

Achilles in the Arena: The Epic Hero as Tamed Lion in Statius' *Achilleid* (*Ach.* 1.858-863)

Animal similes are a well-known feature of Greek and Latin epic. The lion, the “heroic animal par excellence” (Friedrich 1981: 121), features prominently within the repertoire of animals deployed in the similes. Homer and his successors use the lion in a variety of contexts to convey such concepts as martial heroism, savagery, grief, and desperation. In light of the lion’s prominence in the animal similes of epic, it is surely no coincidence that Statius compares Achilles to a lion in a detailed simile at the climactic moment of the first book of the *Achilleid*, at the moment when the hero, disguised as a girl and in hiding on Scyros, sees his own image reflected in a shield and his identity is publicly revealed (*Ach.* 1.858-863). However, this lion differs from its literary predecessors in that it has not been raised in the wild, but rather, has been stolen from its mother as a cub and has been domesticated and trained for the purpose of providing entertainment in the arena. This paper will offer a new interpretation of this important simile and its relation to the poem’s construction of epic heroism.

The simile suggests, on one level, an equivalence between the lion’s training and Achilles’ feminine disguise; both are discarded as soon as a sword flashes (*si semel adverso radiavti lumine ferrum / eiurata fides domitorque inimicus...*, 1.861-2). The lion’s inner wildness overwhelms its training when it sees a sword, just as Achilles’ inner masculinity breaks through his loyalty to his mother’s wishes to remain disguised as a girl. However, an aspect of the simile that has not yet been explored in much depth is the significance of a detail of the lion’s biography, that it was snatched from its mother and taught to learn *mores* (*ut leo, materno cum raptus ab ubere mores / accepit*, 1.858; *edidicit* 1.860). As I will argue in this paper, this detail connects the lion to Achilles, but with a different implication than what is suggested above.

Analogous to the tamed lion, Achilles has been separated from his mother as an infant (e.g., *adhuc reptantibus annis / Thessalus ut rigido senior me monte recepit*, 2.96) and has been educated, or trained, by Chiron. In the lion's taming, we can thus see reference to both Achilles' disguise as a girl (the product of Thetis' training) as well as the supposedly "real," proto-heroic Achilles beneath the disguise (the product of Chiron's training). The boundaries between these two categories, namely Achilles-as-girl and Achilles-as-epic hero, are blurred. This reading accords with the *Achilleid*'s general preoccupation with the transgression of boundaries, a critical aspect of its poetics, as studies such as Barchiesi 2005 and Heslin 2005 have shown. This slippage in the simile indicates that epic heroism, in the *Achilleid*, is not natural or inherent to a character, but rather, is a construction in which one must be trained, and which one, in a sense, performs. Taking up arms, it seems, is just like putting on a dress.

Finally, consideration of the epic hero as trained performer leads us to a re-evaluation of the *Achilleid*'s presentation of masculinity. Bartsch 2006: 152-164 has demonstrated how actors, prostitutes, and gladiators were effectively emasculated by the audience's penetrative gaze. The image of the tamed lion in itself directly evokes gladiatorial games, and Fantham 1999: 65 has noted the gladiatorial overtones of Achilles' description of his learning from Chiron the use of the Sarmatian scythe, Getan hook, and other weapons from the tribes living along the boundaries of the Roman empire (*Ach.* 2.131-36). The revelation of Achilles' masculine identity is thus ironically shadowed by a certain effeminacy, indicating that the category confusion embroiled in the question of Achilles' identity is far from being resolved at the moment at which the text ends.

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