

Peripheral Anthropomorphism and the Fall of Troy

by Alison Earls

For Hector it was animals. Rats, dogs, fish, and quite often horses — sometimes even lions. But for Achilles, it was always dead bodies.

These things appeared to be scattered all around them.

On long journeys. In cities. In forests. In homes that were the most elegant of palaces. Whenever something hooked the edge of each man's peripheral vision, something he did not see clearly, it took on the qualities of an animal. Or a corpse. It was only when Hector turned and looked directly that he saw that the fawn was actually a sack. It was only when Achilles stopped and stared at the boulder by the side of the road that he knew without doubt that it was not a woman who had fallen from a horse.

Two men divided by land. Destined to be only enemies. Yet bound by a similarity of vision that found flesh and bone where neither existed. Briefly. Erroneously. But with rare inspiration.

When each man had been a child, this phenomenon had been a source of fascination, a foundation for storytelling, fruits of a fertile imagination. But as men, as warriors, and especially as heroes, such a reflex could be a distraction if it was allowed.

And too often, Hector allowed it. Perhaps if the tree stump had always been a lion poised to pounce, such apparent weakness would have been understandable. But if it was a heifer or a foal, Hector would still look. And so look away from what was ahead. Away from the road or even from the advancing army.

Hector was a prince of Troy and was destined to fight for his homeland. And he became his obligation. It was all he was. So he had grown to believe that these flashes of imagination were significant. Important signs that foretold dangers or carried counsel

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that would arm him for his duty. So he would move his gaze to see the snake turn into a coil of rope, to see the charging boar become a barrow rolling down a hill, to see a rat on its hind legs become nothing but a branch stuck in the dirt. But to Hector — so driven by his purpose — every dragon by the roadside, every bird and ox that seemed to lurk inside his home, even every insect that appeared to sit itself on the maps he studied, had been put in his mind for some vital purpose. For everything that was in Hector was there to serve Troy and to ensure its safety.

And he saw from the corner of his eye. And he looked and saw with his full vision. And then he wondered what these two images — the imagined and the real — could truly mean.

Achilles' mind created figures much more troubling — a child who had drowned, a man left in pieces by a savage murder — but as a young man he resolved not to look away from his objective to assure himself that he was flanked only by a fallen cloak or a bundle of tools in the flickering shadows of a fire. He chose to ignore the images constructed by his mind and focus on his task, his quest, his triumph. As he hunted in the forest, he did not examine the man who had fallen from the tree nor the girl who had died of terrible starvation. As a child, he had discovered these things to be only logs and sticks, piles of cloth or sacks of apples lying on the ground. And he had smiled. Because he had found his great imagination, a mind that could construct things that did not exist from fragments of truth, memories and curiosity. And as he grew, he resolved to use that mind to achieve the goals that lay ahead.

And so, word spread — when Greece and Troy were certain enemies — that Achilles wore armour given to him by the gods and that his mother, Thetis, had dipped the young Achilles in the river Styx, rendering him invincible. Powerful tales that made for powerful weapons to carry to a war.

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The road to Troy was not without pitfalls and detours for Achilles. But still he made sound use of his lively brain to overcome the obstacles.

And though Hector was himself Prince of the very place to which the Greek warriors would travel, there was much around him that could take his quick mind away and bring the inanimate to life.

So when they met, the two greatest fighters of the Trojan War were both fuelled by rage and loyalty and all the emotions that carry men to murderous combat. But as well they shared an unusual likeness of mind — the Trojan Hector, who could compose creatures and the Greek Achilles, who could conjure corpses. The only difference was the way each had chosen to use his imaginative facility.

At first Hector brandished his sword eyeing Achilles as a soaring eagle would a timid lamb. But as Hector drew back, preparing a deadly thrust, the gleam of his foe's armour reminded him of the supreme nature of Achilles' protection. Accounts of the Greek's indestructible shield daunted Hector and he could not shake them from his chaotic mind. Strewn around the men were the fallen objects of battle — helmets like crouching rabbits, daggers like lizards lurking on the ground — and suddenly Hector found himself lying amongst the rubble, fatally wounded. Breathing his last breath.

And so the Prince of Troy died at the hands of his enemy who was his brother in imagination.

But as it goes in war, it was not long before Achilles met his own brutal end. Killed without valour by Paris, another Trojan prince. With word of Achilles' invincibility, his rival found a way to overcome the spectre of the unbeatable opponent. A poisoned arrow in Achilles' heel — the only portion said not to have been submerged into the Styx — left Achilles struggling for life.

And as he grappled with mortality, Achilles cried out 'Why? Why am I dying when I used my mind inventively, to look ahead and not be distracted by the images at the corners of my eyes?'

And on Olympus, Zeus had turned away. Only his son Ares stood looking down at that moment and he smiled. The God of War smiled to himself as he viewed the men who had used their minds to create violence and pain. And he smiled that his brothers Mercury — the God of Science and Invention — and Apollo — the God of Poetry,

Music, Medicine and Light — had not been able to face the scene that had played out below.

Hector had looked at what lay beside, Achilles at what lay ahead, but both men had used their brains for battle and for bloodshed and not for finding peaceful solutions to their conflict.

'And that is "why",' the War God smirked. 'That is why your mortal heart fades to its last beat. Because you chose war, glorious bloody war, whose only end is early death.'

