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16. Thetis and the Shield of Achilles – Reading the *Iliad* with Auden

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1. Introduction

W. H. Auden's poem 'The Shield of Achilles', which first appeared in print in 1952 and was published as the title poem of the collection *The Shield of Achilles* in 1955, has been interpreted variously, according to its multiple layers of meaning.¹ The poem rewrites Hephaestus' making of the shield for Achilles in *Iliad* book 18, replacing peaceful scenes of country and civic life reminiscent of some images on the Homeric shield, that Auden's Thetis expects to see, with scenes of brutality and inhumanity of modern warfare and society, which the smith-god actually places on the shield.² In his review of the poem shortly after its publication, Jarrell called it 'an impressive, carefully planned, entirely comfortless poem'.³ As Mendelson puts it, it has become 'an anthology piece thanks to its apparently straightforward sentiments against war, cruelty, impersonality and regimentation', though 'its covert themes are Auden's argument with himself about his art and his relation to it'.⁴ MacDiarmid further articulates

I would like to thank the colleagues at 'Thetis' Panel of the Celtic Conference in Classics in Coimbra in June 2019 from whose comments this version has very much benefitted. I am also indebted to Suman Gupta, Jan Haywood and Lucia Presentacion Romero Mariscal for their helpful comments on the conference version of this essay and their bibliographical suggestions.

¹ Auden (1955) 35-37. The quotations from the poem in this essay are from Auden (2007) 594-596, which has minor differences in spelling and punctuation from the original version. See also the version in Auden (1979) 206-208 which also shows minor differences in spelling and/or punctuation to both.

² In Auden's poem the smith-god's name is spelt 'Hephaestos', but I am using the more common English spelling 'Hephaestus' throughout this article.

³ Jarrell (1955) 227.

⁴ Mendelson (2004) 59-60.

Auden's uneasy relationship with art by arguing that the poem is about art as 'a means of disenchantment, through which our expectations for the absolute are answered with the contingent and derivative', showing art's inability to convey moral and spiritual values.⁵ Taplin observes that 'Auden was disturbed that the great poem of war should include the shield of Achilles, and insisted that art must present war in all its brutal inhumanity.'⁶

As a Homerist, I have been puzzled and intrigued by Auden's version of the shield of Achilles. He seems to challenge us not only as to how to read his poem, but also as to how to read the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* and the *Iliad* as a whole. One of the most significant changes that Auden has made to the original tale of the making of the shield is the role of Thetis in the scene. In *Iliad* 18 Thetis does not follow Hephaestus into his workshop (468 τὴν μὲν λίπεν αὐτοῦ 'he left her there'). By introducing Thetis as an anxious viewer of Hephaestus' making of the shield, Auden reminds us that the shield reflects not only the story of Achilles but also that of Thetis.⁷ Moreover Auden's dystopian vision, though deliberately contrasted with happier vignettes on the Iliadic shield, seems to point the reader to some other aspects of the *Iliad* beyond the shield. This essay is an attempt to re-read Homer through the lens of Auden's poem and subsequently examine Auden's poem, à rebours, through the Homeric lens.

2. The Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*

⁵ MacDiarmid (1990) 130.

⁶ Taplin (1980) 17.

⁷ The theme of 'Thetis in the forge of Hephaestus', however, was popular in Pompeiian wall-painting. In one example from the House of Paccius Alexander (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli 9529), the shield is literally reflecting Thetis's image like a mirror. Cf. Hardie (1985) 19 and Villing, Fitton, Donnellan and Shapland (2019) 80.

