

The Muses' Playground: Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8

A) Engaging with epyllia

- Theseus, bit-player despite expectations, cf. Callimachus' *Hecale* (Theseus' stay with Hecale after bull exploit) and Catullus 64
- Theseus: first appearance, *Met.* 7.404; poison attempt and labours (7.404–52); Minotaur and Ariadne 8.169–82; desertion of Ariadne (8.174–6); Theseus's return to Athens and celebration (8.262–66); then Calydonian boar-hunt (267–546) where plays minor part; one of Achelous' guests (8.547–884)
- 1) "We wait in vain for any real exploit by Theseus, particularly in Book 8 for the Bull of Marathon, but are cheated" (Crabbe 1981: 2280 n.31)
- 2) "Flying fame had spread / The name of Theseus through the towns of Greece, / ... / ... His aid even Calydon, / Who owned her Meleager, in distress / Begged and besought" (*Met.* 8.267–71)
- 3) "Well-aimed and bound to reach its mark, had not / A leafy branch if chestnut blocked its flight" (*Met.* 8.409–10, Theseus' spear v boar)
- *Met.* 8.409–10 = last appearance in hunt, though reader tantalized with name: **Th**estius (8.487): **Th**estiadae (8.434); **Th**estias (8.452 and 473): Theseus' name scattered ... (Boyd)
- guest of Achelous on way back from Athens (floods): Theseus as listener, as in *Hecale*. Changes to Callimachus' rustic stay (e.g. jewelled goblets)
- story of Baucis and Philemon told by Lelex (8.618–724): elderly couple hospitable to guests. Cf. Callimachus' *Aitia*: humble Molorchus entertains Heracles: simple meal, important guests; sacrifice (ram/goose) prevented
- cf. Eratosthenes' *Erigone* (Dionysus-Bacchus reveals divinity by having wine bowl fill up)
- 5) "Meanwhile they saw, when the wine-bowl was drained, / Each time it filled itself, and wine welled up / All of its own accord within the bowl" (*Met.* 8.679–81)
- 6) "Bacchus gives proof of his divinity to Falernus in just the same manner as here (Silius vii.187ff.). Since this is a more appropriate way for a wine-god than for Zeus to announce himself, it seems possible that Silius did not take the idea merely from Ovid, but both poets from the *Erigone* of Eratosthenes ..." (Hollis 1970 on *Met.* 8.679ff)
- cf. Callimachus' *Hecale* e.g. meal and cf. metamorphosis and cult of Baucis and Philemon with honours paid to Hecale after her death; NB told to Theseus (guest of poor and elderly woman farmer in the *Hecale* > why he's affected?)
- 7) "The tale- the teller too- / Had moved them all, Theseus epecially" (*Met.* 8.725–26, of the tale of Baucis and Philemon)

B) Testing its epicness

- Callimachean/unCallimachean: leading (*deducere*) a perpetual song
- cf. *Met.* 8.728–78 (part of story of Erysichthon) with Callimachus' *Hymn to Demeter* BUT epic recasting (narrated by "swollen" river-god Achelous): imitating model in OTT style condemned by

model

8) “As when a mighty bull is sacrificed / Before the altar and from his riven neck / The lifeblood pours” (*Met.* 8.761-3: grand epic style)

9) “[Mestra’s] father was a man / Who spurned the gods” (*Met.* 8.739-40) cf. Vergil’s Mezentius; and compare Mestra and Lausus (worthy of better fathers)

10) “Enter my abode, / Illustrious prince of Athens” (*Met.* 8.550-1, Achelous to Theseus)

11) “halted by the **swollen** [*tumens*] stream of Achelous” (*Met.* 8.549-50)

12) “I swelled in anger, high as when my flood / Flows at its highest, merciless alike / In ragee and waters” (*Met.* 8.583-4)

13) “But let the people rejoice in **swollen** [*tumido*] Antimachus” (Catullus 95b: criticism of epic as bombastic)

14) “Spake Envy privily in the ear of Apollo: ‘I admire not the poet who singeth not things for number as the sea.’ Apollo spurned Envy with his foot and spake thus: ‘Great is the stream of the Assyrian river, but much filth of earth and much refuse it carries on its waters. And not of every water do the Melissae carry to Deo, but of the trickling stream that springs from a holy fountain, pure and undefiled, the very crown of waters.’” (*Hymn to Apollo* (2) 105ff.): epic v Callimachean poetry

- delay (8.549) caused by flood BUT Achelous = estuary west of Calydon and Theseus going to Athens (8.548): i.e. no need to cross. Draws attention to delay/excessive material

15) “stooping [“with bent head”], entered in / At the low [“humble”] door” (*Met.* 8.638, Jupiter and Mercury enter house of Baucis and Philemon. Humble house/humble style?)

