

Ovid *Metamorphoses* 12.71-526 (Achilles and Cycnus; celebration; story of Caeneus, who fights on lapiths side with e.g. Peleus against centaurs)

“And now the Sigeian shores grew red; now Neptune’s son, Cycnus, had given a thousand men to death; now was Achilles pressing on in his chariot and laying low whole ranks with the stroke of his spear that grew on Pelion; and, as he sought through the battle’s press either Cycnus or Hector, he met with Cycnus. (Hector’s fate had been postponed until the tenth year.) Then Achilles, shouting to his horses whose snowy necks were straining at the yoke, drove his chariot full at the enemy and, brandishing his spear with his strong arm, cried: “Whoever you are, O youth, have it for solace of your death that you were slain by Achilles of Thessaly.” So spoke Aeacides. His heavy spear followed on the word; but, although there was no swerving in the well-aimed spear, the flying weapon struck with its sharp point without effect, and only bruised his breast as by a blunt stroke. Then Cycnus said: “O son of Thetis, for rumour has already made you known to me, why do you marvel that I am unscathed?” for he was amazed. “Neither this helmet which you behold yellow, with its horse-hair crest, nor yet this hollow shield which burdens my left arm is intended for a protection; ’tis ornament that is sought from them. Mars, too, for this cause, wears his armour. Remove the protection of this covering: still shall I escape unharmed. It is something to be the son, not of Nereus’ daughter, but of him who rules both Nereus and his daughters and the whole sea besides.” He spoke and hurled against Aeacides his spear, destined only to stick in the curving shield. Through brass and through nine layers of bull’s hide it tore its way, but stopped upon the tenth. Shaking the weapon off, the hero again hurled a quivering spear with his strong hand. Again his foeman’s body was unwounded and unharmed; nor did a third spear avail to injure Cycnus, though he offered his body quite unprotected. Achilles raged at this just like a bull in the broad arena when with his deadly horns he rushes on the scarlet cloak, the object of his wrath, and finds it ever eluding his fierce attack. He examined the spear to see if the iron point had not been dislodged. It was still on the wooden shaft. “Is my hand then so weak,” he said, “and has the strength, which it once had, ebbed away in this case alone? For surely it had strength enough when I as leader of the attack overthrew Lyrnesus’ walls, or when I caused Tenedos and Thebes, the city of Eetion, to flow with their own blood, when the Caïcus ran red with the slaughter of its neighbouring tribes, and when Telephus twice felt the strength of my spear. On this field also, with so many slain, heaps of whose corpses upon the shore I have both made and see, my right hand has been mighty and still is mighty.” He spoke and, as if he distrusted his former prowess, he hurled the spear full at Menoetes, one of the Lycian commons, and smote clean through his breastplate and his breast beneath. As his dying victim fell clanging down head first upon the solid earth, Achilles plucked out the spear from the hot wound and cried: “This is the hand, this the spear with which I have just conquered. I likewise shall use it on this foeman, and may the outcome be the same for him, I pray.” So saying, he hurled again at Cycnus, and the ashen spear went straight and struck, unshunned, with a thud upon the left shoulder, whence it rebounded as from a wall or from a solid cliff. Yet where the spear struck, Achilles saw Cycnus marked with blood, and rejoiced, but vainly: there was no wound; it was Menoetes’ blood! Then truly in headlong rage he leaped down from his lofty chariot and, seeking his invulnerable foe in close conflict with his gleaming sword, he saw both shield and helmet pierced through, but on the unyielding body his sword was even blunted. The hero could brook no more: with drawn-back shield and sword-hilt again and again he beat upon the face and hollow temples of his foe. As one gives way the other presses on, buffets and rushes him, gives him no pause to recover from the shock. Fear gets hold on Cycnus; dark shadows float before his eyes, and as he steps backward a stone lying on the plain blocks his way. As he lies with bent body pressed back upon this, Achilles whirls him with mighty force and dashes him to the earth. Then, pressing with buckler and hard knees upon his breast, he unlaces his helmet-thongs. With these applied beneath his chin he chokes his throat and cuts off the passage of his breath. He prepares to strip his conquered foe: he sees the armour empty; for the god has changed the body into the white bird whose name he lately bore.

This struggle, this battle, brought a truce of many days, and each side laid its weapons down and rested. And while a watchful guard was patrolling the Phrygian walls and a watchful guard

patrolled the trenches of the Greeks, there came a festal day when Cycnus' conqueror, Achilles, was sacrificing to Pallas with blood of a slain heifer. When now the entrails had been placed upon the blazing altars and the odour which gods love had ascended to the skies, the holy beings received their share and the rest was set upon the tables. The chiefs reclined upon the couches and ate their fill of the roasted flesh while they relieved their cares and quenched their thirst with wine. Nor were they entertained by sound of cithern, nor by the voice of song, nor by the long flute of boxwood pierced with many holes; but they drew out the night in talk, and valour was the theme of their conversation. Of battles was their talk, the enemy's and their own, and 'twas joy to tell over and over again in turn the perils they had encountered and endured. For of what else should Achilles speak, or of what else should others speak in great Achilles' presence? Especially did the talk turn on Achilles' last victory and Cycnus' overthrow. It seemed a marvel to them all that a youth should have a body which no spear could penetrate, invulnerable, which blunted the sword's edge. Aeacides himself and the Greeks were wondering at this, when Nestor said: "In this your generation there has been one only, Cycnus, who could scorn the sword, whom no stroke could pierce; but I myself long ago saw one who could bear a thousand strokes with body unharmed, Thessalian Caeneus: Caeneus of Thessaly, I say, who once dwelt on Mount Othrys, famed for his mighty deeds; and to enhance the marvel of him, he had been born a woman." All who heard were struck with wonder at this marvel and begged him to tell the tale. Among the rest Achilles said: "Tell on, old man, eloquent wisdom of our age, for all of us alike desire to hear, who was this Caeneus, why was he changed in sex, in what campaign did you know him and fighting against whom; by whom he was conquered if he was conquered by anyone." Then said the old man: "Though time has blurred my memory, though many things which I saw in my young years have quite gone from me, still can I remember much; nor is there anything, midst so many deeds of war and peace, that clings more firmly in my memory than this...

Then Monychus exclaimed: 'Oh, what a shame is this! We, a whole people, are defied by one, and he scarcely a man. And yet he is the man, while we, with our weak attempts, are what he was before. Of what advantage are our monster-forms? What our twofold strength? What avails it that a double nature has united in our bodies the strongest living things? We are not sons of any goddess nor Ixion's sons, I think. For he was high-souled enough to aspire to be great Juno's mate, while we are conquered by an enemy but half-man! Come then, let us heap stones and tree-trunks on him, mountains at a time! let's crush his stubborn life out with forests for our missiles! Let sheer bulk smother his throat, and for wounds let weight suffice.' He spoke and, chancing on a tree-trunk overthrown by mad Auster's might, he hurled it at his sturdy foe. The others followed him; and in short time Othrys was stripped of trees and Pelion had lost his shade. Buried beneath that huge mound, Caeneus heaved against the weight of trees and bore up the oaken mass upon his sturdy shoulders. But indeed, as the burden mounted over lips and head, he could get no air to breathe. Gasping for breath, at times he strove in vain to lift his head into the air and to throw off the heaped-up forest; at times he moved, just as if lofty Ida, which we see yonder, should tremble with an earthquake. His end is doubtful. Some said that his body was thrust down by the weight of woods to the Tartarean pit; but the son of Ampycus denied this. For from the middle of the pile he saw a bird with golden wings fly up into the limpid air. I saw it too, then for the first time and the last..."