

AMBIGUOUS SEXUS: EPIC MASCULINITY IN TRANSITION IN STATIUS' *ACHILLEID* ¹

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Statius' incomplete Latin epic, the *Achilleid*, tells the story of the young Achilles' sojourn on Scyros dressed as a girl, before he goes to Troy. The poem was discounted until recently as a curiosity in the Roman epic tradition, a genre which was theorised to be essentially about martial masculinity (Horace *AP* 73), despite the fact that women and sexual love feature prominently in actual epics. This paper argues that the *Achilleid's* complex post-Ovidian representation of gender also bears implications for our understanding of Roman epic as a genre. As Achilles struggles towards his literary destiny as the ultimate Homeric warrior, the poem's allusive exploration of gender ultimately reorients the tense relationship of the epic hero to women and *amor*, and of the epic genre to its own institutionalised masculinity.

Recent sociological and theoretical studies have commented on the paradox of masculinity: characterised as the norm, the point of fixity against which femininity is defined as "other", it has been silent and hidden from view in critical thought — in the words of historian John Tosh, "everywhere but nowhere".² As the archetypal genre of wars and heroes, classical epic poetry, from the *Iliad* onwards, exemplifies this irony: until lately, the *gender* of the epic hero was never in doubt, let alone placed under scrutiny. Moreover, the primary importance of heroic, warrior masculinity to Roman male identity and society is affirmed again and again by Roman poets, orators and historians: one need only consider how military might is integral to the *Aeneid's* famous definition of the essence of Roman-ness: "to spare the conquered and to war down the proud" (*parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*, 6.853).³ Yet, with the recent development of an increasingly sophisticated discourse on gender in Roman society and literature, representations

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented some years ago at the American Philological Association Annual Meeting in Montreal. I am grateful to *Akroterion's* reviewers for their helpful comments.

² Tosh 1994:180.

³ See also the exemplary narratives of martial heroism in Livy's history; also Silius *Punica* 6.62-551; Hor. *Carm.* 3.5; Cic. *Off.* 1.39. For the connections of *imperium* with Roman conceptions of *virtus*, see Williams 1999:135.

of male heroism in Roman epic no longer appear monolithic, but rather appear fluid, diverse and fraught with ambiguity.⁴

In fact, a certain questioning and confronting of the tenets of warrior manhood may have been a marked feature of some Roman epics themselves. The subject of this article is the unfinished Latin epic *Achilleid*, by Publius Papinius Statius, written around AD 95; I argue that this text playfully challenges assumptions about classical epic masculinity and illustrates the instabilities of men's position within the epic genre. The incomplete poem avoids battle-narrative, telling instead the myth of the young Achilles disguised in female dress before he goes to Troy. Its extant 1200 lines narrate how the goddess Thetis, anxious that her son should not fulfill his fate to die at Troy, whisks the adolescent away from his foster home with the centaur Chiron and secretes him on the island of Scyros among the maidens of King Lycomedes' court, disguised as a girl. The central section details Achilles' sexual awakening on the bucolic island, where he falls in love with Lycomedes' daughter Deidamia and, revealing himself to her as a boy, rapes her, after which she secretly bears him a son. Statius' version reaches its climax when Ulysses arrives, searching for the boy who is destined to win the war for the Greeks. Ulysses exposes Achilles' feminine masquerade in a trick that counteracts and trumps that of his mother Thetis: among the girlish gifts he has brought for Lycomedes' daughters, Ulysses places a shield and spear. When a sudden trumpet blast scatters the girls in fright, Achilles finally reveals his true identity to all by forgetting his disguise and seizing the bloodied weapons placed in front of him. The text breaks off as the newly "come-out" warrior Achilles sails on a ship to Troy with the Greeks. One effect of this interruption is that the existing lines, comprising just over one book, assume the appearance of a self-contained poem and the prevailing impression of Achilles that emerges from the Scyros episode is *not* of a wrathful, implacable, aggressive warrior cutting a swathe through the battlefield, but of a draft-dodging, submissive boy in drag, immersed in a titillating harem of Dionysiac dancing and *amor*.

