directors, cinematographers, and editors.”⁶⁷ This language of changing perspectives suggests a kind of cinematic presentation that would not be possible on a shield or in a static picture. There are more of these terms that imply “cuts” and emphasize a fluid movement of images in the ekphrasis. “*But* the city’s people were not giving way,” and “Their beloved wives and their little children stood on the rampart to hold it, *but meanwhile*, the others went out” (emphasis mine).⁶⁸ The adverb, “meanwhile,” underscores a very important element in Homer’s

⁶⁵ Strauss Clay, 2011: 29.

⁶⁶ Iliad, 18.509-22.

⁶⁷ Winkler, 2007: 61.

⁶⁸ Iliad, 18.513 & 18.514-15.

narrative that deviates from obedient ekphrasis. Homer is now describing scenes that are happening simultaneously, captured on screen with the use of cuts or even a split screen technique. Our sequential reading of the text conflicts with the possibilities of cinema, but Homer's narration makes the simultaneity simple to comprehend.

Cinematic description not only emphasizes movement and jumps in time sequence, it also emphasizes sound. In this excerpt, the importance of speech is being stressed. A council discussing matters of war could be portrayed in a painting, but it would be impossible for the viewer to know that they are discussing whether to storm the city, or to share the property and possessions. Council meetings would not be unfamiliar to the audience, as they occur in the main narrative. Therefore, it would not be impossible for the audience to understand what this likely sounded like.⁶⁹ What's important is what cannot be represented by a static picture, it's only through the audience's capacity to visualize that Homer's words can be represented. Winkler notes that "adverbs like 'quickly,' 'meanwhile,' or 'presently,' and conjunctions like an adversative 'but' and a temporal 'as' impart both scope and complexity to a kind of small-scale epic of war, a miniature *Iliad*."⁷⁰

The stories that take place in the main narrative help facilitate the cinematic imagining of the stories on the shield by the audience. The beloved wives and little children recall Trojans watching Hektor and the others fighting. Temporality is also apparent in the foreshadowing of Hektor's death and Achilles' subsequent dragging of Hektor's body: "She [Death] was holding a live man with a new wound, and another one unhurt, and dragged a dead man by the feet through

⁶⁹ See the assembly in book 2 where Thersites abuses Agamemnon with speech, for which Odysseus beats him down with a staff.

⁷⁰ Winkler, 2007: 61.

the carnage.”⁷¹ The unfamiliar scenes on the shield evoke major events in the larger story of Troy. The effort to drag off Patroklos’ body from the battlefield is recalled by the next line: “All closed together like living men and fought with each other and dragged away from each other the corpses of those who had fallen.”⁷²

Homer finally disciplines the disobedient ekphrasis some fifty lines later when he reminds us that Hephaestus was in the midst of constructing an object. “He made upon it a soft field.”⁷³ But prior to this, in the previous excerpt, Homer denotes the colors of the armour worn by Ares, Athena and the men waiting to ambush. It would not be much of a stretch to believe that the armour these divinities were wearing would be made out of gold, another way Homer is playing with the medium as well as calling attention to his ability to visualize and narrate. He does not indicate, however, that the golden armour is part of the “wonder of the shield’s forging.”⁷⁴ Homer is playing with the real materials of the Shield, not just by mentioning gold, but by stressing how prominent these figures are and therefore how they catch our eye: “They were beautiful and huge in their armour, being divinities, and conspicuous from afar, but the people around them were smaller.” Their static presence on the shield contributes to an obedient ekphrasis, but it does very little to slowdown the unfolding narrative. Homer does not tell us how any of the scenes can fit on the shield, so even a scene that gives the audience an opportunity to consistently visualize falls apart when the audience considers its placement on the shield. Men are described wearing “bright bronze” and later, among the dancing boys and girls, there are young men who “carried golden knives that hung from sword-belts of silver.”⁷⁵ Homer is

⁷¹ Iliad, 18.537-38.

⁷² Iliad, 18.538-40.

⁷³ Iliad, 18.541.

⁷⁴ Iliad, 18.549.

⁷⁵ Iliad, 18.598.

ambiguous about describing whether this is the medium or if this is part of his unfolding narrative. In the next scene:

He made upon it a soft field, the pride of the tilled land, wide and triple-ploughed, with many ploughmen upon it who wheeled their teams at the turn and drove them in either direction. And as these making their turn would reach the end-strip of the field, a man would come up to them at this point and hand them a flagon of honey-sweet wine, and they would turn again to the furrows in their haste to come again to the end-strip of the deep field. The earth darkened behind them and looked like earth that has been ploughed though it was gold. Such was the wonder of the shield's forging.⁷⁶

After the brief reminder, the narrative becomes disobedient again with the ploughmen tilling the field which Hephaestus created. As Heffernan notes, "it penetrates that frame, animating the figures within it, and thus subverting any effort to visualize just where in space the figures are deployed, just what sort of pattern or configuration they assume."⁷⁷ Furthermore, the motion inherent in the ploughing scene defies the two dimensions of the shield.

Laird's initial assertion remains true that "most fictional ekphrases stand at some point in between the two poles of obedience and disobedience."⁷⁸ There are references back to the materiality of the shield, but Homer uses them in an ambiguous way that gives us little detail about the design of the shield. As Hephaestus continues to build scenes upon the shield, Homer gives us details of the colors and metals that are on the actual shield. There is a tension created, however, as Homer's narrative unfolds freely even as he juxtaposes this description with a reminder of the shield's physical attributes.

He made on it a great vineyard heavy with clusters, lovely and in gold, but the grapes upon it were darkened and the vines themselves stood out through poles of silver. About them he made a field-ditch of dark metal, and drove all around this a fence of tin; and

⁷⁶ *Iliad*, 18.541-49.

⁷⁷ Heffernan, 1993: 12.

⁷⁸ Laird, 1993: 19.

there was only one path to the vineyard, and along it ran the grape-bearers for the vineyard's stripping.⁷⁹

The colorful vineyard and grapes are dulled by the shield's metallic colors of gold and silver.

Forging a fence of tin is imaginable on a physical object and reminds us of what Homer is describing.⁸⁰ While a vineyard of grapes would not be colored gold or silver in reality, the fence of tin relates itself to the color of an actual fence. Homer is now playing with the colors and metals of the landscape, rather than the armour mentioned on the divinities. Despite the reminders of the referent, the passage still contains words that imply movement. The process of driving the fence around the field ditch is an example of motion. Our imagination is invited to follow Homer down the only path to the vineyard. Homer's description is inclining towards disobedient even while he is reminding the audience that he is describing a solid shield. There is a tension being created by Homer, as he is not being explicit enough about the design of the shield, but he is not allowing the audience to forget to marvel at the making of the shield. The deliberate tension between Homer's description of an object and the cinematic visualization draws us back into the language of his narrative.