- theoretical epic concern with war and men (“arms and the man I sing”) > Ovid poses challenge to epic masculinity and epic masculine subject matter (love and women). Boar hunt: unheroic/unmanly

16) “All praise for manly **pro**wess (*virtutis*)! The men flushed” (*Met.* 8.387): *virtus* of a woman, not a *vir* (man)

- *Met.* 8.394-5: implicitly male v female contrast between his double-axe and Diana’s bow. Undercutting of Ancaeus’ boast: he is Arcadian (cf. Vergilian girlish youth Pallas), and has a double-axe (associated with Amazons)

17) “Learn how far the weapons of a man / Surpass a girl’s and leave this task to me!” (*Met.* 8.392-3, Ancaeus boasting)

18) “the beast struck first and plunged / Both tusks high in his groin, the shortest road to death” (*Met.* 8.399-400, Ancaeus killed in unmanly way)

19) “His rash heart (*virtus*) / Destroyed Ancaeus (*Met.* 8.407, Theseus of Ancaeus)

20) “...double entendre which equates the *uirtus* which is the defining feature of the epic hero, in a very literal way, with possession of male genitalia. At 392-3, ‘discite, femineis quid tela uirilia praestent, o iuuenes, operique meo concedite!’ *tela*, *uirilia*, and *opus* are all terms regularly used of

the penis,” (Morgan, 2003)

21) “Epic's proper mode of speech was masculine: grave, serious, self-important. But the mode Ovid deploys is typically its polar opposite: flippant, playful, and given to puerile sexual humour.” (Morgan, 2003)

- unepic (in theory) prominence of women and love
- evocation of the *Aeneid* e.g. boar-hunt as epic set-piece: cf. amatory sub-plot of Carthage in *Aeneid* but there brief diversion

22) “the high task (*maius opus*) pressed, the challenge of the boar” (*Met.* 8.328; cf *A.* 7.45 *maius opus*)

- Where are the heroes? Challenge to epic heroism
- boar hunt: failure of Echion (misses), Jason (throw too strong), Mopsus (point falls off spear), Hippalmon and Pelagon (knocked down), Enaesus (hamstrung), Nestor (leaps into tree), Hippasus, Castor and Pollux (boar goes into thicket), Telamon (trips up); boar as hero

23) “Out he rushed / Straight at his enemies, like lightning struck / When clouds collide” (*Met.* 8.338-40, of boar; lightning simile common of warriors)

24) “The first spear thrown, hurled by Echion’s hand, / Missed him and lightly grazes a maple trunk” (*Met.* 8.345-6)

25) “The next, aimed at his back by Jason, must / Have lodged there had his throw not been too strong” (*Met.* 8.347-9)

26) “And Nestor might perhaps have perished too / Before the time of Troy, had he not leapt, / Vaulting on his long spear, into a tree” (*Met.* 8.365-7)

27) “[they] hurled their spears unplanned, / A self-deating stream that blocked its blows” (*Met.* 8.389-90)

28) “luck / Waylaid it and it doomed an innocent hound, / Pierced through the flank and pinned fast to the ground” (*Met.* 8.411-3, Jason's second go)

29) “Ovid's huntsmen are great heroes whose heroism and whose competence as hunters are regularly and ludicrously deficient” (Horsfall 1979)

C) Ovidian humour, wit and cleverness

- criticism: breach of epic decorum? farce of boar hunt
- Scylla: evocation of tragedy: nod to tragic convention: night as nurse

30) “My father! Him alone, / Alas, I fear; alone he thwarts my hopes. / Would God I had no father! Everyone / Is his own god, for sure” (*Met.* 8.70-3, Scylla wondering whether to cut off her father's lock)

31) “The night, the surest nurse of troubled souls, / Advanced” (*Met.* 8.81-2)

▪ play with personification levels: Hunger; Achelous (river and river god)

32) “...her stomach only a void; her joints wasted and huge, / Her knees like balls, her ankles grossly swollen” (*Met.* 8.805-8, description of personified Hunger)

33) “Though just arrived, she felt, or seemed to feel, / Hunger” (*Met.* 8.811-12 of the nymph sent to Hunger: personified Hunger > appetite)

34) “swollen with rain” (*Met.* 8.550, of Achelous the river)

35) “Risk not my ravening torrent. It transports / So often massive trees and sweeps away / Huge boulders headlong with a mighty roar. / Tall stables I’ve seen / Borne down” (*Met.* 8.550-4, Achelous to Theseus, as if he is separate from his river)

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