The *Achilleid* has lagged behind the *Silvae* and the *Thebaid* in the critical reappraisal of Statius' work, but it has recently been dragged centre-stage in the theoretical debates concerning intertextuality. Most of these debates circled around claims of the poem as Ovidian or Virgilian, or as a demonstration of the inevitable miscegenation and hybridity in literary genres. But the focus on allusion and genre leaves questions still to be explored, particularly on the poem's representation of

⁴ See, for example, Keith 1999 on masculinity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Masterson 2005 on Statius' *Thebaid*. Keith 2000 also expounds on the educational significance of Roman epic for encouraging certain gender ideals in Roman boys. For a useful account of Roman notions of masculinity and appropriate sexual behaviour, see Williams 1999: *passim*, esp.125ff.

gender. Peter Heslin's extensive 2005 monograph finally provided an in-depth study of the main subject of the epic, the temporary transvestism of Achilles on Scyros, its significance for the literary figure of Achilles and for the generic identity of the poem.⁵ The role of epic poetry in the inculcation of young Romans in the ideals of Roman manhood has been examined by Alison Keith in her book, *Engendering Rome*,⁶ and the character of the Homeric Achilles surely offered fertile ground for exemplary lessons — both positive and negative — on *virtus*: manliness, courage or excellence.⁷ Yet Roman rhetoricians, poets, artists (particularly of the empire) all became less interested in the manhood of the warrior Achilles and his uncontrollable anger, than in the story of his childhood (his education by Chiron and his spell in drag on Scyros), and recent work suggests that the *young* Achilles became an as yet little acknowledged but important figure in the prehistory of ancient education.⁸ Statius' poem was the major source in the Roman empire and later, in the medieval period, for the myth of Achilles' youth and as such, the trajectory of his Achilles, from boy to girl to man, must be of interest in any exploration of how the ideologies of Roman masculinity were reproduced and / or destabilised through literature. This paper is an attempt to introduce to a wider classical epic readership the complexity and significance of this fascinating text, which has been undergoing something of a revival of interest of late, but is still under-read. For this purpose, I will draw together some of the disparate threads of recent criticism on the poem — its self-conscious secondariness to Homer and Virgil, its intertextual and generic complexity, its Ovidian influence and its ambiguous representation of gender — to show how the

⁵ Heslin 2005. Although I diverge from him where noted, this paper is much indebted to Heslin's exhaustive study, especially his argument that the poem is an irreverent Callimachean and Ovidian rewriting of Homeric and Virgilian epic. I disagree, however, with his overall assessment of it as a "poem of failure" because it represents "Thetis's epic failure to divert the impending destiny of the *Iliad*" (2005:277). Rather I view its truncated narrative as an experimental intervention in the interstices of the epic tradition. Its emphasis is not so much on the inevitable *telos* but on *process*, i.e. not on Thetis' ultimate failure to save Achilles' from his Homeric fate, but on her (and Statius') re-reading — and questioning — of that canonical teleology.

⁶ Keith 2000:8-35.

⁷ *Virtus* derived from *vir*, so thus had primary connotations of manliness, particularly military prowess, but it came to be extended more generally to civic or moral qualities, such as moral, mental or physical courage and excellence. Nevertheless it was still conceived of as inherently a man's rather than a woman's quality; women such as Lucretia to whom *virtus* is attributed for their display of unique courage and probity are often spoken of as having a masculine spirit or soul: cf. Val. Max. 4.6.5; 6.1.1.

⁸ Cameron 2009 discusses the popularity of representations of Achilles' youth in the Roman period, and their relation to the *Achilleid*. On Achilles' education by Chiron in the poem, see Fantham 1999.

Achilleid stages a transformation of both the epic tradition and epic masculinity. I start with a brief discussion of *Achilleid*'s generic secondariness as articulated in the proem, followed by demonstration of how Statius' allusions to Ovid can enlighten our understanding of his ambiguous representations of Achilles' gender — as both essential and constructed. I conclude with some suggestions on how this ambiguity might inform our reading of the *Achilleid* as a text that transforms conceptions of both gender and genre.

The *Achilleid* has in the past been discounted as a generic curiosity, a whimsical composite of New comedy, Latin love elegy and Hellenistic poetry — everything but epic. However, amidst a flurry of recent interest in the poem, scholars such as Stephen Hinds, Alessandro Barchiesi, Denis Feeney and Peter Heslin have re-emphasised the poem's "epicness", particularly in terms of its negotiation with its own "secondariness" to Homer and Virgil (and Ovid).⁹ In his prologue Statius does not attempt to conceal the fact that his Achilles is a secondary hero, in that he has already been incarnated most canonically in Homeric verse: "celebrated much in Maeonian song" (*multum incluta cantu Maeonio*, 3-4).¹⁰ His new Achillean epic, Statius pronounces, will not only be a supplement to Homer's version (*plura vacant*, 4), "filling in the gaps" in the story of Achilles' life, but also, more ambitiously, that it will "lead the youth through the whole story of Troy" (*tota iuvenem deducere Troia*, 7), and this claim sets his projected epic up for a head-on collision with the *Iliad*, the epic paradigm that officially could not be surpassed.¹¹ But the bravado of the *parvenu* poet is thrown into relief by the fact that, like Achilles, Statius himself is secondary — not only to Homer (and Virgil) but to *himself*, as the poet of the *Thebaid*, his first and largely

