

## Achilles' Fathers in Statius' *Achilleid*

Statius populates his *Achilleid* with a multitude of father figures. Achilles has no fewer than four fathers in the poem, and the other characters exploit the eponymous hero's resulting aporia. In the *Achilleid*'s climactic scene, Ulysses tricks the cross-dressed Achilles into revealing himself. This paper argues that Ulysses' use of *pater* in this scene constitutes a joke based on the inherent ambiguity of that term (*Achilleid* 1.873). Furthermore, this joke cleverly harmonizes with the emphasis on anti-essentialism—"nurture" over "nature"—that pervades Statius' *Silvae* and *Achilleid*.

Since the *Iliad*, Achilles enjoys a surfeit of fathers and ersatz fathers. Homer promotes two versions of Achilles' early years, one with the tutor Phoenix, the other with the centaur Chiron. Thus, when the *Achilleid*'s opening lines allude to Jupiter's counterfactual paternal role, Statius engages an already robust tradition of multiple parentage (*Achilleid* 1.1-2). Statius' poem does not stop there, however: Jupiter, Chiron, Peleus, and the Scyrian king Lycomedes are all treated as father figures in the poem.

Both Thetis and Achilles attempt to exploit Achilles' ambiguous paternity. Thetis' solicitude toward her son has long been the object of scholarly attention (Mendelsohn 1990, Fantham 1999). More recently, Heslin shows that Thetis' failures make up an important part of the poem's plot, and this paper demonstrates that her unsuccessful attempt to exploit the rhetoric of paternity constitutes one of these failures (Heslin 2005). As for Achilles, immediately after he rapes the princess Deidamia, and again after he has been revealed, he adduces his own ersatz fathers as a way of appeasing his victims.

Ulysses succeeds where his counterparts fail. When the Ithacan corners Achilles, he first reminds him that Achilles is the foster-son, *alumnus*, of Chiron (*Achilleid* 1.868). After further

words to shame him into joining the Greek mission, he mentions Achilles' mother by name, but uses the ambiguous *patrem* to denote his father. By juxtaposing *pater* with a mother's proper name, Statius highlights the ambiguity of the former. Ulysses manages to insult Achilles' mother while simultaneously appealing to Achilles' desire to please his myriad fathers—not just one of them. This cleverly reminds the reader that the *Achilleid*'s Achilles has not quite decided whom he recognizes as his father.

Especially in his *Silvae*, Statius often favors adoption and non-biological forms of parenthood (Bernstein 2008, 2015). Achilles' glut of fathers in the *Achilleid* demonstrates the presence of a similar theme in the epic. That Achilles' ambiguous parentage plays such a significant role in the poem's climactic scene bespeaks the importance of this theme for the poem as a whole. Its importance in both the *Silvae* and *Achilleid* suggests that Statius has a longstanding interest in forms of alternative kinship.

### Bibliography

Bernstein, N. 2008. *In the Image of the Ancestors: Narratives of Kinship in Flavian Epic*.

Toronto.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2015. "Family and Kinship in the Works of Statius." In *Brill's Companion to*

*Statius*, ed. W.J. Dominik, C.E. Newlands, and K. Gervais, 139-154. Leiden.

Fantham, E. 1999. "Chironis exemplum: On Teachers and Surrogate Fathers in *Achilleid* and

*Silvae*." *Hermathena* 167:59-70.

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

Cambridge.

Mendelsohn, D. 1990. "Empty Nest, Abandoned Cave: Maternal Anxiety in *Achilleid* I." *ClAnt*

9:295-308.