

In analysing the poetic response of later authors to the *Iliad*'s treatment of Achilles – as exemplified by the parallel examples of Ovid's *Heroides* and Statius' *Achilleid* – the most salient factor is less the contents of the text itself as much as the purpose of the works iterating upon it, as its function is made to serve the ends of their respective forms. In the case of the *Heroides*, that intent is implicitly antagonistic; in the *Achilleid*, more congenial – but both works, as products of an established Latin literary tradition, are alien to (if informed by) the Homeric context of the original text, and, in invoking it, do so to pursue their differing ends as discrete textual entities. As such, the prime factor can be said to be authorial intent.

To analyse the former text first, it is useful to analyse its form. The *Heroides* are constituted of fifteen works of epistolary and elegiac poetry, with the addressers being the (universally aggrieved) titular heroines and the addressees formative figures in the Greco-Roman mythological and literary canon. While the precise dating of the *Heroides* is much disputed, elements of scholarly opinion hold it to be amongst the earliest of his works, generally citing a passage from the second book of the *Amores* ("I do what I may[...] Or write what's rendered in the words of Penelope to her Ulysses"¹) to place it between 2 and 16 AD ("The only collection of *Heroides* attested by O[vid] therefore antedates at least the second edition of the *Amores* (c. 2 BC), and probably the first (c. 16 BC)"²). As such, the resonance of the theme of the wronged heroine forsaken or persecuted by the divine or semi-divine with the contents of works such as the *Metamorphoses* (i.e. the rape of Medusa in the temple of Minerva by Poseidon) is likely just an early use of a favoured trope and more broadly symbolic of Ovid's poor opinion of the Roman social and literary mainstream.

The *Heroides* being, in essence, a compilation of imagined complaints by discarded lovers in epistolary format is an apt reflection of its relation to the *Iliad* as a text in its own right, and its portrayal of Achilles as a by-product of the same. To put it another way, the *Heroides* can be considered a metatextual epistle to Homer, with the aggrieved lover Ovid and the cause for complaint Achilles. Much as a disillusioned love letter only makes sense within the context of a relationship, so too do the *Heroides* rely on the reader's being grounded in the Greco-Roman canon, using the *Iliad* as a kind of metatextual scaffolding – for, as much as the exercise grants Briseis an unprecedented voice, the subject matter thereof and the entire conceit of the thing rest upon Briseis' relation to Achilles and establishment in the *Iliad*. As such, in both cases Briseis is dependent on Achilles both as a textual entity and as a character – Ovid's principle innovation, at root, being to make explicit the implicit by re-orientating the narrative focus from the details of Achilles' behaviour to its *consequences* as they pertain to Briseis.

Here, again, the relations between characters are expressive of those between textual forms. Just as Ovid's narrative focus deliberately muddies the heroic with the human (Achilles' refusal to fight being equated to an (implicitly equally) shameful refusal to "Go now [and] deserve the name of an eager lover"³, both being quite literal deficiencies in Achilles' virility as the Romans understood it), just as the form of the *Heroides* takes the subject matter of epic poetry (a 'respectable' genre associated in the Latin tradition with the masculine ideal) and subjects it to implicit critique by the titular heroines in the register of tragic romance, with the function of the *Heroides*' contents following the form chosen by Ovid. The treatment of Achilles, therefore, is deliberately deconstructive and critical in intent by simple virtue of the form –

¹ (Ovid & McKeown, 2005)

² (Knox, 2005)

³ (Ovid & McKeown, 2005)

each epistle being, in essence, a lament – but, crucially, it is one rooted less in the text proper than in Ovid’s purposes.

To elaborate, while the section of the *Heroides* dealing with Briseis’ epistle to Achilles is necessarily dependent on the *Iliad*, the central conceit of the work entire is a critique of the whole epic-heroic/Greco-Roman genre and canon as it was understood by Augustan Rome as mediated through the narrative vehicle of aggrieved heroines. This is a natural extrapolation of both the remainder of Ovid’s works and the literature of the age – with the Augustan regime directly patronising epics in the vein of the *Aeneid*, the poetic was political and the political poetic. As such, to assume the pose of critique of the canon – particularly in so exemplary a totem of classical heroism as Achilles – is in a fashion to critique the regime, and vice versa. Ovid’s consistent – if sometimes subtle – literary misotheism, paired with his ever-escalating poor relations with the early Principate (culminating in his exile) synergises with his contempt for the authorities. It is not the sole object of his poetry, or even the main – the *Amores* are proof enough of that – but, particularly in the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*, it is an inescapable theme of his work.