⁹ Barchiesi 1996; Hinds 1998 and 2000; Feeney 2004; Heslin 2005. For a perspicacious assessment of critical trends up until 2003 regarding the *Achilleid*, see Coleman 2003, an introduction to Shackleton-Bailey 2003.

¹⁰ Translations are based on Shackleton-Bailey's 2003 Loeb edition, with occasional modification.

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Quint. *IO* 10.i.50, on Homer: "Does he not transcend the limits of human genius ... with the result that it requires a powerful mind, I will not say to imitate, for that is impossible, but even to appreciate his excellences?" On the centrality of Homer to Roman education and culture, see Farrell 2004. Hunter 2004 analyses antiquity's view of Homer as "the "source" from which all subsequent writers were irrigated, the fountainhead of both subject and style, and also the "father" of all later literature (cf. Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 25.265)", not just epic (2004:235). As the first and ultimate "classic", Homer "officially" — in terms of ancient literary criticism — could not be surpassed, but poets' allusions to and appropriations of Homer (and Virgil, later) should be seen as acts of competitive self-assertion as well as of reverence (Hardie 1993). Note also the important comments on these issues in the *Achilleid*'s proem in Barchiesi 1996.

successful epic poem.¹² The poet of the *Achilleid* wards off this anxiety of self-influence with a prayer that his second venture into epic will be as inspired as his first: *da fontes mihi, Phoebus, novos ac fronde secunda / necte comas* (9-10: “grant me, Phoebus, new founts and bind my hair with an auspicious [lit. “a second”] garland”).¹³

The programmatics of “secondariness” at work in the proem become even more complex when, in an apostrophe to Domitian, Statius describes his *Achilleid* as merely a “prelude”, a preliminary game to the real business of writing historical epic about the emperor himself:

*da veniam ac trepidum patere hoc sudare parumper
pulvere: te longo necdum fidente paratu
molimur magnusque tibi praeludit Achilles.* (1.17-19)

Grant me your indulgence and, in my anxiety, allow me to sweat in this dust for a little longer: I am not yet confident in my long preparations to work on you, and great Achilles is your prelude.

Here the poet formulates a hierarchy of appropriate epic subjects with Domitian as the true hero of “real” epic. Achilles, although *magnus* (19), is configured as secondary in eminence to the emperor, as well as his heroic precursor in the form of the prelusory *Achilleid*. With this curious *recusatio* — a trope usually deployed in defence of a poet’s decision *not* to write martial epic — Statius deliberately calls into question not only his own poetic prowess (*necdum fidente*, 18) but also the legitimacy of his own subject, Achilles, as “epic” proper.¹⁴ Thus the proem as a whole, in its self-conscious juxtaposition of epic audacity and self-effacing *recusatio*, stages what Heslin has called the “ironising of the apparatus of poetic inspiration” — and casts the poem in a generically ambiguous light, as both epic and not “epic”.¹⁵ Statius asserts that, unlike Homer, he will “go through the whole hero” (*nos ire per omnem ... heroa*, 4-5), filling in what is left over (*plura vacant*, 4), co-opting the Homeric narrative within his larger scope.¹⁶ Yet this

¹² On the proem of the *Achilleid* as a reflection on the end of the *Thebaid*, see Barchiesi 1996:50 and Hinds 1998:91-6.

¹³ On the pun here (i.e. *secunda* as “propitious” and lit. “second”) see Hinds 1998:96; also Koster 1979:196.

¹⁴ This is in fact his “second” *recusatio* for writing Domitianic epic, echoing his first demurral in *Theb.*1.32-33. See Hinds 1998:96-97. Note that Domitian is also labelled *magnanimus* at *Theb.*12.814.

¹⁵ Heslin 2005:78. See also 71ff. for the complex programmatics at work in the proem, usefully synthesising previous scholarship.

