

Auden's Homer: "The Shield of Achilles"

W.H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" makes intense demands of its reader. In this talk, I suggest that a knowledge of Homer's *Iliad* deepens Auden's already-powerful argument against heroic violence.

In his introduction to Viking's *Portable Greek Reader*, W.H. Auden speaks of the European education in Classics that was standard thirty-five years before, and has all but vanished by the time he comes to edit this anthology in 1948. "The Shield of Achilles", which Auden wrote three years later, presents a certain challenge. One is tempted to ask what the educated reader of poetry, who has perhaps not happened to read the *Iliad*, far less translated passages from it into English iambic pentameter, will make of this poem that hides the identities of the principals until the last seven lines, yet hints all along that we know just who Homer's actors are in this poem.

Auden had not only Greek and Latin poetry in his extraordinary memory, but great swaths of English poetry as well. The "Shield"'s careful metrical structure, as well as its language, show influences and echoes of Milton, Keats, the Book of Common Prayer, and doubtless much more. The poem's nine stanzas alternate one lyric stanza with a pair of stanzas in rhyme royal. The contents of the stanzas adhere to their meters, such that the lyric stanzas inhabit Auden's (and Achilles') Iliadic world, and every one but the last lyric stanza starts with the same words: "She looked over his shoulder / For ...". The alert reader congratulates herself on identifying Thetis as "she", though the poem only confirms her identity in the final stanza; we can't know at first whose shoulder she looks over. In fact none of Auden's three Homeric players are disclosed until the poem's desolate ending. In each lyric stanza Thetis, who is the first reader of and in the poem, looks at the shield for the sweet cosmos of Homer, and at the end

of each lyric stanza her gaze is filled instead, as is ours, with images of the hellish twentieth century cosmos that the stanzas in rhyme royal relentlessly depict.

The world Thetis expects to see on the shield, which we remember with her from Homer, *is* beautiful, and its context full of reciprocal relationships. In *Iliad* 18 Hephaestus is delighted that Thetis, “long-robed”, “silver-footed”, has come to him to give him the chance to repay her for an old kindness, by making the shield for her son. The bond of sympathy between Thetis and her son Achilles shows as each comprehends the other’s loss. The depiction even of violence and dismemberment throughout the *Iliad* is famously exquisite, for how else could it be heroic? Auden however recreates the world of *Iliad* 18, and as Oliver Taplin says (1980) reforges the shield, to make heroic violence implausible. On the shield instead we see, three times repeated in response to Thetis’ searching gaze, the landscape of twentieth century sadism, the grim prospect of the world shaped by violence, the annihilation of beauty and culture.

Auden’s final (lyric) stanza, in which the Homeric characters are each named at last and furnished with an epithet, is heart-breaking:

The thin-lipped armorer,
Hephaestos, hobbled away,
Thetis of the shining breasts
Cried out in dismay
At what the god had wrought
To please her son, the strong
Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
Who would not live long.

But perhaps the Classicist's heart breaks a little more, and this may explain Taplin's defensive insistence that in the "Shield" Auden has failed to understand Homer. It seems on the contrary that Auden has understood the *Iliad* perfectly, and has written his own poem to say it is wrong. The "Shield of Achilles" seems to be using every rhetorical gesture to move us to desolation and to feel with Thetis loss and pain as we look for the glory, as well as the warmth, that is not there. The better Auden's reader knows the *Iliad* the more of it there is to lose and, one might say, the more Auden's poem succeeds: Homer's heroic figures are hardened, hopeless, vicious; there never was a glorious war.

Bibliography

Auden, W.H. 1973. *Forewards and Afterwords*. New York, Vintage Books.

Taplin, Oliver. 1980. "The Shield of Achilles within the *Iliad*," *Greece and Rome* 27:1-21.