First of all, I would like to look at the structure of Achilles' shield as depicted in *Iliad* 18, which can be summarized as in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The scenes on the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18

(1)	The Earth, the Sky and the Sea	483-489
(2)	The City at Peace	491-508
(3)	The City at War	509-540
(4)	Ploughing (spring)	541-549
(5)	Reaping (summer)	550-560
(6)	The Vintage (autumn)	561-572
(7)	Cattle (winter)	573-586
(8)	Sheep (winter)	587-589
(9)	The Dance	590-606
(10)	Oceanus	607-608

The current academic consensus on the significance of the shield of Achilles appears to be that it is 'a microcosm of the world and all that is in it'.⁸ The scenes on it do not appear to have anything directly to do with the story of Achilles, but to depict the wider world, with cities and countryside, war and peace, work and pleasure, horror and joy, bounded by the sky in the

⁸ Alden (2011) 796. Cf. Anderson (1976) 5-6, with his references to some of the most influential studies leading to this view, especially Lessing (1901), Reinhardt (1961), Schadewaldt (1965) and Marg (1971). See also Stansbury-O'Donnell (1995) 315: 'The poet's choice of scenes transforms the shield into a microcosm of the world of the *Iliad*, providing its listeners and readers with both a retrospective and prospective picture of the course of the poem and making them think about the price of the war by its contrast with scenes of peace.' For these and other angles from which the shield has been interpreted, see Rutherford (2019) 25-32.

middle and Oceanus encircling the whole. Some argue that this lack of specific reference to Achilles is precisely what gives the shield the universal significance.⁹ If the shield is to represent the whole world, then, by carrying it, Achilles is surely carrying the weight of the world.¹⁰ This seems to correspond symbolically to his role as observed by Slatkin, that by not being born to Zeus as the son ‘stronger than his father’, but to a mortal father and dying young, he is sustaining the status quo of the Olympian universe.¹¹ If so the shield is also part of Thetis’ story, not only because she commissions it on Achilles’ behalf, but also because she ensured that she gave birth to a son who was destined to be stronger than his father, not for Zeus, but for Zeus’ grandson Peleus.

The emphasis on Thetis’ role in Auden’s poem also prompts us to look for more signs of her story in the context of the making of the shield. We need not look very far to find the synopsis of her life story, which is told in *Il.* 18.429-461. In her speech to Hephaestus by which she commissions Achilles’ arms, Thetis recounts her story: her unique position among the goddesses and Nereids in being forced to marry a mortal (429-435);¹² she gave birth to a son whom she brought up like a young tree in an orchard (436-438; ἄλωή at 438 here means orchard or vineyard); that she sent him in the curved ships to fight in Troy and will never be able to welcome him back to Peleus’ house (439-441); he has sorrows even while he lives and she is powerless to help him (442-443), because Agamemnon dishonoured him and he withdrew from

⁹ Cf. Anderson (1976) 6, referring to Reinhardt (1961) 405, Marg (1971) 38 and Sheppard (1922) 8.

¹⁰ In this sense Achilles’ relationship with his shield is not so unlike Aeneas’ with his shield as the symbol of Rome’s future (*Verg. Aen.* 8.731), with which Lessing contrasts Achilles’ shield at Lessing (1901) 137, except that Achilles’ burden is significantly larger. Cf. Edwards (1991) 208.

¹¹ Slatkin (1991) 101.

¹² For Thetis’ unique position among goddesses in having been forced into a marriage with a mortal, see Yamagata (2020) 16.

the battle (444-450); but by lending his armour to Patroclus and sending him out instead to save the Argives, he lost both his dear friend and his arms (451-456); therefore she has come to ask Hephaestus to make him a new set of armour (457-462). A scholiast (bT) has labelled this passage as a typically ‘feminine’ moan instead of a straight answer to Hephaestus’ question (424-427).¹³ Likewise Aristarchus athetized 444-456.¹⁴ However, if the shield is somehow meant to reflect the story of Thetis, which incorporates that of Achilles, as it clearly does in her reply to Hephaestus, it makes perfect sense for her to present its ‘blueprint’ to its prospective maker.

Turning to the shield itself, I cannot help thinking that it must be significant that its description begins with the earth, the sky and the *sea* (483), the last of which is the abode of Thetis and her family. It must also be significant that the image of Oceanus, her ancestor and therefore also Achilles’, ends the first section (489) as well as the whole description of the shield (607-608).¹⁵ The picture of the universe on the shield therefore can be said to be framed in the story of the origins of Thetis and Achilles.