In an example of an extremely disobedient ekphrasis, Catullus 64 gets completely away from the referent and by the time the narrative has ended, it is difficult to recall that what was just described was meant to fit onto a tapestry.⁸¹ By not departing entirely from the referent, Homer's description enhances the cinematic visualization, as the audience does not forget that the description is meant to be on a shield. The language calls attention to itself, and this draws

⁷⁹ Iliad 18.561-566.

⁸⁰ Heffernan, 1993: 19. "Homer thus reminds us that he is representing representation. His tribute to the wonder of the forging and forgery of art springs precisely from the recognition that what appears on the shield is not the ploughed earth itself, but gold that has been somehow made dark enough to resemble it."

⁸¹ Becker, 1995: 99. Becker notes that other scholars believe that attention to the visual medium could distract from the poem's ability to represent an external referent. Becker argues that "inclusion of the medium in the message enhances rather than diminishes our trust in the mimetic capability of that medium."

the audience's attention towards Homer, the describer of the shield. Becker notes that "As such it is similar to the way in which the bard's references to the medium of words and song routinely enhance the audience's sense of the authority, authenticity, and mimetic fidelity of the epic."⁸² The tension created by Homer between free description and the reminder to marvel at the shield accentuates his enormous ability to translate the images into words and the words back into images for the audience. We are astonished by the shield's cinematic images and simultaneously reminded to marvel at Homer's craftsmanship.

As Laird insists that the tapestry in Catullus 64 "invites and highlights comparison between verbal and pictorial communication,"⁸³ so should an argument in favor of the Shield of Achilles be made as inviting and highlighting a comparison between the poet's ability to both pay tribute to the medium and be allusive in how it can be visually imagined. Homer calls more attention to his achievement in the next passage, where he cites another legendary craftsman, Daedalus, giving him a guest spot on his shield, otherwise devoid of named figures – except, significantly, gods and personifications.

And the renowned smith of the strong arms made on it a meadow large and in a lovely valley for the glimmering sheepflocks, with dwelling places upon it, and covered shelters, and sheepfolds. And the renowned smith of the strong arms made elaborate on it a dancing floor, like that which once in the wide spaces of Knosos Daidalos built for Ariadne of the lovely tresses.⁸⁴

The mention of Daedalus and the specific site of Knosos are important at this culminating moment. As the shield is coming to a close, Hephaestus has built the stage for the final scene and Homer cites a legendary craftsman, as if to say that the Shield of Achilles is worthy of the sort of

⁸² Ibid: 99.

⁸³ Laird, 1993: 20.

⁸⁴ Iliad, 18.587-92.

creation that Daedalus would have wrought.⁸⁵ The site of Knosos is significant since it is the only named site on the entire shield, which is full of anonymous locations. This tribute deviates from Homer's cyclical description of nameless figures and places taking part of the endless struggle between peace and war. Attention is brought specifically to Homer's craftsmanship, as the audience visualizes Knosos and compares the famous work of Daedalos (perhaps, specifically the labyrinth) with Homer's ekphrasis of the Shield of Achilles.

Motion, simultaneous actions and the tension created by recalling the referent all contribute to Homer's disobedient ekphrasis. Sound, however, is an equally significant component of Homer's disobedient shield. Its appearances on the shield add a new dimension to the description that cannot be represented by a static image. Sound, in conjunction with motion, evokes Homer's performative aspect and the audience's ability to listen and visualize Homer's performance.⁸⁶

Sound and music on the silent shield depend entirely on the passing of time, and this realm belongs to the poet.⁸⁷ The passing of time in music runs parallel with oral poetry and how it unfolds in real time. Scholars have been blinded to the prominence of sound in Homer's description due to the narrow definition of ekphrasis. Sound can be implied in a static image, but it is how that sound contributes to the movement of the text that separates Homer's ekphrasis from other ancient examples.

⁸⁵ Becker, 1995: 145. "The comparison with Daedalus' work turns us into viewers by associating an as yet undescribed and unseen image with an image presumed to be already familiar to the audience."

⁸⁶ Becker, 1995: 109. Becker offers a lengthy commentary on the scenes on the shield, but he does not bother to elaborate on the importance of sound and music; he glosses over these important attributes of Homer's ekphrasis.

⁸⁷ Lessing, 1766: 91. Lessing separates the provinces of the painter and the poet: "It remains true that succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter."

Homer turns his attention away from the prominence of sound and instead shows us how the lack of sound figures prominently into the narrative of the next scene.

He made on it the precinct of a king, where the labourers were reaping, with the sharp reaping hooks in their hands. Of the cut swathes some fell along the lines of reaping, one after another, while the sheaf-binders caught up others and tied them with bind-ropes. There were three sheaf-binders who stood by, and behind them were children picking up the cut swathes, and filled their arms with them and carried and gave them always; and by them the king in silence and holding his staff stood near the line of the reapers, happily. And apart and under a tree the heralds made a feast ready and trimmed a great ox they had slaughtered. Meanwhile the women scattered, for the workmen to eat, abundant white barley.⁸⁸

This is another moment where the audience is captivated by the moving images in the description. Stating that the figure is “silent” emphasizes the importance of sound and stresses the process of Homer’s narrative unfolding through time. It would be difficult to describe a figure in a painting as being silent without narration to put that silence into context. For Heffernan, the quiet king is “the only manifestation of what might be called perfectly sculptural stasis, a double stillness that occurs nowhere else.”⁸⁹ Heffernan is implying that the king is a still image and his silence implies a lack, or stillness, of sound. This “double stillness” cannot hold up, as Becker notes, “If the surface of the shield were the focus, such mention of silence would be improbable.”⁹⁰ The very fact that a lack of sound is even described demonstrates the importance not only of sound on the Shield of Achilles, but Homer’s performance, which would make sense to an audience who is listening and visualizing Homer’s words. It would be appropriate to describe the king as “silent,” as he looks on at all of the workers moving around him. Representing the silent king on a static picture would not be possible; the viewer would not be able to tell whether the king was silent or not since the picture itself is silent. The

⁸⁸ Iliad, 18.550-560.

⁸⁹ Heffernan, 1993:21.

⁹⁰ Becker, 1995: 132.

disobedience of Homer's ekphrasis allows Homer to break free of the restrictions of a silent image and create a description that relies as heavily on sound as it does on anything else.

