

Mechanisms for a Coming-of-Age Gender Transformation in Statius' *Achilleid*:

Persuasion, Association, and Performance

Matthew P. Vieron (University of Wisconsin, Madison)

Statius' *Achilleid* is well suited for analyzing the performative and/or essentialist aspects of gender identity: does Statius portray Achilles' gender as innate and simply disguised on Scyros, reflecting an essentialist view of gender, or is it externally driven and successfully acted out on the stage of culture, reflecting a more fluid, performative view of gender (Butler 1990, Gleason 1995)? This paper discusses these issues and proposes a reading which reflects the poem as a struggle between these two polemic aspects of gender experience.

I will show how Statius uses three particular mechanisms to manipulate the gender of Achilles in the particular context of a Greek-modeled coming-of-age rite of passage in which the initiate, Achilles, experiences the "other" female gender (Gennep 1960, Vidal-Naquet 1986). These mechanisms are gendered persuasion, association, and performance, i.e. persuasion by an external force namely Thetis and Ulysses, performance of gender on a superficial external level, and direct association with the appropriate gender in which he is performing. I will argue that Statius uses these mechanisms to address the struggle of Achilles' changing gender in a coming-of-age context as essential on the one hand, yet performed and fluid on the other.

Scholars of Statius' *Achilleid* have acknowledged that this epic poem addresses and struggles with the paradox of gender as constant and essential, yet fluid and able to be modified, but ignores the question of how Statius actually does this and in what particular context (Heslin 2005). I will not only show how the poem itself does not seem to favor either side of this polemic debate, but I will also contribute to the discussion by analyzing the exact mechanisms for which Achilles' gender is able to be changed in the particular context of a coming-of-age transformation.

I will briefly establish the proper context of a Greek-modeled coming-of-age story in which the poem addresses the struggle of gender identity. I will then discuss the mechanisms which allow for Achilles' transformation of gender. I will do this through a close reading of the precise moments of transitioning and show how the poem exploits the fluidity of gender through the particular "mechanisms" of persuasion, performance, and association. This will reveal how the *Achilleid* addresses the struggle of gender as essential, yet able to be changed and manipulated by these factors. An acknowledgement of these particular elements in a coming-of-age context will not only reflect specifically how Statius manipulates and struggles with the fluidity of gender, but it will also give us deeper insights into our multi-faceted image of Roman sexuality and manliness.

Select Bibliography:

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1990.

Gennep, A. Van. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by M Vizedom and G Caffee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

Gleason, Maud W. *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Heslin, P. J. *The Transvestite Achilles: Gender and Genre in Statius' Achilleid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

McDonnell, Myles. *Roman Manliness: Virtus and The Roman Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Vidal-Naquet, Pierre. *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*. Translated by Andrew Szegedy-Maszak. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986.