¹⁶ Statius’ assertion that his narrative will be complete and linear is also a refutation of the way in which the cyclical epics remained at the margins of the Homeric epics. See

totalising epic claim is broken by a parenthesis, “such is my desire” (*sic amor est*, 5).¹⁷ Here *amor* not only describes the poet’s inspired desire for his subject; it is also a textual pointer towards the “amorous” *contaminatio* of the epic tradition that Statius introduces into Achilles’ story, with its account of the elegiac wooing of Deidamia.¹⁸

How do these complex negotiations with generic identity in the proem relate to the issues of epic masculinity raised by the rest of the poem? Recent work on gender has shown that women and gender conflict are embedded in the structure of war in much of Roman epic — as unwitting instigators, disruptive forces and / or advocates of violence.¹⁹ Yet here we see the tension between Roman ideas of epic and Roman practice: according to Stephen Hinds, “epic” as a literary construct in Roman critical discussion remained hypostasised as an *idée fixe*, its proper subject matter codified in Horace’s *Ars Poetica* as “exploits of kings and leaders and savage wars” (*res gestae regumque ducumque et tristia bella*, 73), a regulatory ideal with which actual epic poems rarely, if ever, entirely complied.²⁰ According to this interpretation, the right and proper subject matter for “epic” was formulated as men and battles, and women and love were consistently seen as “unepic”, in spite of the fact that they consistently feature in individual epic poems.

Moreover, if, as feminist scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis have claimed, the presence of women in epic is always generically subversive and transgressive, “an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix or matter”,²¹ then the presence in the *Achilleid* of the proto-typical epic hero Achilles, dressed as a woman, is doubly so.²² In the *Achilleid*, “woman” is an obstacle to the trajectory of the epic hero not only in the forms of Thetis and Deidamia, but in the *body* of Achilles himself. 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

Heslin 2005:72, on the Ovidian nature of this claim, i.e. that the *Achilleid* will absorb into its larger compass the Homeric epics (esp. the suggestion in *deducere* of a full and linear narrative: cf. Ovid *Met.* 1.4).

¹⁷ A Callimachean touch: Heslin 2005:73-74.

¹⁸ For the influence of Ovidian erotics, especially the *Ars Amatoria*, on the *Achilleid*, see Sanna 2007:207.

¹⁹ Keith 2000.

²⁰ Hinds 2000:223.

²¹ De Lauretis 1984:119, cited in Keith 1999:215.

²² Hinds 2000:237 highlights the double irony: “In fact, with a degree of mannerism that shows Statius at his most thoroughly post-Ovidian, Scyros in the *Achilleid* is persistently the land not just of gender- (and genre-) bending imagery, but of the *bending* of gender- (and genre-) bending imagery”.

and those of epic itself. This modulates the tension between Roman epic theory and practice into another key, one where the hero himself is its “unepic” element, a methodological embarrassment that must be remedied in the remainder of the poem by focussing on heroes and battles. Achilles’ vow, on regaining his masculine apparel and *arma*, to expiate his shameful cross-dressing “phase”, might be seen as programmatic for the non-extant remainder of Statius’ epic poem too:

*hoc excusabitur ense
Scyros et indecores, Fatorum crimina, cultus. (2.44-45)*

With this sword Scyros and the unseemly dress, the crime of destiny, shall be excused.

As a number of influential critics have noted, Statius’ reading of the hero in drag displays the intoxicating influence of Ovid’s poetics of gender ambiguity, particularly in his epic the *Metamorphoses*. Achilles’ first appearance in the poem is focalized through the gaze of his mother, the sea nymph Thetis, who arrives at Chiron’s cave with the intention of removing Achilles from his foster-father’s care and hiding him from the mustering Greek forces:

*figit gelidus Nereida pallor:
ille aderat multo sudore et pulvere maior,
et tamen arma inter festinatosque labores
dulcis adhuc visu: niveo natat ignis in ore
purpureus fulvoque nitet coma gratior auro.
necdum prima nova lanugine vertitur aetas,
tranquillaeque faces oculis et plurima vultu
mater inest. (1.158-165)*

Icy pallor freezes the Nereid. The lad was there, much sweat and dust made him bigger, and yet in the midst of weaponry and his hurried labours he was still sweet to look upon. A bright glow bathes his snow-white face and his hair shines fairer than yellow gold. His first youth has not yet been changed with new stubble, the lights in his eyes are tranquil and much of his mother is still in his face.