The silent king represents domestic peace, status and authority on the shield. It is the king, the most powerful figure in the scene, who stands by, happily (and silently) watching people work. Sounds of reaping are associated with lower status and the drudgery of the labourers, who are not standing still. They continue to work in the next passage: "And apart and under a tree the heralds made a feast ready and trimmed a great ox they had slaughtered."⁹¹ Similar to the templates of scenes in the main narrative that help the audience hear the quarrel scene and the assembly scene, the absence of sound as an indicator of authority can also be found elsewhere in book 2 when Odysseus grabs the scepter from Agamemnon and wields authority over the noisy Thersites. The scene informs the audience in visualizing (or hearing) the silent king who holds a staff as he watches the reapers.

So he spoke and dashed the scepter against his back and shoulders, and he doubled over, and a round tear dropped from him, and a bloody welt stood up between his shoulders under the golden sceptre's stroke, and he sat down again, frightened, in pain, and looking helplessly about wiped off the tear drops. Sorry though the men were they laughed over him happily, and thus they would speak to each other, each looking at the man next him: 'Come now: Odysseus has done excellent things by thousands, bringing forward good counsels and ordering armed encounters; but now this is far the best thing he ever has accomplished among the Argives, to keep this thrower of words, this braggart out of assembly. Never again will his proud heart stir him up, to wrangle with the princes in words of revilement.' So the multitude spoke, but Odysseus, sacker of cities, stood up holding the staff and beside him grey-eyed Athene in the likeness of a herald enjoined the people to silence, that at once the foremost and the utmost sons of the Achaeans might listen to him speaking and deliberate his counsel.⁹²

The translation uses both scepter and staff to describe the same object. In these scenes, the staff (or scepter) symbolizes authority. The staff is a symbol of a king's power, awarded to him by the authority of Zeus: "Lordship for many is no good thing. Let there be one ruler, one king, to

⁹¹ Iliad, 18.558-59.

⁹² Iliad, 2.265-82.

whom the son of devious-devising Kronos gives the scepter and right of judgment, to watch over his people.”⁹³ This power is transferred to whoever wields the staff, such as Odysseus. The absence of sound and the urgency to listen is also implicit in this scene. Eurybates, the herald of Ithaka, takes the staff and urges men to “sit still and listen.”⁹⁴ Unlike the king on the shield, Odysseus is forced to speak because of Thersites’ outburst and in order to return the men to silence he makes an example out of the audacious Thersites. The audience recalls this scene, specifically the power wielded by the person holding the staff, when the silent king on the shield looks over all the labourers operating his kingdom. The king would only need to break his silence if his reaping labourers stepped out of line or challenged his authority, like Thersites. In this passage, Homer demonstrates how important sound (or the lack thereof) is to his narrative.

Homer enhances his engagement with sound in the unfolding narrative of the cattle and herdsmen. The sounds Homer explicitly mentions help move the narrative forward in time. The scene is described cinematically as sound and motion are predominant, as well as the aforementioned jump in time sequence.

But among the foremost of the two cattle, two formidable lions had caught hold of a *bellowing* bull, and he with *loud lowings* was dragged away as the dogs and the young men went in pursuit of him. But the two lions, breaking open the hide of the great ox, gulped the black blood and the inward guts, as meanwhile the herdsmen were in the act of setting and urging the quick dogs on them. But they, before they could get their teeth in, turned back from the lions, but would come and take their stand very close, and *bayed*, and kept clear (emphasis mine).⁹⁵

Homer’s ekphrasis elevates poetry to the realm of painting and even exceeds it by describing scenes that could not be represented in a static painting. His poetry brings before our eyes the sequence of images in his mind as he translates it into language and we transform it back into

⁹³ Iliad, 2.203-06.

⁹⁴ Iliad, 2.200.

⁹⁵ Iliad, 18.579-586.

moving pictures through our imagination.⁹⁶ Sound plays a significant role in the audience's visualization of the scenes. It is not just a static bull we are meant to imagine, but a bellowing bull, one that is struggling and crying out as it is dragged away. Our perspective jumps to the dogs and young men eagerly chasing after the lions. Homer jumps again to the lions' perspective and shows us the breaking of the hide and in the same line cuts back (meanwhile) to the herdsmen closing in on the lions. Homer builds up the dramatic scene only to inform us that the dogs fail to attack the lions. The scene fades away as the audience visualizes the dogs baying at the lions.

As if to underscore the prominence of sound and motion throughout the shield's narrative, the final scene before Homer closes the frame with Ocean River depicts young men and girls, once again dancing to the sound of music.

And there were young men on it and young girls, sought for their beauty with gifts of oxen, dancing, and holding hands at the wrist. These wore, the maidens long light robes, but the men wore tunics of fine-spun work and shining softly, touched with olive oil. And the girls wore fair garlands on their heads, while the young men carried golden knives that hung from sword-belts of silver. At whiles on their understanding feet they would run very lightly, as when a potter crouching makes trial of his wheel, holding it close in his hands, to see if it will run smooth. At another time they would form rows, and run, rows crossing each other. And around the lovely chorus of dancers stood a great multitude happily watching, while among the dancers two acrobats led the measures of song and dance revolving among them.⁹⁷

The scene here brings together three important things that make it difficult to visualize on a shield. Motion, something that is difficult to visualize in a static picture, is displayed by the running of their feet. Sound, something that would be difficult to hear on a silent image, is prominent in the end of the scene where the two acrobats sing and dance around the other

⁹⁶ Becker, 1995: 140. Becker notes that. "The ekphrasis encourages us to react to art as life, almost; it simultaneously reacts to the world and to a depiction of that world, as it translates visible phenomena into language."

⁹⁷ Iliad, 18.593-605.

dancers. The other cinematic feature of this scene is the jump in time sequence. “At another time” is a phrase that moves the characters in space and time. The movement in this scene becomes more complex when the dancers form rows and crisscross each other, something that would defy representation on a static image.⁹⁸ A picture can show dancing, but a still image cannot depict the intricate process of crisscrossing back and forth.

Within his description of the final scene, Homer includes a simile that reminds us of the cyclical nature of the shield’s narrative. One can imagine Hephaestus as the potter, crouching to make trial of his shield. The simile alludes to Homer’s similar creative effort in constructing the embedded narrative on the shield. The complexity of the simile in the midst of this description is not incidental. The ekphrasis is already asking us to visualize the description and the simile, a literary device, is comparable to the elements of the ekphrasis that make it disobedient. Homer’s ability to describe different actions unfolding simultaneously in different places and make sense of their relationships is similar to a simile. Homer’s similes, after all, are very vivid examples of visualization and Homer’s use of one here contributes to the emphasis of an unfolding narrative created by the “devices” he uses (simultaneous actions that describe two different things and establish a relationship of likeness).

