



Achilles

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Achilles was supposed to have been immortal. His mother Thetis, a daughter of the god Oceanus, had hoped that Zeus would have been his father. Zeus knew fate, however, and he realized that any child he fathered of Thetis was destined to overthrow him. As a result, Zeus directed her to Peleus, the mortal king of the Myrmidons, since this would preclude any direct danger to his throne.

Thetis was determined to make her son immortal in any event, and she chose to do this by immersing the infant Achilles in the Styx, the flaming river of immortality in the Underworld. She, of course, left the child's foot unprotected, and it was this vulnerability that provided a means for Helen's Trojan husband, Paris, to kill him in the final days of the ten-year Trojan War.

Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* focuses on the prophecy that Achilles was destined to have either a short but glorious life or one that was long but undistinguished. No plans made by Thetis to raise him as a girl in the court of Lycomedes could prevent the young man's heroic manhood from making itself plain. Agamemnon and Odysseus recognize Achilles immediately when the young man claims a warrior's bow rather than women's baubles. Love of glory wins its first battle over love of an anonymous life.

Once Patroclus, Achilles' protege and beloved, dies at the hands of Hector, the greatest of the Trojan warriors, Achilles' immanent death is certain. Paris merely becomes the clumsy agent of fate. Even so, Achilles' death becomes a mythic paradigm for the heroic life involving obscure origins, passionate love, and acceptance of inevitable death as its components. Cook sees this as a series of historical relays, and the final section of her prose poem makes this plain by establishing connections with Astley Cooper (1768-1841), the pioneer anatomist-surgeon whose careful dissection studies made possible medical procedures for life-giving treatments of hernia, cystitis, heart disease, and most notably tuberculosis.

Cook places the poet John Keats at one of Cooper's dissections. Keats had, of course, read George Chapman's translation of Homer and through it the fate of Achilles. Keats was also aware of his own fate to die young from the family curse of tuberculosis. Though hardly the equivalent of Achilles physically, the frail, slight poet relays the heroism of Achilles though his personal courage as well as through his art.

Sources for Further Study

The Atlantic Monthly 289 (February, 2002): 102.

The New Yorker 78 (April 8, 2002): 89.

Publishers Weekly 248 (December 17, 2001): 63.

The Spectator 286 (March 17, 2001): 36.

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