This first passage represents Achilles’ ephebic body as gender-ambiguous: although he occupies himself with suitably proto-heroic pursuits such as hunting, by spotlighting his smooth-faced beauty, Statius at once destabilises Achilles’ claim to heroic stature by constructing him as a potential object of erotic *amor*. Furthermore, Achilles’ resemblance to his mother (165) echoes the sketch of the adolescent boy Hermaphroditus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, before his body

becomes fused with the female nymph Salmacis (*Metamorphoses* 4.290-291): *cuius erat facies, in qua materque paterque cognosci possent* (“in his face both his mother and father could be discerned”).

Like Ovid, Statius establishes his youth as possessing both feminine and masculine physical traits even *before* any “transformation” or “transvestism” takes place. On Scyros, Thetis attempts to coax her boy into assuming feminine raiment by comparing several mythological characters who experienced gender transformation: Hercules, who dressed as a woman as a servant of Queen Omphale, the androgynous god Bacchus, Jupiter, who disguised himself as Diana when in pursuit of Callisto, and Caeneus / Caenis.

*cedamus, paulumque animos submitte viriles
atque habitus dignare meos. si Lydia dura
pensa manu mollesque tulit Tiryntius hastas,
si decet aurata Bacchum vestigia palla
verrere, virgineos si Iuppiter induit artus,
nec magnum ambigui fregerunt Caenea sexus* (1.256-264)

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 ...²³

Born a girl, Caenis undergoes a full “gender-reassignment” at her own request, after she has been raped by Neptune (she is also granted invulnerability) and Thetis claims that her “doubtful sexes” (*ambigui ... sexus*, 264) did not weaken her as a man. Thetis has clearly read her Ovid, who treats most of these figures in his *Metamorphoses*. Yet Thetis’ rhetoric would seem to contradict her own purpose, which is to play *down* the physical change involved, to persuade Achilles that wearing her clothes won’t harm him. By mobilising an array of Ovidian examples, all of whom demonstrate some gradation of gender ambiguity and transformation (from cross-dressing to temporary or full-blown sex-change), she is inserting Achilles’ own transvestism into a continuum of ever-increasing *physical* gender metamorphosis. Heslin argues that this is further proof that Thetis is “the Mrs. Malaprop of Latin epic”, since she undermines her argument by confusing transvestism and transsexuality.²⁴ I would suggest, rather, that Thetis is aware of precisely what her examples imply — the precarious instability of gender

²³ The verbal similarities in this passage to the scene in Seneca’s *Troades* where Astyanax is interred alive in a tomb for his own safety have been noted by Fantham 1979.

²⁴ Heslin 2005:137.

categories — and of how this fluid Ovidianism runs counter to the heroic essentialism demanded by martial epic.²⁵ What is more, she knows that ultimately Achilles will thwart her attempts to conceal him and will become a warrior hero — Neptune has just told her that the fates have decided it, for one thing (1.81). Rather, it seems that is the naïve *Achilles* who does not understand the ridiculous and subversive irony of the situation. Thetis uses Ovidian *exempla* of heroes and gods, who are famous for their hyper-masculinity yet who undergo gender mutation, as powerful rhetorical precedents to persuade her macho little boy to do something supposedly far less transgressive by comparison: to just “put on a dress” for a while.

Yet this passage sets up the question which the rest of this section of the poem explores: in epic, when it comes to the distinctly *mortal* epic hero, where does the gap lie between the gender and the clothing — the arms and the man? Indeed, the category confusion between transvestism / transexualism implied by Thetis' speech takes on a further twist in the succeeding passage; as Statius sets Thetis up as divine agent in an Ovidian-style metamorphosis the suggestion of *bodily* change intensifies. When Achilles spies the beautiful Deidamia among the girls on the beach, his resistance to the dress wavers and Thetis seizes her chance:

*aspicit ambiguum genetrix cogique volentem
iniecitque sinus; tum colla rigentia mollit
submittitque graves umeros et fortia laxat
bracchia et impexos certo domat ordine crines
ac sua dilecta cervice monilia transfert;
et picturato cohibens vestigia limbo
incessum motumque docet fandique pudorem.
qualiter artifici victurae pollice cerae
accipiunt formas ignemque manumque sequuntur
talis erat divae natum mutantis imago.
nec luctata diu; superest nam plurimus illi
invita virtute decor, fallitque tuentes
ambiguus tenuique latens discrimine sexus. (1.325-337)*

His mother sees his indecision, sees that he was willing to be forced, and throws the folds of the garment over him. Then she softens the stiff neck, lowers the weighty shoulders, loosens the strong arms; she subdues the unkempt hair, fixing and arranging, and transfers her necklace to the beloved neck. Constraining his steps with an embroidered hem, she teaches him how to walk and move and how

²⁵ See Hinds 1998 and 2000.

to speak with modesty. As wax that an artist's thumb will bring to life, take on form and follow fire or the hand, such was the picture of the goddess as she transformed her son. For an abundance of gracefulness is left over in him, though his manhood is unwilling, and viewers are deceived by *ambiguous sex*, hiding in a narrow distinction.