Homer revisits the cosmic elements and physical cycles by enclosing the shield with water: “He made on it the great strength of the Ocean River which ran around the uttermost rim of the shield’s strong structure.”⁹⁹ The shield comes to a rhythmic close, as Homer praises the chorus of dancers and the singers in the art form they are performing. But what Homer has been describing is not a finished product. We have not observed Achilles’ reaction to the shield, but

⁹⁸ Heffernan, 1993: 13. “The only shape the dancers are explicitly said to form is ‘rows’, but since they run in rows ‘crossing each other,’ the picture is explicitly moving; they are nowhere fixed in space.”

⁹⁹ *Iliad*, 18.606-07.

rather the divine master, Hephaestus, as he made it.¹⁰⁰ It mirrors the performative aspect of Homer's telling of the poem. The audience would not be presented with a finished product, such as a text, but rather a performance of a story in words that unfolds over time. The narrative of the Shield of Achilles, with its emphasis on sound and motion, unfolds similarly.

Theories about the purpose of the shield vary. It is plausible that the scenes on the shield reveal themselves as an overarching snapshot of both the cosmic life (Hephaestus) and the trials and tribulations of mortal life (Achilles).¹⁰¹ The audience is presented scenes of peace, dancing and joyfulness on the shield, all scenes that bring to mind other passages in the main narrative. Taplin believes the ekphrasis "represents the good life," and its purpose was to make us see [war] in relation to peace. Taplin approaches the shield with an examination of the images it depicts. For him, "the shield represents an easy hedonistic existence spent in feasting with the pastimes of conversation, song and dance, making love – in fact a life such as the gods lead."¹⁰² I believe that the cyclical imagery and the anonymous figures on the shield are meant to accentuate the endless cycle of war and peace. The anonymity of the figures tells us that the particulars (as in the famous heroes of the Trojan War) are irrelevant and what is more important is the recurrence of these elements of life. In the remaining books, Achilles will go on a rampage and fully express his immense capacity for strength, similar to how the shield depicts two lions viciously attacking cattle. But there will be reconciliation; Achilles' anger will be cooled with the return of Hektor's body. There will be peace (albeit momentarily) and this is similar to the peaceful ending of the shield. Like the shield, war and peace are on an endless cycle and

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 95.

¹⁰¹ Scully, 2003: 30. Scully suggests it is "like a calm before an impending doom."

¹⁰² Taplin, 1980: 15.

Achilles' slaying of Hektor is rounded off by the return of his body, continued again with the war beyond the narrative and the stories of Achilles' death, the eventual fall of Troy, and so on.

The shield's integration with the fabric of the poem through the multiple connections with scenes from the larger narrative is crucial in contextualizing the ekphrasis. The choice to not be explicit in the scenes on the shield mirrors the significance of the inconclusive scenes at the end of the *Iliad*. Homer does not give us a conclusion to the trial scene and he does not tell us what happens to the defenders and attackers of the city. Likewise for the rest of the poem, "The price that Achilles must pay for [killing Hektor] is merely intimated – not narrated – at the end of the poem, and the fate of the besieged city remains untold."¹⁰³ Indeed these are different degrees of closure, as the audience would be familiar with the fate of Achilles and the Fall of Troy, as opposed to the fates of the defenders and attackers of the city on the shield. But what both share in common is that the scope of the *Iliad* requires the reader (or viewer) to visually imagine (or interpret) their conclusions, whether they know the end or not.

The ekphrasis defies the restrictions implicit in the narrow definition as describing a work of art. It is far from being a set-piece description, or a narrative pause, where nothing corresponds to the story and the plot does not advance.¹⁰⁴ Once the shield is completed and presumably the images are "frozen" on the shield, the audience is reminded that the shield is "made not to be sealed in a museum cabinet but to be borne into battle and to bear the shocks of fighting: in the course of combat, it is halfway penetrated by Aeneas' spear as well as struck by Hector's."¹⁰⁵ The shield, which relies on a cinematic description of sound and movement,

¹⁰³ Heffernan, 1993: 17.

¹⁰⁴ Heffernan, 1993: 10. For Heffernan, "The making of the shield completes a turning point in the poem – the point at which Achilles has finally decided to bury his anger at Agamemnon and join the war against Troy to avenge Hector's slaying of Patroclus."

¹⁰⁵ Heffernan, 1993: 11.

continues to be used in an active way. The shield marks a new phase of Achilles' anger. After gazing at his divine armor, Achilles' attention immediately focuses back on the war and his dead friend, Patroklos.¹⁰⁶ He will soon enter the fight and begin wreaking havoc on many Trojan soldiers. The cycle of war depicted in the unfolding narrative on the shield, continues to unfold in Homer's main narrative.

The Shield of Aeneas

By contrast, the Shield of Aeneas is one dimensional; Vergil directs the reading of the completed shield and moves from one iconic snapshot to the next. For the audience, there is hardly any reason to recall relevant material from the main narrative in order to help visualize it. The Shield of Aeneas is not embedded with cinematic features and discourse. Significantly, the hero of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas, will be absent for a significant portion of the book that follows the description of his shield, therefore contextualizing its purpose in the larger narrative is difficult. This is not the only notable difference between the Shield of Achilles and the Shield of Aeneas. The shield is an example of Vergil's engagement with the Homeric model. Hephaestus, now Vulcan, crafts this shield after Aeneas' divine mother, Venus, comes to him for help. The arrival of the shield comes at a point right before Aeneas engages in the final battle with Turnus. Unlike the Homeric shield, which features the making of the shield by Hephaestus, the Shield of Aeneas is finished before its description.

Michael Putnam, in his book *Virgil's Epic Designs*, draws comparisons between the Shield of Achilles and the Shield of Aeneas. He notes that we, the viewers, are meant to read the shield.¹⁰⁷ The context of Vergil's ekphrasis differs with Homer's in terms of the performative

¹⁰⁶ Iliad, 19.21-27.

¹⁰⁷ Putnam, 1998: 168-69.

aspect of each poet. Whereas Homer's epic was presented to the audience orally, Vergil's epic was written down. Vergil's approach to the scenes on his shield is comparable to the process of writing and reading. Putnam's comparison will assist in justifying some of the differences that have been discussed in using Laird's categorization of two types of ekphrasis. The features that make the Shield of Achilles a disobedient ekphrasis can be sustained in a comparison with the Shield of Aeneas. The differences between the two shields are reflective of fundamental differences between the two poems. Homer's ekphrasis is a kind of continuous narrative while Vergil's is a series of vignettes; these techniques present different demands on the audience.

The description of the Shield of Aeneas effectively marginalizes movement and sound. It is important to stress that the Shield of Aeneas does not lack sound and motion altogether. There are instances where sound and motion make appearances, but what is different is the level of impact they have on the narrative as directed by Vergil. If we were to frame the Shield of Aeneas as a series of small scenes representing a history of Rome vs. a series of larger scenes that all take place at Actium, our sequential reading of the shield is conditioned by the smaller scenes to not pay close attention to sound and motion, even when they make an appearance in the larger scenes of Actium.