Then the first human activities that appear on the second scene in the city at peace are a wedding and dancing (491-496), which also seem to correspond to the images on the ninth, penultimate, scene on the shield, where the dancing of ‘unmarried youths and much-courtied maidens (ἡίθεοι καὶ παρθένοι ἀλφεισίβοιαι)’ (593) are depicted.¹⁶ Again, it seems significant

¹³ Cf. Rutherford (2019) 183-184 on 429-461 and the bT-scholia to *Il.* 18.429-431 (Erbse 1975, 519).

¹⁴ Cf. Rutherford (2019) 185 on 444-456, who defends Thetis’ rationale for briefing Hephaestus who has not been involved in the story since Book 1.

¹⁵ Another reminder of the significance of Oceanus to Thetis’ story occurs shortly before she meets Hephaestus, when he recounts to Charis how he was saved and sheltered by Thetis and Eurynome by the stream of Oceanus (*Il.* 18.395-405).

¹⁶ For the correspondence of the two scenes and the recurrence of Oceanus, see Hubbard (1992) 41, n. 67.

that the similar images of wedding and dancing are framing the shield, since the story of the Trojan War and that of Achilles began with the wedding of Peleus and Thetis.¹⁷

Further parallels between the shield and Achilles' story have been pointed out. Anderson argues that the trial scene in the city at peace (497-508) is meant to echo the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon, especially Achilles' refusal to accept Agamemnon's offer of compensation, which Ajax criticizes by contrasting his behaviour with a hypothetical case of a man accepting a blood price for his kinsman (9. 632-638).¹⁸

The scenes related to the city at war (509-540) also contain many elements that are reminiscent of the *Iliad* at large, including the general situation of Troy under siege and particularly the mention of the women, children and older men on the city wall (514-515), recalling Hector's words in 8.517-522 and the *teichoskopia* in 3.146-242.¹⁹ The besiegers' internal debate over how to treat the spoils of the city that they are yet to capture seems to echo both Diomedes' words at 7.400-402 and Hector's thoughts at 22.117-120.²⁰ The scene on the shield of the surprise attack on two shepherds playing pan-pipes (18.525-529) also recalls Achilles' attack on Andromache's brothers while they were tending their sheep and cattle (6.423-424).²¹

The peaceful agricultural scenes of plenty that follows (541-589), especially the picture of the king happily supervising the work on his land (556-557), have been interpreted to

¹⁷ Cf. Hubbard (1992) 29. Alternatively – or in addition – the wedding may allude to that of Paris and Helen, which triggered the war, as Anderson (1976) 11 suggests.

¹⁸ Anderson (1976) 14-15. See also Alden (2011) 794: 'The situation depicted in the two cities bear some relation to THETIS' account of Achilles' dispute with AGAMEMNON and the events leading to Patroklos' death (18.439-461).'

¹⁹ Cf. Anderson (1976) 9-10.

²⁰ Cf. Anderson (1976) 9 and Alden (2011) 794.

²¹ Cf. Alden (2011) 794.

represent the life that Achilles has given up.²² It is this aspect of the shield that creates a tragic contrast with the rest of the poem. We may also be meant to recall the image of Achilles whom Thetis nurtured as a young tree in the orchard (438: ἀλωή) at 18.438 from the scenes of the vintage in the vineyard (561: ἀλωή) at 561-572, which closes with a song for Linus. The Linus-song is a song of lament which many readers find out of place in the otherwise joyous context, but if the scene is echoing Thetis' lament for her son like a young tree, it may be more fitting as a motif on the shield than has often been thought.²³ These and other peaceful scenes are the ones that seem to correspond most closely to what Thetis expects to see on the shield of Achilles in Auden's poem. Having surveyed some evidence for how the shield might relate to the story of Thetis and Achilles, I would now like to turn to Auden's poem.