The salient fact of this, however, is that in attacking Achilles in lieu of the Augustan, the *Heroides* fails to hook its proper target. The Achilles of the *Iliad* is necessarily a different beast – albeit one of the same *gens* – to the Achilles of the *Heroides*, because, put plainly, Ovid’s treatment of Achilles is as a man rather than a hero, and a person rather than a cipher. This is not an error, but an inevitable result of the differing purposes and genres of each author, which in turn are informed by their respective contexts.

Ovid wrote the *Heroides* in the context of Augustan Rome, a period of unmatched plenty, from the perspective of a self-consciously anti-authoritarian and perverse (in the literal sense of the word) personality rooted in a society defined by a unique emphasis on personal honour (*auctoritas*, *dignitas* etc.), as a(n almost certainly conscious) riposte to a fashion for the epic and implicitly pro-Julio Claudian. While the precise circumstances of the *Iliad*’s provenance beyond its being written by Homer remains a source of debate, it is most succinctly described as ‘post-Mycenaean’, having emerged in the late 8th to early 7th century BC at a time wherein Greek society was still emerging from the aftershocks of the Bronze Age collapse. Accordingly, the treatment of Achilles is consequent to the very nature of the form of the epic poem – namely, to exaggerate.

Achilles, whose centrality to the poem is such that it is defined by Homer as the subject matter with the beginning invocation of the Muse (“The wrath sing, goddess, of Peleus’ son Achilles, the accursed wrath which brought countless sorrows upon the Achaeans”⁴). Ovid treats Achilles in many ways as a human being – as a man who has failed his begrudging paramour by “even [opposing] [her] being restored”⁵. This is a consequence both of form and of culture. For the former, the logic is obvious – if Achilles can be complained of as the subject matter of an embittered epistle, it is thereby necessary that he be understood as a person – in the Roman context, a *vir* who has compromised his *auctoritas* such that even his slave, who finds being addressed as his wife by another slave “a burden in that name”⁶, is appalled.

⁴ (Homer, Murray and Wyatt, 1988)

⁵ (Ovid & McKeown, 2005)

⁶ (Ovid & McKeown, 2005)

In the context of the *Iliad*, he is a *hero* in the original Greek sense – a warrior straddling the line of the human and divine, defined by rage of a quite literally superhuman scale, growing steadily more brutalised over the course of the poem. Because of the scale of the poem and its subject matter – the end of an age of heroes – Achilles, simply put, cannot be Achilles alone. His life’s centrality to the *Iliad*, both in terms of its plot and its themes, belies any claim to individuality in isolation. His bargain for glory at the cost of a short life is an apt summation of the overall bargain of the Achaeans – the bloodiest war in history for the sake of maintaining their honour regarding their pact over Helen. His steady brutalisation is reflective of the horror of war, and a stand-in for the overall degeneration of the Achaeans, culminating in the sack of Troy. Finally, the loss of Patroclus and his surrender to the “accursed wrath”⁷ deemed fit to be sung of by the divine represents the broader tragedy of the *Iliad*, which, in turn, is a cipher for the Collapse that ended the Mycenaean civilisation whose remains Homer inhabited – that, in an effort to preserve the honour that was the mortar of their civilisation, the Achaeans lose it, with the methodology of the “man of tricks and turns”⁸ ultimately being what guarantees their victory rather than Achilles’ blood-soaked heroism. None of this, however, is conducive to Ovid’s object, and so, necessarily, through the difference in form that is itself a product of differing cultural functions, the treatment of Achilles in the *Heroides* – as a person, a *vir* rather than an archetype – is itself a metatextual epistle in a decidedly one-sided Greco-Roman literary relationship.

