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Trawsnewid Addysg, Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education, Transforming Lives

Achilles' background



parentage

- father not Jupiter but **Peleus** (Jupiter = ancestor; Aeacus is Achilles' grandad on his father's side):
- "I claim to be of the lineage of great Zeus. The father who begot me is one who is lord among the many Myrmidons, Peleus, son of Aeacus; and Aeacus was begotten of Zeus." (Homer *Iliad* 21.187-9, Achilles boasting over the corpse of Asteropaeus)
- (mother = Thetis)



parentage

- Peleus = an Argonaut: “When chosen young men, oaks of Argive adulthood, / Eager to rob the Colchians of a gilded hide, / Ventured the voyage past salt shoals in a swift hull, / Sweeping bluegreen levels with palms of silver fir.” (Catullus 64. 4-7, which shows Peleus and Thetis meeting)
- “Peleus, to whom Jove himself, / The Father of the Gods himself resigned his love.” (Cat. 64.26- 7): why?



parentage

- “... Zeus and glorious Poseidon strove for the hand of Thetis, both of them desiring her to be his beauteous bride, for love enthralled them. Yet the immortal counsels of the gods did not bring that marriage to pass, when they had heard a certain oracle. **For Themis, wise in counsel, spake in their midst, saying how that it was fated that the sea-queen should bear a princely son, who would be stronger than his father,** and who in his hand would wield another weapon, mightier than the thunder-bolt or the stubborn trident, if she were wedded either to Zeus or to his brethren.”
(Pindar, *Isthmian Odes* 8.27ff.; tr. Sandys)

Prometheus

- Alternative version that Prometheus tipped Jupiter off. NB guest at wedding of Peleus and Thetis:
- “Prometheus of crafty heart, / Bearing **faded traces** of the ancient punishment / Which formerly, with limbs fast bound by chain to flint, / He paid by hanging over a sheer precipice.” (Catullus 64.294-7)

Why does Catullus include this detail?

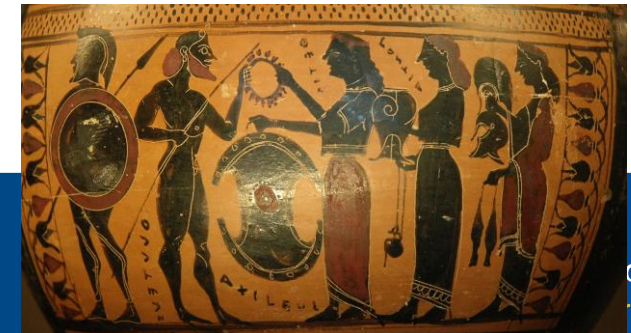


parentage

- “Goddess, tell of great-hearted Aeacides [descendant of Aeacus] and offspring **feared of the Thunderer** and forbidden to succeed to his father’s heaven” (Statius. *Achilleid* 1.1-2)
- “I am he (why do you tremble?) that my sea-green mother almost bore to Jove and sent to Thessaly’s woods and snows to be reared.” (Stat. *Ach.* 1.650-2, Achilles to Deidamia just after he has raped her)
- Implications of not being Jupiter’s son?

Peleus and Thetis' union and wedding (> (mortal) Achilles)

- Feeney (*'Tenui ... latens discrimine: Spotting the Differences in Statius' Achilleid', Materiali e Discussioni* 2004: 88-9) notes that Apollo (who in a tradition helps Paris kill Achilles at the Scaean gate) is called on for inspiration at *Ach.* 1.9: "the simultaneously destructive and creative god is called upon to begin the process that will carry on until the subject of the poem is dead"
- nb the power of Thetis (e.g. goddess; sources arms for him): adds poignancy to helplessness over her inability to save him



Thetis

- cf. Iliad ““Hephaestus, is there now any goddess, of all those that are in Olympus, who has endured so many grievous woes in her heart as are the sorrows that Zeus, son of Cronos, has given me beyond all others? Of all the daughters of the sea he subdued me alone to a mortal, to Peleus, son of Aeacus, and I endured the bed of a mortal man though very much against my will. And he lies in his halls overcome with grievous old age, but now other griefs are mine. A son he gave me to bear and to rear, preeminent among warriors, and he shot up like a sapling; then when I had reared him like a tree in a rich orchard plot, I sent him in the beaked ships to Ilios to war with the Trojans; but never again will I welcome him back to his home, to the house of Peleus.” (Homer // 18.429-41, Thetis trying to get arms)

Peleus and Thetis' union

- Ovid *Metamorphoses*
- (first century CE) Valerius Flaccus Book 1
- "They [Peleus and Thetis] were married on Pelion, and the gods celebrated the marriage with hymns and a banquet. Chiron gave Peleus a spear of ash-wood, and Poseidon gave him immortal horses named Balios and Xanthos." (Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3. 170): Greek mythographer C2nd A.D.