The figures and scenes on the Shield of Aeneas would easily be recognized by the Roman audience.¹⁰⁸ The action of the story preceding Book VIII comes to a sudden pause where the descriptions of the Roman elites begin.¹⁰⁹ The static nature of the Shield of Aeneas' isolated images keeps the narrative under the control of Vergil. His audience's reading of the shield

¹⁰⁸ Lessing, 1766: 95. Lessing's bias begins here: "The Roman poet either did not feel the fineness of his model or else the things which he wanted to put on the shield seemed to him to be of such a nature as not to permit their execution before our eyes." We get a picture perfect copy of the Shield of Aeneas that, according to Lessing, was "an insertion, intended solely to flatter the national pride of the Romans; an alien stream turned by the poet"

¹⁰⁹ Lessing, 1766: 96. Lessing points out significantly that "Not a single one of the characters takes part in the description."

mirrors the role of destiny and divinely ordained historical “plan” laid out in the larger narrative. The shield, as well as the poem, arguably seeks to flatter the national pride of the Romans and their emperor Augustus.

Vergil imbued the myth of Venus, the Fall of Troy, and the wanderings of Aeneas with a new meaning, in which not only the future rule of the Julian house, but the whole history of Rome was portrayed as one of predestined triumph and salvation. In the Aeneid the age of Augustus is adumbrated in visions and, in the mythological context, is celebrated as the ultimate realization of an all-encompassing world order. By virtue of his powerful and evocative imagery, Vergil created a national epic that was perfectly designed to bolster the Romans’ self-confidence.¹¹⁰

The central scene of Actium contributes to Augustus’ rule as the ultimate realization of an all-encompassing world order. The smaller scenes that come before the Battle of Actium, condition our reading of the central scene.

This shield is a perfect example of a set-piece description. The scenes on the shield can be visualized more easily than on Homer’s shield. An important difference between Vergil’s description and Homer’s description is the position of each poet within the narrative. As the Shield of Achilles is described, we are told several parts of a single story, and even given perspectives of multiple characters who are acting together simultaneously. Regardless of the audience’s familiarity with the scenes, Homer tells us that two forces of armed men were debating over laying siege to a city and at the same time the city’s people were preparing for an ambush. The early stories on the Shield of Aeneas, by contrast, require the audience to be familiar enough to fill in the rest of the story that Vergil does not tell us about. The scenes are represented as snap shots or diagrams. They are recognized by the audience at only a glance. The audience fills in the story; the story does not unfold before our eyes.

¹¹⁰ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 193.

For there the Lord of Fire had wrought the story of Italy, the Romans' victories, since he was not unskilled in prophecy or one who cannot tell the times to come. There he had set the generations of Ascanius, and all their wars, in order. There, too, he made a mother-wolf, reclining in Mars' green cavern; and at play beside her, twin boys were hanging at her dugs; fearless, they sucked their mother. She, at this, bent back her tapered neck to lick them each in turn and shape their bodies with her tongue. Not far from this he set the Romans and the Sabine women they carried off – against all law – while in the crowded theater the great Circensian games were under way; and sudden war then broke out again between the Romans and aged Tatius, king of austere Cures.¹¹¹

The depiction of the mother-wolf nurturing Romulus and Remus is frozen, despite suggestive movement. While the boys suck the mother, the mother is also bent back and licking them; an image that would have been common in Vergil's time. In the next ten lines Vergil tells us four different stories, leaving major gaps for anyone who does not know the story of the Sabine women. Vergil is directing our reading and we are inclined to follow his lead.

A major difference between the two shields is that we are encouraged to think in terms of an unfolding narrative on the Shield of Achilles, whereas we are meant to fill in the missing parts of the iconic story on the Shield of Aeneas. The presence of sound in the crowded theater where the Circensian games are being held are undermined by Vergil's authoritative direction. We move quickly from this snapshot. It is possible to discern some sound happening here, the sounds of the women screaming as they are carried off, the crowds in the theater and the sound of war, but the shield's description simply does not bring these into the foreground. By contrast, the last scene on the Shield of Achilles is characterized by sound and motion: "There were young men on it and young girls, sought for their beauty with gifts of oxen, dancing, and holding hands at the wrist."¹¹²

¹¹¹ Aeneid, 8.810-827.

¹¹² Iliad, 18.593-95.

Vergil effectively piles on his version of Roman history in a series of snapshots, or vignettes in order to direct our attention to the most evocative images, spending little time on each scene.

Next, Romulus and Tatius, these same kings, their quarrels set to rest, stood at Jove's altar; both, armed and cup in hand and having offered a sow as sacrifice, swore league and friendship. Not far from this, two chariots that rushed in different directions tore apart Mettus (but then you should have kept your word, o man of Alba!); Tullus hauled the guts of that conniving man into the forest; the briers dripped with splattered blood. There, too, Porsenna, asking Rome to readmit the banished Tarquin, hemmed the city in with strangling siege; Aeneas' sons rushed on the sword for freedom's sake. You might have seen Porsenna as one wild and menacing, since Cocles dared tear down the Tiber's bridge, and Cloelia broke her chains and swam the river.¹¹³

The iconic stories behind Romulus and Tatius are expected to be known by the audience. Significantly, Vergil tells us that the quarrel is already over, therefore making the image static. His description doesn't give any action to the two characters, but instead describes their relationship. The quickness of these opening scenes conditions our reading of the later scenes at Actium. We are not meant to pay such close attention to implied details, like sound and motion, because they are not important to understanding the narrative. In fact, our attention and eyes are guided by Vergil. Phrases like "There," "Next," "Not far from this," and "Carved in the upper part" directs our viewing experience of the shield. As readers, we are already forced to read the scenes in sequence, but Vergil's direction forces us to visualize the images on the shield

As often in Homer's shield, we are not given the conclusion of many of the scenes. We are compelled to imagine what happens following the quarrel between the two men in the marketplace, or the fate of the city at war. On the Shield of Aeneas, Vergil controls our eye and our interpretation. Vergil tells us where the scenes begin and end, and he does not offer to fill in what happens between, thus forfeiting any prominence of sound and motion, the stuff that make

¹¹³ Aeneid, 8.828-44.

images cinematic. Sound and motion are circumscribed to the larger ideological goal of presenting all of Roman history as a relentless march leading to the golden age of Augustus.

