

Classical Mythology in Roman and Medieval Times

Assessment 2: Write a Critical Commentary of 1500 words on Statius' *Achilleid* 2.94-118.

Publius Papinius Statius was a Neapolitan by birth and upbringing, whose father was a 'Greek professional poet and highly esteemed **grammaticus**'.¹ Statius' career as poet and his subject matter and style are therefore unsurprising. Carole Newlands states that Statius 'stands out in Flavian literature...for his empathy in giving significant voice to the victims of war and other's destructive ambitions.'² Though Achilles inflicted immense damage on the people and city of Troy, and indeed on the Greek army during his absence from battle and his want of recompense and fame (see the *Iliad*), Newlands' statement perfectly describes Statius' Achilles from the *Achilleid*: Achilles will be a victim of war, and is a pawn in the 'destructive ambitions' of others.

In Statius' *Achilleid*, Achilles, son of Peleus King of Phthia and the sea goddess Thetis, is addressed by Ulysses as, '**magnae vastator debite Troiae**' though the fame of such a feat would come at the cost of his own life.³ As such, his mother, Thetis, did what she could to protect her son. Statius' deemed unfinished epic deals with Achilles' life pre-Troy and begins with Thetis smuggling a young Achilles from his Centaur teacher Chiron's cave on Thessaly to Skyros, the land of King Lycomedes. Here the youthful Achilles is disguised as a young woman and placed among the daughters of the King until his warlike impulses get the better of him. Achilles reveals himself by seizing weapons of war at the clarion call, tricked by Ulysses and Diomedes, who are on Skyros searching for the young Achilles, so that he can fulfil his destiny and secure victory for the Greek forces at Troy.

Stat.Ach.2.17-30 sees Achilles leaving his new bride (whom Achilles had raped) Deidamia (daughter of King Lycomedes) and his newborn son Pyrrhus (Neoptolemus). Achilles having boarded the ship with Ulysses (Odysseus), heading to Aulis, the meeting place of those Greek fleets heading to Troy under the command of Agamemnon.

Achilleid 2.94-118.

The son of Oeneus, Diomedes, asks Achilles to tell the men on the ship the story of his boyhood. In telling the story of his boyhood under the guardianship of Chiron, Achilles speaks of the games he used to play, and the food he used to eat.

Growing up in barren Thessaly, Achilles had no access to normal food nor his mother's nourishing milk,

**'...sed spissa leonum
viscera semianimisque lupae traxisse medullas'** Stat.Ach.2.99-100.

¹ Dewar, 2010, online; Newlands, 2012, p.1.

² Newlands, 2012, p.2.

³ Stat.Ach.2.32.

The striking image of Achilles eating the marrow of a half-alive she-wolf and devouring the entrails of a lion for sustenance is both untamed and brutal, in stark contrast to how Ulysses and Diomedes first found Achilles on Skyros, disguised in women's clothing.

This extraordinary foodstuff along with the ability to pull apart the beasts are beyond an individual human child's capacity, and betray the divine nature of the young boy.

At the opening of the *Achilleid*, Statius not only ties the events of his poem to those in the Homeric epic the *Iliad*, but specifically mentions the events immediately after Hector's death, and the actions of Achilles.⁴ The reader of the *Achilleid* is seemingly reminded of this event again (in Stat.Ach.2.99-100). 'traho' holds the meaning 'to drag', prompting the reader to think of Achilles dragging Hector's lifeless body around the walls of Troy.⁵ This context, and the word choice by Statius can be read in two ways: the treatment of Hector's body by Achilles was inhumane (bestly behaviour), lacking the required respect of traditions, or Hector's body being treated as animal, as opposed to human.

Of course, when a lion is mentioned, in terms of Greek/Roman mythology and poetry, for both an ancient and modern audience alike what initially springs to mind is the slaying of the Nemean Lion by Hercules (Herakles).⁶ Stat.Ach.156 sees Statius link Achilles with the Argo (Achilles' own father Peleus and Hercules were both themselves Argonauts). Under the tutelage of Chiron, Achilles has learnt to sing and play the lyre. Achilles is versed in the histories of the gods and the godlike, the songs he sings include the deeds of Hercules.⁷

Valerius Flaccus, poet and contemporary of Statius, has the two (Achilles, and Hercules) meet face to face before the Argo and its passenger heroes (Hercules and Peleus, Achilles' father among them) launch on their mission to aid Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece.⁸ Flaccus' Hercules is dressed in the lion skin at this moment. Add to this the suggestion by Antony Augoustakis that Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, Statius' *Achilleid*, and Homer's *Iliad* can be taken as continuation of the same Achilles story (containing the same Achilles), as the later writers moulded their efforts to conform with the earlier *Iliad*. Taking this into consideration it does suggest that it is possible the lion is to inspire the reader to have in the back of their mind the other half-god, Hercules, and throughout the *Achilleid* for the reader to contemplate the similarities between the two.

