

Article Response for “The Shield of Achilles within the *Iliad*” by Oliver Taplin

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Homer’s digression into the shield of Achilles is initially bizarre to any audience of the *Iliad*. Why, in the middle of the poem’s longest and the war’s most brutal day of battle, is there a detailed description of this all-encompassing shield? Why as well is does the shield possess beauty, dance, and agriculture, when the shields in the *Iliad* and elsewhere in Homer up to that point had mostly contained terror and demons (among other fearful things)? Taplin does not immediately present his readers with his hypothesis, but weaves it throughout the story and finishes his base argument in the article’s conclusion. His hypothesis can be mostly described as the following: the description of Achilles’s shield in the *Iliad* aligns with the rest of Homer in its balance of an epic battle and poignant beauty, in a similar way to other similes across his works.

After presenting his question and hinting at a hypothesis, Taplin gives context to the shield digression and describes other shields in Homer featuring demons, ghosts, bloodshed, and any number of terrible things used to inspire fear in the enemy. Two of the examples he gives are the shield Agamemnon used in book II and Athena’s aegis. Why, Taplin asks, is Achilles’s shield so different from these others? He references several other authors or artists who chose to almost ignore the way Achilles’s shield was described, choosing to highlight or display only certain parts of the passage. W. H. Auden, for example, in “The Shield of Achilles”, highlights the shield’s odd nature and chooses to align the shield more closely with Auden’s perception of Achilles as “the prototype of the Aryan superman”.

Taplin raises three possible explanations for the shield’s relatively startling attributes. The passage could be: emulating an actual artifact that existed, serving as a break in the battle narrative, or serving as an orator’s tool for free digression. Taplin debunks the first because no trace of such an artifact has been discovered (physically or in literature), and he sets aside the second as well for its unlikelihood—the books following the shield digression serve as a break from the action themselves. Taplin hints further at his own hypothesis in his tabling of the third possibility: Homer, Taplin claims, would not be as revered as he is if the third were the case. The shield is similar to other parts of Homer: by extricating the shield and labeling it as a secondary addition to Homer, one must also extricate other parts of Homer that have the same pattern and serve the same purpose, and in doing so strip Homer of everything that sets him apart from all other writers in history. Part of Taplin’s reason for not being obvious in his argument is that his argument is best built as a rebuttal to an opposing and popular argument suggesting that the shield is an oration tool. This style of writing makes Taplin’s article initially challenging to reconcile but eventually allows him to craft his argument in a robust fashion.

To support his claim, Taplin draws evidence from three categories: the *Odyssey*—namely, the settled societies of various characters in it; similes throughout Homer; and Troy itself within the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey*, we see diction that is similar to the shield digression when various characters in the epic are waxing poetic about their homes and home life. Nestor speaks nostalgically about Pylos and Menelaus laments Sparta and all the peace it offered him. Next, Taplin provides four similes to compare to the shield: the “tranquility of snowscape” 12. 278-86, the fire of Hephaestus that “sweeps through the vegetation, [...] likened to a breeze that dries a newly irrigated plot” of land 21. 346-7, “Agamemnon’s wound [that] hurts like a woman’s labor pains” 11.269-72, and “when Gorgythion is killed his head drops like a poppy-head heavy with seed” (8. 306-7). Taplin lists these similes as examples of times in Homer outside of the shield digression where the audience is forced to have perspective on the brutality of battle by the peace and prosperity featured in the similes. Finally, the audience is brutally reminded of the tragedy of war throughout the *Iliad* when Homer allows us to see glimpses of what Troy once was: the

“other world” that the shield serves as a metaphor for “is seen most directly in Troy itself, since the Trojans still have to live in the setting of their former prosperity and joy.”

Something that Taplin does not address in his comparisons of the shield digression to other parts of Homer is the sheer bulk and detail involved with the shield that is simply not part of any evidence he draws. Specifically, it is true that beauty and peace are referenced in similes and in the *Odyssey* and with respect to Troy before the war, but never in such a capacity as they are weaved in the circles of the shield. The shield is the lengthiest simile in Homer. This is why it stands out, and why Taplin’s argument that it actually suits the story is not an obvious argument and one that is frequently contested. My own rebuttal to this counterargument is that it is entirely possible that the shield of Achilles is the absolute crux of Homer’s style. Not only does it well-represent his ability to balance peace and war in his epics, and thus augment the natural poignancy of battle, but the shield digression is the most climactic and thorough simile he ever used. This claim does not make the shield digression any less suitable for the *Iliad* or to any of Homer’s writing. I will not go down this path, but it is worth noting that Homer is so masterful that even though the shield description (or simile comparing the *Iliad* to the rest of the world) is massive, it is not the most profound. I revere the shield digression, but even I will not label it as the most important simile, merely a possible crux of analogy and certainly the broadest.

Taplin drives home his argument by elucidating the two main heroes’ true legacies: Hector, “remembered above all for his scene with Andromache” and for his failure to defend his homeland than for his victories in battle outside of the *Iliad*; Achilles, known more for his tragic choice of a heroic and early death and for his respect for Priam than for his various single-handed massacres. Few audiences would argue that Achilles and Hector display astounding balance in their character and action. If the evidence Taplin provides in similes or epithets does not convince the reader that the shield description suits Homer, then the well-rounded legacies of the *Iliad*’s two heroes will.

To reduce the shield of Achilles to a poetic hack is to reduce Homer to a layman. Taplin expertly ties together the shield’s description and Homer’s other writing to show that Achilles’s shield is intentional. On its surface, the shield seems an odd digression from battle when it in fact is the crux of Homer’s work as a whole: in an opposite ratio to the *Iliad*, it exhibits Homer’s masterful balance of compassion and vigor. Time and time again “pain and destruction and violent death are compared to fertile agriculture, creative craftsmanship, useful objects and tasks, scenes of peace and innocent delight”. To disregard the shield is to disregard the similes, and to disregard the similes is to splice all of Homer’s work into something almost unremarkable.

The *Iliad* would not be lost without Achilles’s shield. There would still be empathy and compassion tied in with glory and destruction, but Taplin’s point is that the shield’s description suits the story. As most, it is surprising, but it certainly should not be jarring. The digression is as much of a meandering as any simile, and moreover is as powerful as any simile. After establishing that the digression is well in accordance with Homer’s work, the audience is left to consider that the shield of Achilles might just be the most representative passage in Homer. The passage frequently stands out to scholars as *other*, but once it is shown that the passage in fact belongs, its depth could indicate that Homer intended for it to be a sort of crux in his work. “The *Iliad* owes its tragic greatness to Homer’s ability to appreciate and sympathize with both aspects of heroic war,” the destruction and beauty in kind. The duality Homer weaves throughout all of his work, and peaks with the shield of Achilles, which so brazenly pulls the audience out of the *Iliad* and forces it to remember a world outside of war.