Elsewhere in the *Aeneid*, Vergil takes command of our viewing of a descriptive scene. He directs our reading of the Temple of Juno through Aeneas' viewing and reaction to the panels.¹¹⁴ The panels themselves are read in sequential order by both Aeneas and the audience, ranging from the warriors circling Pergamus¹¹⁵ to Priam pleading for Hektor with defenseless hands.¹¹⁶ Vergil directs our reading (and Aeneas' reading) of the panels. "Elsewhere young Troilus...runs off, his weapons lost."¹¹⁷ The phrase "elsewhere" distorts our sequential reading, as if Vergil decided to jump from one panel to another, skipping over some in between. It is clear that Aeneas does not read all of the panels, as his viewing is interrupted by the arrival of Dido and Vergil leaves the Temple of Juno like Homer leaves the end of the *Iliad*, with a narrative unconcluded in the poem but an iconic story where the audience fills in the rest.¹¹⁸ Vergil cannot resist finishing the story; however, as Aeneas fills in the rest at the banquet with his story of the sacking of Troy and more immediately, the image of Penthesilea, from the last panel, morphs into the figure of Dido in the main narrative.

With the Temple of Juno, Vergil effectively integrates the ekphrasis with his narrative, seamlessly, structurally and thematically. The Shield of Aeneas functions differently. The static vignettes fracture the central scene of Actium.

¹¹⁴ Alessandro Barchiesi, *Virgilian Narrative: Ecphrasis*. *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*. Edited by Charles Martindale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997: 277. "His interpretation of the images as a sign of compassion and respect for the Trojan catastrophe is indeed reinforced by powerful contextual pointers, but there are also counter-indication which set up a spiral of historical ironies."

¹¹⁵ Aeneid, 1.660.

¹¹⁶ Aeneid 1.689.

¹¹⁷ Aeneid, 1.671,

¹¹⁸ Aeneid, 1.698-701.

Here in relief were carved the nude Luperi and dancing Salian priests, with woolen caps and shields that feel from heaven; through the city chaste matrons in their cushioned carriages led sacred rites. Away from these scenes Vulcan added the house of Tartarus, the high doorways of Dis, the penalties of crime; and Catiline, you hanging from a cliff that threatens, trembling at the Furies' faces; and set apart, the pious who receive their laws from Cato. Bordering these scenes, he carved a golden image of the sea, yet there were blue-gray waters and white foam where dolphins bright with silver cut across the tide and swept the waves with circling tails.¹¹⁹

These are static vignettes that lack the degree of sound and movement in its narrative that gives the shield a sense of movement. Instances of motion and implied sound are evident in the images of the sea and dolphins, but the word “carved” emphasizes the completed nature of the shield, one closed to audience participation in interpreting its vignettes. Vergil is not playing with these descriptions of gold, as Homer does; he makes it easy for the audience to see dolphins carved on a solid shield. The narrative is fragmented. The audience fills in the missing narrative as Vergil moves our eyes elsewhere. Like the Temple of Juno, we get the sense that we are not even viewing all of the scenes on the shield. From one scene to the next, Vergil moves away from his scenes, rather than telling us what is surrounding the Luperi and dancing priests.

The smaller scenes on the Shield of Aeneas that lead up to the central scene of Actium condition our reading of the central scene, one that contains the most narrative on the shield. Unlike the multiple perspectives displayed in the scenes on the Shield of Achilles, the smaller scenes on Aeneas' shield do not give much perspective at all. Vergil points to the image, describes it and moves on to the next image. The narratives on the Shield of Achilles unfold over time, starting in one place and ending in another. The fundamental difference between the two shields is the absence of sound and motion that make the Shield of Achilles' description cinematic and the Shield of Aeneas' static. The Battle of Actium scene displays the most

¹¹⁹ Aeneid, 8.859-73.

examples of sound and motion on the Shield of Aeneas, but by the time they come up, the audience has learned to be directed towards more iconic elements by the previous scenes.

Across the center of the shield were shown the ships of brass, the strife of Actium: you might have seen all of Leucata's bay teeming with war's array, waves glittering with gold. On his high stern Augustus Caesar is leading the Italians to battle, together with the senate and the people, the household gods and Great Gods; his bright brows pour out a twin flame, and upon his head his father's Julian star is glittering. Elsewhere Agrippa towers on the stern; with kindly winds and gods he leads his squadron; around his temples, glowing bright, he wears the naval crown, magnificent device, with its ships' beaks. And facing them, just come from conquering the peoples of the dawn, from the red shores of the Erythraean Sea – together with barbaric riches, varied arms – is Antonius. He brings with him Egypt and every power of the East and farthest Bactria; and – shamefully – behind him follows his Egyptian wife.¹²⁰

The shield in general deals with a specific overview of Roman history, focusing only on unique events and individuals that are important to show how Augustus' Rome is the natural goal of all these events.¹²¹ The smaller scenes before have conditioned our viewing of these larger scenes at Actium. The sound and motion in the previous scenes were minimalized and controlled by the poet's direction.¹²²

Vergil deters any sense of waves moving by describing them as glittering with gold. The stage is set for the battle of Actium and each figure makes an appearance. Like the static vignettes described before it, the scene at Actium is fragmented. The audience visualizes the figures, but the figures do not perform any action. Vergil describes Agrippa's leadership and then the crown he wears. The description of Antonius does not move the narrative forward, but merely provides a small back story that is filled out by the audience. Vergil's description of the

¹²⁰ Aeneid, 8.874-95.

¹²¹ Heffernan, 1993: 31. Heffernan notes, "The reader is repeatedly invited to visualize the scenes on the shield even as the narrator's language converts those scenes into a kind of history. 'You could have observed' Porsenna in a rage, 'you could have seen' all Leucata seething with war."

¹²² Heffernan, 1993: 30. "More than half the ninety-eight lines of Vergil's ekphrastic commentary concern the victory of Augustus in the battle of Actium and his triumphal return to Rome; we can safely infer that Vergil fully intended to celebrate him as the savior of Rome and as its new god of peace".

figures “facing” each other makes it easy to visualize the figures standing next to each other. The next scene implies sound and movement, only to be diminished as Vergil takes the focus off the battle and moves on to the celebration at the end.

The squadrons close headlong; and all the waters foam, torn by drawn-back oars and by the prows with triple prongs. They seek the open seas; you could believe the Cyclades, uprooted, now swarm upon the waters or steep mountains had clashed with mountains as the crewmen thrust in their great galleys at the towering sterns. Torches of hemp and flying darts of steel are flung by hand, and Neptune’s fields are red with strange bloodshed. Among all this the queen calls to her squadrons with their native sistrum; she has not yet looked back at the twin serpents that swim behind her.¹²³

These colorful scenes contain the most vivid examples of sound and motion on the entire shield. We the audience, however, have not been conditioned to pay close attention to these details. This passage is preceded by Cleopatra and followed by the Egyptian queen calling out to her squadrons with their native sistrum.¹²⁴ Vergil has not presented us with cinematic description; therefore the audience can visualize this scene as yet another snapshot belonging to a panel on the shield’s artistic representation, much like the panels on the Temple of Juno. Vergil, pulling from the Homeric model, reminds us of the making of the shield.