With regards to the *Iliad*, Statius himself links his poem to Homer's poem in lines Stat.Ach.1.3-7.

Some key parallels between Hercules and Achilles are the emotion of anger and their semi-divine nature. Both carry the weight of divinity yet are not in possession of immortality, though Hercules does eventually, through his Labours, secure a place in Heaven. As stated

⁴ Stat.Ach.1.3-7.

⁵ Il.22.

⁶ Graves, 1990, pp.103-107.

⁷ Stat.Ach.189-194.

⁸ V.Fl.255-263.

above, Achilles will die at Troy. Both, according to their mythical traditions, held shields forged by the god Hephaestus.⁹ Hercules has an episode of cross-dressing in some mythic traditions.¹⁰ Another such example is Chiron, a key character in the lives of both men (Hercules accidentally wounds his friend Chiron (which leads to Chiron's death) during his 4th Labour, the capture of the Erymanthian Boar).¹¹

At the risk of oversimplifying some of the scholarship undertaken by Katherine King, one of the many components of Achilles' Homeric character is his lion-like nature and action, whether in the form of his grief-stricken guttural groans that pour out during his mourning of Patroklos, to fighting like a lion, and possessing the heart of a lion.¹²

Furthermore, the guidelines set by the Homeric Achilles which Statius has followed in the creation of his Achilles further adds credence to the idea of Augoustakis', that the *Achilleid*, in terms of the character of Achilles, has been created as a prequel to the earlier work, the *Iliad*.

The birthing of the Homeric Achilles in Statius' *Achilleid*, and the allusions to the *Iliad*, do not end with lions. To bring into focus these particular lines (2.110-113) of the *Achilleid*, as they are loaded with allusion and description which complements that which has already been discussed above in this commentary.

**'vix mihi bisse nos annorum torserat orbis
vita rudis, volucris cum iam praevertere cervos
et Lapiths cogebat equos praemissaque cursu
tela sequi...'** Stat.Ach.2.110-113.

Achilles continues his story: barely twelve, he tells his shipmates, he was out, under the instigation of Chiron, in the wilds of Thessaly, outrunning deer and Lapith horses. These acts in these lines (2.110-113), such as catching the spears which he (or perhaps Chiron) had himself let loose, portray god-like speed and agility, again betraying the young boy's divine genealogy, and suggest the origins of Achilles' famous 'swift-footed' Homeric epithet. There are also many allusions in the *Achilleid* to descriptions and events from an earlier poem written by Catullus. In particular, Catullus XLIV, suggests Achilles (yet to be born) will be able to outstrip the wild deer with his speed and this prophecy is, the reader finds, completed by Statius in his *Achilleid*.¹³

Stat.Ach.2.112, sees Achilles disrupting the Lapith horses, putting them to rout, perhaps, in a strange way, considering himself horse-like and running with them.

Earlier in the *Achilleid*, Chiron explains to Thetis that the Centaurs also often complain of her son's behaviour,

⁹ Il.18.478-608; Hes.Sh.

¹⁰ Cameron, 2009, pp.2-3.

¹¹ Graves, 1990, pp.113-116.

¹² King, 1991, pp.19-28.

¹³ Cat.XLIV.338-341.

**'...ipsi mihi saepe queruntur
Centauri raptasque domos abstractaque coram
armenta et semet campis fluviisque fugari'** Stat.Ach.152-154.

There is the obvious tension of the battle which had occurred between the tribes, the Lapiths and the Centaurs, but what should also be considered by the reader is the conflict taking place inside the very being of Achilles. Achilles, during his boyhood, disturbs both the Thessalian Lapith (human) and the Centaur (half-human/half-horse) community in the *Achilleid*. What does Achilles, in these moments of 'play' see himself as? Human, Centaur, or neither?

The conflict within Achilles is a trait which follows him throughout his mythology, and no less so than in Statius' poem. There are a myriad of examples where Achilles is torn between decisions, for example Stat.Ach.2.23-29. Achilles is aware of his own destiny but often at odds with completing it.

Achilles is at odds with himself throughout the *Achilleid*, youthful boy/man disguised as a woman, then an expected hero, a man or a beast, that is neither human nor god.

word count 1477

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