As for the *Achilleid*, the issue of form is of lesser salience – while it remains fragmentary, that which remains is couched in the form and style of epic poetry. It is useful to note that Statius, in composing both the *Achilleid* and the rather more complete *Thebaid*, was influenced in both instances by the poetic example set by Ovid. Indeed, in the instance of crossdressing on Skyros, the influence of the *Metamorphoses* – both poetic and literal – is particularly blatant, intersecting too with the work’s emphasis on the nature of power as it pertains to social roles and the fluidity thereof (i.e. the assumption of the feminine and implicitly passive role by the archetypically masculine Achilles).

However fond the author was of Ovid’s trappings, however, the two were of an altogether different substance – a state of affairs that needs no exemplification short of the fact that, where Ovid was exiled by the emperor of his day, Statius was the object of imperial patronage by that of his. Artistically, however, the crux of the issue is that Ovid’s work was fundamentally satirical – both literally and in terms of the deliberate mocking and subversion of the Roman social mainstream – whereas Statius’ oeuvre, with the admitted occasional excursion into cross-dressing, is firmly rooted in and positively disposed towards that same canon. Indeed, the Skyros incident can actually be seen as essentially affirmatory of the basic Roman conception of masculinity – the rending of the “flowing garments [draping his] breast”⁹ and acceptance of his fate being, in essence, a choice to act as a *vir*, the “destroyer of Asia”¹⁰ instead of the “wicked maiden yonder”¹¹ – rather than the acceptance of safety at the price of losing that status (admittedly with a forced hand, but still).

While Statius’ Achilles, insofar as such an entity may be postulated, shares aspects with that of Ovid, it would be fair to say that the depiction, while in parallel, is not altogether the same line. Where Ovid, in making Achilles a *vir*, depicts him as an inferior example of such, Statius (in part due to the portion of

⁷ (Homer, Murray and Wyatt, 1988)

⁸ (Homer and Murray, 1994)

⁹ (Publius Papinius Statius, 1928)

¹⁰ (Publius Papinius Statius, 1928)

¹¹ (Publius Papinius Statius, 1928)

Achilles' life his surviving work concerns itself with, and in part due to fundamental differences between the two authors) in depicting Achilles' nascency necessarily places a greater emphasis on "boyhood glories"¹² than the figure who "with unbending purpose refused his country aid"¹³. If Ovid's Achilles is a deficient *vir* defined by impotency and "gloomy wrath"¹⁴, Statius' Achilles is treated as one at once doomed and with unique promise, with incidents of rape and crossdressing essentially portrayed as bumps on the road.

Once again, though the forms are more compatible on this occasion, the long and short of it in comparing Statius' treatment of Achilles to the original – that is, Homeric – article is that, in seeking to compose poetry regarding Achilles the *vir*, even the compatibility of forms cannot quite balance this with Achilles the *hero*. Whether the tone is negative – as with Ovid – or positive – as with Statius – is largely immaterial, as, in truth, the *Iliad* makes the existence of a separate *Achilleid* something of a Latin redundancy. Opening with the evocation of his wrath, following him throughout its course arguably more than even Helen, the Achilles of the *Iliad* cannot be extricated from the Trojan War because, in a very real sense, his narrative existence is synonymous with that war. Homer does not consider him as an unworthy husband, as Ovid might, or as a young man on the make, as Statius does, because the very point of Achilles is to embody both what was lost – and, for a post-Mycenaean culture, there was little debate as to whether a loss had occurred – and why. In his wrath, his impetuosity and his heroism, he embodies the Achaeans as a whole infinitely more perfectly than Agamemnon, and consequentially cannot be treated as a human quantity.

This, then, is the concluding difference in the treatment of Achilles evinced by Homer, and that by those who would be his contemporaries – to the former, the salient detail is that he is a hero, and to the latter, that he might be a man. Each is bred of and informed by forms, though not exclusively (as the narrative forms of epic poetry in the Homeric era could not hope to be unaltered by variations in both space and time), and, ultimately, the Achilles in each answers not to a coherent, consistent or contiguous canon, but rather the needs of each author – just as each poem finds itself employing different expressions and forms.

¹² (Publius Papinius Statius, 1928)

¹³ (Ovid & McKeown, 2005)

¹⁴ (Ovid & McKeown, 2005)