3. Auden's *The Shield of Achilles*

I have sketched out the structure of Auden's poem with some keywords in Table 2.²⁴ There are nine stanzas to the poem, consisting of four stanzas featuring Thetis (Stanzas 1, 4, 7 and 9, composed of eight three-stress lines) and five stanzas featuring modern life (Stanzas 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8, composed in seven-line verse known as rhyme royal).²⁵

²² Cf. Anderson (1976) 7; Alden (2011) 795. The peace, however, is disturbed by two lions snatching an ox at 579-86. Alden (2011) 795 points out that the lion attack is the subject of many similes and refers particularly to a simile comparing Menelaus to a lion ravaging a bull at *Il.* 17.61-69.

²³ Cf. Tsagalis (2004) 20 for the link between the vegetal imagery of Achilles at 56 and 57 and lamentation. For the meaning of the 'Linus-song', see Rutherford (2019) 218 on 570, Coray and Olson (2018) 253-254 on 570 and Vos (this volume), with bibliography {p. 8 n. 14}.

²⁴ Based on the text in Auden (2007) 594-596.

²⁵ Wetzsteon (2007) 28-29 observes Hardy's influence on Auden's use of alternating stanzas here, creating 'a similar dialogue between naive optimism and harsh reality by using two very distinct stanza forms'.

Table 2: Some keywords in Auden's *The Shield of Achilles*

'Thetis' Stanzas (eight lines)	'Modern' Stanzas (seven lines)
<p>Stanza 1</p> <p>'She looked over his shoulder For ...'</p> <p><u>Not found</u>: 'vines', 'olive trees', 'Marble well-governed cities', 'ships'</p> <p><u>Found</u>: 'An artificial wilderness And a sky like lead'</p>	
	<p>Stanza 2</p> <p>'A plain without a feature', 'No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood', 'Nothing to eat', 'A million eyes, a million boots in line, Without expression, waiting for a sign.'</p>
	<p>Stanza 3</p> <p>'a voice without a face', 'some cause was just', 'No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;'</p>
<p>Stanza 4</p> <p>'She looked over his shoulder For ...'</p> <p><u>Not found</u>: 'ritual pieties, White flower-garlanded heifers, Libation and sacrifice', 'the altar'</p>	
	<p>Stanza 5</p>

	<p>‘Barbed wire’, ‘A crowd of ordinary decent folk Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke’, ‘three pale figures’</p>
	<p>Stanza 6</p> <p>‘The mass and majesty of this world, all That carries weight and always weighs the same, Lay in the hands of others;’</p>
<p>Stanza 7</p> <p>‘She looked over his shoulder For ...’</p> <p><u>Not found</u>: ‘athletes at their games’, ‘Men and women in a dance, Moving their sweet limbs, Quick, quick, to music,’ ‘dancing floor’</p> <p><u>Found</u>: ‘a weed-choked field’</p>	
	<p>Stanza 8</p> <p>‘A ragged urchin, aimless and alone, Loitered about that vacancy;’ ‘a bird’ which avoids ‘his well-aimed stone’, ‘That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third, Were axioms to him, who’d never heard Of any world where promises were kept, Or one could weep because another wept.’</p>
Stanza 9	

'Thetis of the shining breasts Cried out in dismay', 'Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles', 'Who would not live long'	
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The first three 'Thetis stanzas' (1, 4 and 7) begin with the refrain 'She looked over his shoulder | For...', followed by what she did not find on the shield and then followed by what she did see on it.²⁶ The first half of Stanza 1 goes as follows, listing what she looked for but did not find:

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,

'[V]ines' remind us of the vintage scene on the Iliadic shield (esp. *Il.* 18.561-568), with its possible connection with Thetis' lament for Achilles, as we have seen above. There is no mention of olive trees on the Homeric shield, but Achilles' image as a tree can also relate to this. Auden may have introduced them also because the olive branch is commonly known as a symbol of peace.²⁷ 'Marble well-governed cities' appear to refer to the city at peace (490-

²⁶ Daalder (1974) 193 observes Milton's influence in the refrain 'She looked...', which appears to echo '*He looked ...*' and other expressions in lines 555-556, 637-638, 712 and 840 in *Paradise Lost* XI.