The Lord of Fire had fashioned her within the slaughter, driven on by wave and west wind, pale with approaching death; but facing this, he set the Nile, his giant body mourning, opening wide his folds and all his robes inviting the defeated to his blue-gray breast and his sheltering streams. But entering the walls of Rome in triple triumph, Caesar was dedicating his immortal gift to the Italian gods: three hundred shrines throughout the city. And the streets reechoed with gladness, games, applause; in all the temples were bands of matrons, and all in all were altars; and there, before these altars, slaughtered steers were scattered on the ground. Caesar himself is seated at bright Phoebus’ snow-white porch, and he reviews the spoils of nations and he fastens them upon the proud doorposts.¹²⁵

At line 923 we are reminded of Vulcan and his construction of the shield. His presence as the maker of the shield is overshadowed by Vergil’s direction in highlighting the images he wishes

¹²³ Aeneid, 8.896-908.

¹²⁴ Aeneid, 8.905-06.

¹²⁵ Aeneid, 8.923-40.

to show the audience. The audience knows that Vulcan is not present here, that there is no progress and hence no emphasis on the movement or sound the images may be making. The images that glitter in gold, silver or steel are meant to freeze the images so that they can be visualized on an actual shield. Vergil's ekphrasis is a standout example of an obedient ekphrasis. The audience was intended to pass over the details that Vergil leaves out. As Zanker notes that, "The criteria used in selecting the greatest figures of Roman history made it possible to eliminate certain periods better forgotten, especially those of internal conflict, and to present a consistently harmonious picture."¹²⁶ Just when you think there will be play by play narrative of the Battle of Actium, we get absolutely nothing. Cleopatra shouts at her men, the gods make their appearance, and Augustus is seen celebrating in Rome. Not a single figure gets direct speech, or even implied speech, and no figure performs any action in the description.

The last scenes on the Shield of Aeneas, that of Augustus' triple triumph, feature a number of moments that imply a presence of sound and motion. The scene of contemporary Roman public celebrating Caesar's victory might be the scene that the audience would most easily identify with. This is comparable to the silent king and the clamor of ordinary life on the Shield of Achilles. By this point in the ekphrasis, however, our attention is not drawn towards the contrast between the grand figures of Rome and the ordinary public. We are not meant to wonder about the ending of the triumph, we have been encouraged and directed by Vergil to imagine Augustus and his triumph. In an artistic representation, it would not be imperative for the artist to depict the applause from the crowd; rather it could just depict a set of figures standing next to one another looking over at Augustus. Despite their static nature, the images on the shield are meant to be iconic. By contrast the Shield of Achilles is not embedded with iconic

¹²⁶ Zanker, 1988: 211.

figures; it instead challenges the importance of the particulars by focusing on the recurrence of war and peace.

The Shield of Achilles “details a timeless realm of universals, strife and peace, the processes of law and life, seasonal activities, a dancing floor that celebrates art.”¹²⁷ These are images that require significant narration, violations of the “obedient” ekphrasis that allows the viewer to consistently visualize the work of art being described. Putting the shields into the context of the larger narrative, the universal images on the Shield of Achilles containing anonymous mortals are carried immediately into battle by the most famous warrior in antiquity, whereas the Shield of Aeneas features some of western civilizations most famous elite men but it does not get carried into battle immediately. The viewing of its creation isn’t even that important, but once the shield is completed, the hero Aeneas goes missing for almost an entire book. This may be comparable to the reactions to the shields by each hero. There is no real significance to Achilles’ reaction to the shield, as he is a figure who mirrors the cyclic nature of war on the shield. Ironically, the vignettes on the Shield of Aeneas are presented as prophecies to Aeneas and significantly, he does not understand what he sees, despite Vergil’s heavy-handed authoritative interpretive strategy. Vergil effectively undoes the purpose of the shield and it is not incidental that the hero, who simply does not get it, disappears for an entire book, whereas the hero of the *Iliad* immediately carries out his plan to ravage the Trojan army and duel with Hektor.

The Shield of Achilles has a monumental role in the context of the overall narrative of the *Iliad*. It serves as recapitulation of the narrative up until that point, it calls upon several scenes throughout to inform the narrative on the shield, and it marks a dramatic turning point in

¹²⁷ Putnam, 1998: 167.

Achilles' anger. By contrast the Shield of Aeneas' role in the context of Vergil's narrative is ambiguous. Aeneas disappears in book 9 and all the drama that the shield's description built up is diminished. The Temple of Juno scene fits thematically into the narrative, and it allows Vergil to reprise the story of the *Iliad* and later finish the story with Aeneas' telling of the fall of Troy. Aeneas' reaction to Vulcan's shield is confusing, and does not create much emphasis for any greater purpose. The future had already been prophesized to Aeneas in the underworld and Aeneas' use of the shield really only contributes to his fulfilling of his destiny. The obedient ekphrasis of the Shield of Aeneas highlights Vergil's directed approach to telling a story. He directs our viewing of parts of the shield in his description and allows the audience to consistently visualize his vignettes. The audience's reading of the shield mirrors the role of destiny and divinely ordained historical "plan" laid out in the rest of the poem. Another difference is that Vergil's audience is meant to know a history – that represented on the shield – which is a consequence of the events in the poem, and it comes as no surprise that the characters in the narrative are ignorant of this history. By contrast, the *Iliad* does not offer a historical vision that implicates the audience. Arguably, the Shield of Aeneas is an "aside" directed to the audience.

Conclusion

The key differences between the ekphrasis in Homer and Vergil, specifically the descriptions of the two shields, have been, to some extent, obscured by modern definitions of ekphrasis and their more limited focus upon the description of a physical object and static work of art. Homer's ekphrasis of the Shield of Achilles focuses on a narrative that involves active

participation from the audience, who in Homer's time, would have been listening and interpreting his words visually. The ekphrasis predominately uses sound and motion to animate its figures in ways that are too complex to be represented in a static picture.¹²⁸ The modern definition of ekphrasis leaves the shield fractured and restricted to an art form that ignores the passages in the shield that defy representation as a static picture. Vergil's ekphrasis of the Shield of Aeneas restricts the audience's participation by directing our eyes and our reading of the shield. The ekphrasis emphasizes iconic figures and memorable moments in Roman history that appear to progress naturally to the golden age of Augustus. The vignettes are more appropriate for a modern definition of ekphrasis, or one that is more inclined to be obedient. Significantly, Vergil's text is a fixed text and not one that was composed in performance. This gives even more control to the author, Vergil, who openly exercises this direction throughout the shield.¹²⁹

The Shield of Achilles is a battleground of emotions that is all encompassing.¹³⁰ The ekphrasis is not a momentary pause in the action for the audience to rest and gaze at something irrelevant to the larger narrative. The major themes that dominate the narrative are reflected in the shield's vivid description.¹³¹ The contrast of the destructive nature of war and the clamor of the ordinary, peaceful life and its striking return to violence that begets more peace reveals the cyclical nature of the world, and significantly the shield accomplishes this with a cast of

¹²⁸ One of the most explicit examples of complex movement comes from the final scene where the young men and young girls, dancing, form rows, and run, rows crossing each other. Capturing such intricate movement in a static picture would be difficult.

