

Virtus and heroism in the *Metamorphoses*/*Achilleid*

- virtus and Achilles in the *Metamorphoses*

Ovid *Met.* 12.159-65 (Greeks) “they drew out the night in talk, and **valour [virtus]** was the theme of their conversation. Of battles was their talk 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 Cynus’ overthrow.” > 169ff Nestor’s long speech (moving from Cynus > Caeneus)

virtus

Met. 12.159 topic = *virtus*. Where is *virtus* in Nestor's stories? (Cyllarus and Hylonome: see DeBrohun *American Journal of Philology* 2004)

And what of previous narrative?: by the time of Ovid, the tradition of partial invulnerability popular. In the case of Achilles and Cycnus does this render questionable their heroism? (physical prowess key in Homer)

Achilles

After Achilles' great deeds, focus on stories of Nestor: Achilles asks questions: "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." (*Met.* 12.176-81)



Nestor's reply/Achilles' characterisation

“Famous for beauty was Elatus' daughter, Caenis, most lovely of all the maids of Thessaly, both throughout the neighbouring cities and your own (for she was of your city, Achilles), a maid vainly yearned for by many suitors. Peleus, too, perchance, would have tried to win her; but he had either already wed your mother or she was promised to him. And Caenis would not consent to any marriage;...” (*Met.* 12.189-95); nb Peleus kills 6 Centaurs in the fight

Tleptolemus knows all about his father in the fight

Nb for *virtus* exploration in Ovid, see Achilles' and Odysseus' debate over arms: where wordy Odysseus wins over Ajax ...

Statius' *Achilleid*

Ach. 1.334-7 “For an abundance of gracefulness remains left in him, though his **manhood is unwilling** [*invita virtute*], and viewers are deceived by ambiguous sex hiding in a narrow distinction.”



maleness



In the terms of modern gender debate, was maleness for Romans a question of constant construction, of performance, or biological essentialism? Or could both of these approaches co-exist?

nb Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: The instance of Iphis (book 9) shows gender performance at work. - because Iphis' male self-presentation has been so powerful, she is transformed by Isis into a boy just before she gets married to a girl she has fallen in love with.

BUT her crisis is precipitated by her forthcoming wedding: Ovid reinforces norms by showing how the institution of marriage serves to separate genders.



gender

Do dilution of male markers affirm or undercut masculinity for the Romans?

Roman masculinity was arguably a precarious state. Since it was tied to social status and predicated upon control of others and the self, it could be weakened by, for instance, a loss of social standing or adoption of a passive role.

A temporary and strictly controlled gender inversion could help reaffirm gender roles. So cross-dressing could actually appear to reaffirm masculinity: see the case of the hyper-virile Hercules from Ovid *Fasti* 2 (see Cyrino 1998)



Ovid



“this gendered distinction in the Ovidian tales of transvestism is rooted in the varying levels of anxiety in the classical world about masculinity and femininity. Ovidian male-to-female stories of cross-dressing functioned as channels for exploring and venting insecurities about the provisional nature of masculinity in ancient Rome, while Ovid's lone tale of male impersonation allows him to comment explicitly on the constructed nature of gender identities.” (Raval, Shilpa, ‘Cross-dressing and "gender trouble" in the Ovidian corpus’, *Helios* 29 (2002), 149)



Statius' *Achilleid*



Is Achilles' *virtus* impaired by acting/dressing as woman?

Ach.2.35 Odysseus asks if “cunning mother” “**violated** with female clothing?” (femineo ... **violavit** amictu): “The phrase femineo ... violavit amictu, with its sexual undertones, implicitly associates Achilles’ female dress with a breach of the physical integrity so prized by men” (McAuley 2010: 47)

McAuley notes that rape establishes his manhood but then little changes and like Deidamia



Statius' *Achilleid*



Thetis to Achilles on beach:

“Let us give way. Lower your manly spirit a little and condescend to wearing my clothes. If Hercules carried Lydian wool in his hard hand and effeminate spears, if it suits Bacchus to sweep his footsteps with a gold-embroidered robe, if Jupiter donned a virgin’s limbs, and Caeneus was not weakened by his uncertain sex ...” (*Ach.*1.256-64)



Statius' *Achilleid*



Heslin (2005) argues poor rhetoric by Thetis

McAuley suggests Thetis is aware:

“what her examples imply — the precarious instability of gender categories — and of how this fluid Ovidianism runs counter to the heroic essentialism demanded by martial epic.”



Statius' Achilles



“ Just as the generic purity of Statius' epic is adulterated by its transgressively erotic sojourn in the unwarlike and feminine milieu of Scyros, Achilles' own gender-purity as an epic hero is tainted by his transvestism, and thus the poem poses an intrinsic connection between the ambiguities of the masculine and those of epic itself.” (McAuley 2010 *Akroterion* 55: 42-3) (genre/gender)

Ach 1.164-5 like his mother (plurima vultu [face] /**mater** inest): like Hermaphroditus before he fuses with nymph Salmacis (*Metamorphoses* 4.290-291: “facies [appearance] in qua **materque** paterque /cognosci possent”)