²⁷ For the olive as the symbol of peace both in ancient Greece (e.g. the use of olive wreaths at the Olympic Games) and Christian traditions, see Sotiriu (2000) 1172-1174. Daalder (1974) 195 sees Milton's influence in Auden's poem, citing *Paradise Lost* XI.860, which describes the olive leaf that the dove brings back to Noah as a 'pacific sign'. The Old Testament (Genesis 8.11), on the other hand, does not explicitly describe the olive leaf as the symbol of peace.

508).²⁸ No ships appear on the Homeric shield itself, though Thetis specifically mentions that she sent Achilles to Troy in the *ships* (439). The sea appears in the first section of the Homeric shield (483).

In Stanza 4 Thetis looked for ‘ritual pieties’ (line 2), ‘White flower-garlanded heifers’ (line 3) and ‘Libation and sacrifice’ (line 4) which recall the sacrifice of an ox and the preparation for the feast in the harvest scene on the Homeric shield (558-560).²⁹

In Stanza 7 Thetis looked for ‘athletes at their games’ (line 2), which do not belong to the Homeric shield, but remind us of the games hosted by Achilles (*Il.* 23.257-897) for the funeral of Patroclus, at which Thetis stirs up the lamentation among the mourning Greeks (23.14). She also looked for ‘Men and women in a dance’ (line 3), which seem to refer to the wedding scene in the city at peace (18.491-96) and the dance circle towards the end of the Homeric shield (590-605), taking place on ‘a dancing floor’ (χορός 590) that Auden’s Hephaestus did not make (line 7). As noted above, both these scenes evoke the wedding of Peleus and Thetis.

What Thetis did see on the shield in these stanzas are ‘an artificial wilderness’ (Stanza 1), ‘a sky like lead’ (Stanza 1) and ‘a weed-choked field’ (Stanza 7), which are an antithesis to

²⁸ Homeric vocabulary does not have a word for marble. Daalder (1974) 192 argues that Auden is ‘consciously appealing to our sense of a tradition and its virtues rather than a specifically Homeric world.’ He also points out possible echoes in Auden’s poem of some expressions in Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, such as ‘peaceful citadel’ (Stanza 4) and ‘marble’ (Stanza 5).

²⁹ Daalder (1974) 192 convincingly demonstrates the influence of Stanza 4 of Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* on Stanza 4 of Auden’s poem by pointing out the verbal echoes of such words as ‘sacrifice’, ‘altar’, ‘heifer’, ‘garlands’ and ‘pious’.

the well-ploughed land in the Homeric scene of ploughing (541-549) and do not seem to belong to the world of Homer's shield.³⁰

What about the scenes depicted in the stanzas on modern life? I believe there, too, are some reflections of the *Iliad*, even if not all images are relevant. Auden as a classicist is not likely to have made a naïve dichotomy between the idealized heroic world of Homer and the dystopian world of today.³¹

Stanza 2 begins with further description of the 'artificial wilderness' of Stanza 1:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,

No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,

Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,

³⁰ Lead does not feature on the Homeric shield, which is made of bronze (or copper cf. Coray and Olson (2018) 194-95 on *Il.* 18.474-75), gold, silver and tin. A 'sky like lead' must have been made of lead, looking like lead with all its negative connotations, including being the material for bullets (I owe this observation to Gary Vos). It may also be worth noting Auden's well documented fascination with lead mines since his childhood, which may have prompted his choice of this metal as a symbol of desolation. For Auden's fascination with lead mines, see Carpenter (1981) 13-14 and Osborne (1980) 13.

³¹ Cf. Fuller (1998) 449: 'Auden was aware that the function of descriptions of shield-decoration in classical epics could be to represent life as it generally and eternally is, both in war and in peace (see, for example, "Aeneid" for our time', *Nation*, 10 March 1951): his poem is claiming that the distinction between the two had become in his era almost meaningless.' See also Summers (1984) 220: 'Auden's point, then, is not that the Homeric idealization of war contrasts with contemporary militarism, but that the heroic age contained within it the seeds of modern dehumanization.'

A plain without grass, absence of neighbourhood and absence of food all look like an antithesis to the scenes of plenty on the Homeric shield. The remainder of the stanza depicts the soldiers standing in this wilderness:

Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, wating for a sign.