Apollonius' *Argonautica*

- Apollonius = Hellenistic poet. Greek *Argonautica* pub 238 BC (?) (Alexandria, Ptolemaic Egypt):
- on Jason getting golden Fleece (and Medea)



Happy families?

- Argonaut mission:
- “On the highest peaks, the nymphs of Pelion marveled to see the work of Itonian Athena and the heroes themselves plying the oars with their hands. And Cheiron, Philyra’s son, came down from the mountain top to the sea, and, wetting his feet in the gray break of the surf, repeatedly waved encouragement with his mighty hand and wished them a safe return as they set out. And with him his wife [Chariclo], holding Peleus’ son Achilles in her arms, showed him to his dear father.” (Apollonius Rhodius *Argonautica* 1.549-58)

Valerius Flaccus

- Latin *Argonautica*
- begun 70s AD (NB rule of Vespasian: AD 69-79; Titus 79-81)
 - possibly into early eighties (NB rule of Domitian 81-96).
- Stover 2008 argues entirely written in 70s.
(but has positivistic view)
- Seems to have been finished before the *Achilleid* and used by Statius

Happy families?

- “And now speeding down from the mountain-tops came Chiron, holding up to view Achilles who called to his sire from afar. As soon as the child saw Peleus start at the well-known voice and stretch out his arms in wide embrace, he sprang forward and hung long on his dear neck. The foaming goblets of strong wine tempt him not, the chasing of the ancient metal fair to look on holds not his gaze: rather he marvels at the captains, drinking in their loud words, and brings his face close to the lion-skin of Hercules.
- “But Peleus in joy clasps his son and kisses him eagerly, and looking up to the heavens he cries: “Surely as ye wish that Peleus speed over calm wave and that he desire a following breeze, even so, ye gods, do ye preserve this life. All else do thou, Chiron, vouchsafe. Let my little son marvel to hear thee speak of clarions and of wars; do thou teach him to wield his boyish weapons in the chase, and ere long to grasp my spear.” (V. Fl. 1.255-70)

Marriage/estrangement in Apollonius Rhodius

- (Hera to Thetis): “For ever since your infancy I raised you myself, and I have loved you more than all the other goddesses who live in the sea, because you did not deign to lie down in the bed of Zeus when he desired it ... but rather, respecting me and fearful in your thoughts, you shunned him. Then he swore a mighty oath that you would never be called the wife of an immortal god. But all the same, he did not stop eyeing you against your will, until venerable Themis told him everything — how in fact it was fated for you to bear a son greater than his father. Therefore, in spite of his desire, he gave you up out of fear, so that no one else might be his match and rule over the immortals, but he might retain his rule forever.

Marriage/estrangement in AR

- And I gave you the best of the mortals to be your husband, so that you might have a marriage dear to your heart and bear children. I invited all the gods together to the wedding feast and with my own hands raised the marriage torch, in return for that kind hearted respect of yours. But come, let me tell you an unerring account: when your son comes to the Elysian field—he whom the Naiads are now tending in the dwelling of Cheiron the Centaur, though he longs for your milk—it is his fate to be the husband of Aeetes' daughter Medea.

So, as her mother-in-law, help your daughter-in-law, and Peleus himself as well. Why is your anger so firmly fixed? He made a mistake- yes, but mistakes happen to gods as well.”
(AR Arg. 1.790- 817, **Hera trying to persuade Thetis to help the Argonauts through the clashing rocks**)

Rhetorical tricks? Putting a good spin on things? What might have been her motivations?

estrangement

- NB one etymology for Achilles' name was ἄ- χείλος, he who did not put his lips to the breast (Apollod. 3.13.6, cf. AR. Arg. 4.813; see Richard Hunter (1991); Heslin (2005))
- “In Apollonius' epic, stress is laid upon the separation of the baby Achilles from both his parents. At 1.553-8 he appears in the arms of his centaur foster-parents as the Argo sails past Pelion, and at 4.813 Hera pathetically refers to the baby's longing for Thetis' milk, ... That verse hints at an etymology of the hero's name from ἄ- χείλος...” (Hunter, R. 1991. ‘Breast is best: Catullus 64.18’, *Classical Quarterly* 51: 254-5, at 255)
- • potential for effect of estrangement from parents to be explored in Achilles' characterization