¹²⁹ Vergil directs our eyes and our attention by telling us exactly where to look on the shield. He guides us with his opening phrase, almost like stage directions: "Next, Not far from this, Carved in the upper part was Manlius, Here in relief, Away from these scenes, etc."

¹³⁰ Winkler, 2007: 49. To borrow the words from American writer-director Samuel Fuller, the Shield of Achilles "is like a battleground: love, hate, action, violence, death. In one word: emotions."

¹³¹ Heffernan, 1993: 10. Heffernan argues that the scenes mirror the world of the poem, citing Kenneth Atchity in arguing that "the shield microcosmically reflects the whole 'thematic expanse' of the Iliad."

anonymous cities and people.¹³² What gets underscored in the narrative is the recurrence of war and peace.¹³³ A substantial part of the narrative on the Shield of Achilles invites us to recall scenes throughout the larger narrative, but the heroes are no longer important, neither is the sacking of the city of Troy. All of these essential elements are stripped away and we are left with only the bare bones.¹³⁴

A more appropriate way to modernize a definition of Homeric ekphrasis in a way that restores the importance of features overlooked in prevailing understandings of the device would be through cinematic description. Homer leads the audience on an imaginative journey throughout the *Iliad*, taking us through numerous battles, jumping from the Trojan camp to the Greek camp, from Olympus to Mt. Ida and so forth. Strauss notes that this allows “his listeners to share in the re-representation of the heroic world the Muses have entrusted to him.”¹³⁵ The active participation invites interpretation and makes the description all the more fluid. Though describing Homer’s scenes as “cinematic” may seem anachronistic, it is undeniable that the scenes on the Shield of Achilles are spatial, moving and lively.¹³⁶

¹³² Oliver Taplin, “The Shield of Achilles Within the *Iliad*,” *G & R* 27 (1980): 14. Taplin suggests that these scenes are spotted throughout the poem itself. He suggests that “there lay behind the *Iliad* the whole world of peace and ordinary life, but only glimpsed occasionally through gaps or windows in the martial canvas which fills the foreground.”

¹³³ The wedding festival contrasted by the besieged city, juxtaposed with the happy herdsmen playing on their pipes, next comes the men who kill them, followed by the triple-ploughed field; the happy (but silent) king; the reapers; the youths playing and singing with a lyre; the dancing people; the lions who gulp the black blood and the inward guts of the ox; and finally the climatic dancing scene.

¹³⁴ Taplin: 14. Troy embodies elements of both cities depicted on the shield. Taplin says, “Again and again we are given fleeting glances of wives and families, native rivers, fertile estates, and beautiful treasures. They have left these to go to war, and many shall never return.”

¹³⁵ Strauss Clay, 2011: 26. Strauss points out that cognitive study has demonstrated the importance of the role of visual memory in storytelling in oral traditions. Strauss states that she is basing her discussion of imagery on book by David Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes*.

¹³⁶ Strauss Clay, 2011: 30. Homer’s divine Muse “can zoom out for a sweeping view of two armies charging, focus in on blood spattered chariot wheels or the perfect breasts of Aphrodite, fade into an informative little flashback, or fast forward to anticipate a warrior’s death.”

A cinematic description as a definition for Homer's ekphrasis argues that rather than painting (or forging) the Shield of Achilles, it would make more sense to use a medium such as film to showcase the complexities of the language.¹³⁷ Sound and motion would be covered in this dimension.¹³⁸ As opposed to the fixed definition of a work of art, cinematic description allows for sound and movement to weave its way through to the foreground. By contrast the Shield of Aeneas, an ekphrasis more fitting to its modern, narrow definition, minimizes sound and motion and focuses on static images, or vignettes. Homer's vivid imagery, which depends so heavily on his oral performance, is lost in the modern definition of ekphrasis. Our reading so heavily relies on printed text as the standard and until a more effective definition arises; our first inclination will be to render these passages as still images that are monumental, in that they are meant to be gazed at.

An alternative way of thinking about Homer's ekphrasis of the Shield of Achilles, in effect, offers an alternative interpretation of the shield's context in the *Iliad*. The shield's emphasis on anonymity reminds us that the particulars of the main narrative are irrelevant when thinking about the recurrence of the themes that comprise the poem. What is important on the shield is not the famous heroes and their famous deeds, but the cycle by which their fame is a part of. Like variations on a theme, the names of iconic figures may change in the passing of time, but the actions that they are remembered for, the world in which they live in, don't change. The Shield of Achilles reminds us that the Trojan War, the foundation upon which the *Iliad* is wrought, is merely one event in a universe of similar events. The beauty of a cycle is that there is no end and there is no beginning. The moon waving into fullness is only a point of its entire

¹³⁷ Winkler, 2007: 47. But other examples, such as concepts of duty, honor and ethical behavior; of religious practices and the importance and functions of numerous gods would be difficult to get across to a modern audience.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 50. There are numerous aspects of the *Iliad* that are "the stuff" of film. ¹³⁸ "The text, as it were, contains its own screenplay, with staging directions, hints at camera angles, and points about editing."

cycle; the young men who follow the circles of the dance explicitly imply the repetitive nature of a cycle; to the heralds who sit in a sacred circle of deliberation; all the way to the mighty Ocean River that ran around the rim, these all have in common a theme of a cycle and all of these are variations on that theme. This does not diminish the achievement of the epic, but rather elevates it to the status of an authority on human universals. The Shield of Achilles is a description of the human condition; its vivid imagery and accessibility to interpret allow it to be elevated to such a plain that, in effect, forces a shift in interpreting the poem as a whole. By contrast, the Shield of Aeneas operates on a different level. Its directed reading leaves little room for active participation from the audience. Vergil's direction of the ekphrasis has a larger purpose that parallels the purpose of the larger poem (despite Aeneas' failure to understand). As easy as it is to visualize the many vignettes on the shield, so too is arriving at an interpretation that puts the shield in context with the rest of poem. The shield's goal is to underscore the role of destiny in Vergil's divinely ordained historical "plan" for Aeneas to set the stage for the coming of Rome's greatest moment in the history of western civilization, the golden age of Augustus.

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