Although it is expected to be a scene of modern warfare, the soldiers waiting for a sign remind us of the ambush in the scene of the city at war on the Iliadic shield (*Il.* 18.520-522) as well as the silent march of the anonymous soldiers in *Il.* 3.8-14.

In Stanza 3 ‘a voice without a face’ out of the air (line 1) could easily be the voice of the oracle dictating that Troy must fall in the tenth year of the war or that Achilles must die young.³² ‘[S]ome cause was just’ (line 2) reminds us of Agamemnon’s words justifying the war due to Paris’ breach of the code of hospitality (*Il.* 2.356) or his advice to his brother Menelaus not to spare any male Trojan, not even a little boy or baby in his mother’s womb (*Il.* 6.55-60). The soldiers silently marching in ‘Column by column in a cloud of dust’ (line 5) again echo *Il.* 3.8-14, which describes the dust stirred up by the march of silent soldiers. Mendelson sees the

³² Cf. Bahlke (1970) 170: ‘The lines here form a comment on the perverse logic which leads men in all ages to create enemies and fight them; the artificial wilderness is a plain indifferent to the multitudes of men who wait there for some sign – voices of the gods in the Homeric worlds, the voices of political leaders and dictators in the modern world.’

mood of the Cold War era in this stanza, but the suppression of freedom of expression and ‘dispassionate conformity’ can be seen in such passages in the *Iliad*, too.³³

In Stanza 5 the scene of the execution of ‘three pale figures’ has been related to the Crucifixion (lines 4-7):³⁴

A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

However, here, too, we can find a parallel to the sacrifice of twelve Trojan youths by Achilles at Patroclus’ funeral (*Il.* 23.175-177). Homer, who rarely speaks as a narrator, uncharacteristically comments that this is *κακὰ ἔργα* (176 evil deeds), but those around Achilles, presumably most of them ‘ordinary decent folk’ (line 4), do not say anything.

Stanza 6 is least easy to relate to Homer, but ‘The mass and majesty of this world, all | That carries weight and always weighs the same’ (lines 1-2) seems to echo Achilles’ shield itself and its symbolic meaning. The powerlessness of people who are ‘small’ (line 3) and ‘could not hope for help’ (line 4) when the power ‘[I]ay in the hands of others’ (line 3) seems no different from the powerlessness of people in Homer.

In Stanza 8 again I hear echoes of Homer in ‘A ragged urchin, aimless and alone, | Loitered about that vacancy.’ (lines 1-2) which reminds us/the reader of Achilles sulking on

³³ Mendelson (1999) 362: ‘... the collective impulse was now expressed in dispassionate conformity, mass communications, and statistical answers to ethical questions.’ An example of enforcement of conformity can be found in Odysseus’s harsh treatment of the outspoken Thersites at *Il.* 2.244-271.

³⁴ E.g. Summers (1984) 220, Fuller (1970) 228, Smith (1997) 63.

his beachside camp, withdrawn from battle and lounging around aimlessly.³⁵ It may be fanciful, but the bird at whom the urchin aims a stone (lines 2-3) reminds me of the fact that one of the games that Achilles sets for Patroclus' funeral is pigeon shooting (*Il.* 23.850-883)!

The following three lines (lines 4-7), 'That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third, | Were axioms to him, who'd never heard | Of any world where promises were kept,' come as no shock to those of us acquainted with Homeric epic. After all it was the rape of Thetis or the abduction of Helen that started the story of Troy. Patroclus was killed by Euphorbus (*Il.* 16.806-815) and Hector (16.820-857). Dolon was killed by Odysseus and Diomedes, who did not keep their promise to spare him (*Il.* 10.454-457). This is not the only time that promises are broken in the *Iliad*, including the breach of the truce in Book 3. Although Achilles eventually weeps with Priam in *Iliad* 24, earlier he took no pity on the weeping Lycaon in *Il.* 21.97-135. Violence and brutal inhumanity, especially those caused by war, were already clear to see in the *Iliad*.³⁶ We only need to read them in the reflection on Auden's shield.