Achilles' (in)vulnerability

- Achilles not invulnerable in Homer's *Iliad*, as we can see in the Agenor scene: Agenor stands in Achilles' path, stopping Achaians capturing Troy (Il. 21.544-6) – considers and decides to take on Achilles as he is mortal:
- “His flesh, too, I suspect, may be pierced with the sharp sword, and in him is but one life, and men say he is mortal; but Zeus, son of Cronos, gives him glory.” (Il. 21.568-70, Agenor)

Achilles' (in)vulnerability

- This confirms prophecies of death since Patroclus's death and vulnerability of Achilles in recent Xanthus episode:
- “noble Achilles raised on high the spear of Pelian ash; but the warrior Asteropaeus hurled with both spears at once, since he was ambidextrous. With the one spear he struck the shield, but it broke not through, for the gold stayed it, the gift of the god; and with the other he struck the right forearm of Achilles a grazing blow, and the **black blood gushed out**; but the spear point passed over him and fixed itself in the earth, eager to glut itself with flesh.” (Il. 21.161-7)

Achilles' (in)vulnerability

- Achilles not invulnerable in Statius' *Achilleid*, as Thetis knows: see her words to herself at *Ach.* 1.31-6 as she has seen Paris' ship with Helen and then the Achaean ships:
- “This fleet,’ she says, ‘is after me, to me a deadly **menace**. I recognize the warnings. Proteus told true. Raising her torch from the stern, behold, Bellona [war goddess] brings Priam a new daughter-in-law. I see Ionian and Aegean pressed by a thousand keels.” (Stat. *Ach.* 1.31-6)
- NB Thetis' attempts to give invulnerability in mythology

Achilles' (in)vulnerability

- “Terrible sorrow struck him [Peleus], because he had never again seen her come, since that time she first left his bed chamber, in anger because of noble Achilles, then a baby. **For she would always singe his mortal flesh in the flames of a fire in the middle of the night, but then, during the day, would anoint his tender body with ambrosia, to make him immortal** and to keep hateful old age from his body. But Peleus leapt from his bed and saw his dear son convulsing in the flames and let out a horrible yell at the sight, great fool that he was! When she heard it, she grabbed the baby and threw him screaming to the ground, and she herself, like a breeze in form, like a dream, went swiftly forth from the palace and leapt into the sea in anger, and thereafter never came back again. That is why helpless dismay fettered his mind. ” (AR Arg. 4.866-879, Peleus remembering)

Styx

- First in *Achilleid* (lost source; nb art). See Heslin 2005 (*The Transvestite Achilles*)
- “Where is my child, Chiron, say. Why does the boy now spend any time apart from you? Is there not good cause for my troubled sleep, for the dark portents of the gods telling my mother’s heart dire fears—falsely, I pray? Now I see swords threatening my womb, now my hands bruised with lamentation, now wild beasts attacking my breasts. Often I myself (oh horror!) am bearing my son down hollow Tartarus, **bearing him to dip again in the waters of Styx**. The Carpathian seer tells me to rid me of these terrors by process of a magic rite” (Thetis, *Ach.1* 1.27-37)

Styx

- “I beg you by your handsome looks and future joys of youth: if for your sake I made trial of land and a lowly spouse, if I armed you at birth with the stern Stygian river (and **would it had been all of you!**), for a little while take safe clothing, that will do no harm to your spirit.” (*Ach.* 1.267-71, Thetis to Achilles)

Styx

- Gossip at Aulis:

“Whom else did a Nereid take through Styx’ river in secret and block his fair limbs against steel? Such talk do the Greek cohorts in their camp repeat and pass on. So when the pale skydwellers [Olympian gods] gathered to the camp at Phlegra [=battle vs giants] and Gradivus [Mars] was already rising to the height of his Odrysian spear, Tritonia [Minerva] rearing her Libyan snakes, the Delian [Apollo] bending his huge bow, Nature stood panting with terror, eyes upon the Thunderer alone—when would he summon storms and thunder from the clouds, how many bolts ask of fire-bearing Aetna?” (*Ach.* 1.480-90: equating Achilles with Jupiter?)