In Stanza 9, we meet Thetis again, named at last, though we had worked out who it was from the title of the poem and the context. Hephaestus, too, is named as 'The thin-lipped armorer, | Hephaestos' as he 'hobbled away' (lines 1-2). Here Thetis bears Auden's original epithet to be 'Thetis of the shining breasts' (line 3), instead of 'of the silver feet'.³⁷ Her 'silver feet' have been interpreted as possibly referring to water around her feet or her white feet glistening while wet as she comes out of the sea.³⁸ By analogy, therefore, her epithet here could

³⁵ Cf. Rodway (1984) 150: '... the legendary hero (burlesqued by the urchin)...'

³⁶ Cf. Summers (1984) 220, quoted in note 31 above.

³⁷ The epithet ἀργυρόπεζα (silver-footed) is unique to Thetis in Homeric epic, applied to her 12 times in the *Iliad* (1.538, 556; 9.410; 16.222, 574; 18.127, 146, 369, 381; 19.28; 24.89, 120), once in the *Odyssey* (24.92) and once in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (319).

³⁸ Cf. Pulleyn (2000) 258 on *Il.* 1.538 for the former and Hinckley (2001) esp. 149 for the latter interpretation.

be referring to her wet, shining breasts as she emerges from the swell.³⁹ We must also note the significance of the attention given to her breasts instead of her feet, for the Homeric mother will expose her breasts only in order either to feed her baby or to lament its death. Therefore, Thetis can be seen here to be cast as the mother above all, in her dual role of nurturing (as in her story to Hephaestus at *Il.* 18.438) and sheltering (as she did for Dionysus at *Il.* 6.135-137 whom she took into her bosom (κόλπος) and for Hephaestus at *Il.* 18.395-405) and of mourning her son.⁴⁰ The epithet is also amplified by her action – she ‘[c]ried out in dismay/At what the god had wrought/To please her son,’ (lines 4-6), lamenting at the grim world she has to send her son into, while trying to please and shield her son as much as she can.⁴¹ As in the *Iliad*, she is very much a mourning mother.

The epithets that Auden applies to Achilles also need closer attention (lines 6-8):

the strong

Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles

Who would not live long

I believe even into his grim modern version of the shield Auden incorporated the human connection between Achilles and Priam, with the phrase ‘Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles’.

³⁹ The image of Thetis with bare breasts may go back to Cat. 64.18. Cf. Hunter (1991) 254. (I owe this reference to Maciej Paprocki.)

⁴⁰ For Thetis as the mourning mother, cf. Slatkin (1991) esp. 85-105; Tsagalis (2004); Kelly (2012) 249-250; Currie (2016) 119-120, and the contributions of Massetti and Cannavale {this volume}.

⁴¹ By commissioning the shield for Achilles, she can be seen to be acting as his shield herself in a sense. (I owe this observation to Jan Haywood.) If so, the suggestion of Daalder (1974) 189 that Thetis’ ‘shining’ breasts are meant to be metallic can be connected to her function as Achilles’ ‘shield’.

‘Iron-hearted’ is a description shared between Achilles and Priam in the *Iliad*.⁴² Hector describes Achilles’ heart as being of iron (σιδήρεος) when the latter refuses to release his body to his family (*Il.* 22.357).⁴³ In the end, however, he does allow Priam to ransom Hector’s body, thereby proving that his heart was not made of iron after all. On the other hand, Priam’s heart is described as being of iron (σιδήρειον) both by Hecuba (*Il.* 24.205) and Achilles (*Il.* 24.521) for his audacity to risk his life to ransom Hector’s body. This epithet therefore connects the two men and evokes the scene of their reconciliation in *Il.* 24.485-672, which is ‘very much about someone weeping “because another wept”’.⁴⁴

Likewise the epithet ‘man-slaying’ evokes the connection between Achilles and Priam through Hector. Hector is the only hero in the story of the *Iliad* who is described with this epithet and as often as 11 times.⁴⁵ The only other Iliadic hero to whom it is applied is Achilles, but only to his hands, which is applied three times.⁴⁶ On one of those occasions (*Il.* 18.317), he is leading the lamentation for Patroclus, placing his ‘man-slaying’ hands to the dead body of Patroclus. In this scene he is compared to a lion whose cubs are stolen by a hunter, desperately

⁴² Cf. Taplin (1980) 19 n. 7.

⁴³ Hector also expects Achilles to have the strength of iron, judging by his description of him at *Il.* 20.371-372, saying that he has to face Achilles even if his hands are like fire and his strength is like gleaming iron (μένος δ’ αἰθωνι σιδήρω). Cf. Taplin (1992) 227.

⁴⁴ Cf. Fuller (1998) 450, with his reference to Taplin’s quotation of *Il.* 24.503-526 at Taplin (1980) 17-18.

⁴⁵ The epithet is applied to Hector always in the genitive form in the formula Ἐκτορος ἀνδροφόνου (‘of the man-slaying Hector’) and occurs at *Il.* 1.242; 6.498; 9.351; 16.77, 840; 17.428, 616, 638; 18.149; 24.509, 724. There are two other occurrences of the epithet, once applied to the god Ares (*Il.* 4.441) and once to Lycurgus in a story of the past (*Il.* 6.134).

⁴⁶ *Il.* 18.317 = 23.18 χεῖρας ... ἀνδροφόνους (‘man-slaying hands’); *Il.* 24.478-79 χεῖρας | δεινὰς ἀνδροφόνους (‘terrible/man-slaying hands’). Cf. Taplin (1980) 19, n.7, who speculates that Auden derived his epithet ‘man-slaying’ from *Il.* 18.317.

trying to find him and is bitter with anger (318-322), reflecting his anger at Hector. On another occasion (*Il.* 23.18) he is again leading the lament and bidding farewell to Patroclus, promising to feed Hector's body to dogs (23.19-24), again with his desire for revenge even after Hector's death. On the third occasion (*Il.* 24.478-479), however, the epithet is applied to his hands as they were kissed by Priam who has come to ransom Hector's body, with which Achilles does not kill, but to treat Priam kindly (24.508, 671-672). Therefore, the use of the epithet 'man-slaying' to Achilles' hands, given that it is Hector's trademark, comes with great irony and pathos in the *Iliad*. The epithet in Auden's poem is therefore also evoking Achilles' connection with Priam as well as with Hector, and through it the human potential for reconciliation and understanding.

The last line of Auden's poem, 'Who would not live long', is another Homeric epithet in disguise (ὠκύμορος or μινυθάδιος).⁴⁷ Achilles is the only Iliadic hero to whom the former (ὠκύμορος) is applied and it is always spoken by Thetis, either while lamenting Achilles' fate with him (*Il.* 1.417, 18.95) or while appealing to another god to seek their help for him (*Il.* 1.505 to Zeus, *Il.* 18.458 to Hephaestus). The latter (μινυθάδιος) is used for four warriors on the Trojan side, including Hector (*Il.* 15.612),⁴⁸ but also used by Achilles once to describe himself while appealing to Thetis to seek her help to regain his honour (*Il.* 1.352). Therefore, this epithet is closely connected with Thetis as the protecting and mourning mother, aptly in the context of Auden's poem, and at the same time also hinting at the shared fate of Achilles and Hector.

4. Conclusion

⁴⁷ Cf. Taplin (1980) 19, n.7.

⁴⁸ The others are Simoeisios (*Il.* 4.478), Hippothoos (*Il.* 17.302) and Lycaon (*Il.* 21.84).

My re-reading of the Homeric shield of Achilles along with Auden's poem seems to have produced two main results. One is the observation that the Iliadic shield seems to reflect more of the story of Thetis and Achilles than previously thought. The other is that Auden's shield of Achilles appears to echo many negative elements of the *Iliad*, suggesting that war was no more or less inhuman in Homer's time than today. However, Auden's poem has proven not to be 'entirely comfortless', by subtly hinting at the episode of Achilles and Priam as the symbol of human hope and capacity for sympathy and reconciliation. And the story of Thetis as the nurturing and lamenting mother seems to be reflected on both versions of the shield.

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