By using the language of Ovidian metamorphosis and configuring Thetis as a Pygmalion-type artist who uses Achilles' malleable body as her raw material, Statius speaks as if Achilles' transvestism, supposedly aesthetic and sartorial only, were a bodily alteration. We also know from Ovid that Thetis is herself an expert in the art of shape-shifting: Achilles' father Peleus had trouble pinning her down in the form of a female goddess, so he could rape her and "fill" her with his "essence" — "great Achilles" (*amplectitur heros / et potitur votis ingentique inplet Achille, Met.9.238-64*). In the *Achilleid* the feminine "makeover" of that same *ingens Achilles* at the hands of designer Thetis consists of a "loosening" and "softening" (*mollit, laxat*), reinforcing the impression that Achilles *physically* relents to Thetis' assiduous and skilful refashioning (*submittit, domat, accipiunt formas*).

It seems to me that we should view the word *ambiguus* as an operative term for the construction of Achilles' unstable identity in this poem. The word *ambiguus* is first used in 264 of Caeneus (*ambigui ... sexus*) who changed into a man (and by some accounts, back into a woman again — eg. in Virgil's account of the denizens of the Underworld in *Aen.* 6.448); in 325, *ambiguus* describes Achilles' psychological indecision, after he has seen Deidamia, towards assuming the disguise; and in 337 *ambiguus* is again paired with *sexus*, to describe Achilles' "indeterminate sex" (*ambiguus sexus*) after Thetis has dressed him up. The notable triple repetition within less than 100 lines describing both physical and psychological ambiguity, taken together with the distinctive allusions to the *Metamorphoses*, imply that by assuming women's clothing and deportment, Achilles has actually *effected* a sexual ambiguity on a more profound, *physical* level. By this point, Statius would seem to be refuting — even parodying — the notion of a primary gender identity as natural and inevitable, and mobilising a definition, strongly influenced by the *Metamorphoses*, of gender as fluid and permeable, where there is a titillating elision of boundaries between the body, the costume, and the performance. This exerts a pressure on our interpretation of the final lines of the passage:

*superest nam plurimus illi
invita virtute decor, fallitque tuentes
ambiguus tenuique latens discrimine sexus. (1.334-337)*

For an abundance of gracefulness remains left in him, though his manhood is unwilling, and viewers are deceived by *ambiguous sex* hiding in a narrow distinction.

Of use here is Judith Butler's formulation of how gender performativity can affect the materiality of the body: "If gender *is* drag, and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence of psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth".²⁶ Statius describes Achilles' transvestite body as hidden in the *tenui discrimine*, "the mysterious space between the poles of gender differentiation",²⁷ as if his cutaneous feminisation has somehow created the illusion of a different essence (*fallit tuentes*, 335), thus nudging his already ambiguous, vulnerable body further into some liminal area or abyss where his somatic dimensions become hazy, malleable, penetrable, neither / nor.²⁸ Thetis now activates all of the childish *decor* that "is left over" in his adolescent body (*superest nam plurimus illi ... decor*, 334), that which is "in excess" of his masculinity, still unaccounted for: *ambiguus*. So far, so metamorphic. But before sliding entirely into a fantasy world where Achilles' gender is utterly fluid and infinitely variable, irrespective of bodily contours and entirely at the mercy of the artistic manipulations of his mother, Statius is careful to insert a reference to Achilles "manhood that is unwilling" (*invita virtute*, 335), implying a psychic masculine core or essence, which has become displaced, but not erased, by his new bodily identity.

What ensues after this quasi-metamorphosis is a narrative that fluctuates repeatedly between concealing and revealing Achilles' body and his gender status — a kind of narrative "striptease". Thus at times Statius glosses over the materiality of Achilles' burgeoning adolescent physique with an Ovidian elegance, in language that evokes illusion and deception, as in lines 334-337 above, or again at 560-561: *occultum falsi sub imagine sexus / Aeaciden* ("Aeacides concealed

²⁶ Butler 1990:28. For a different reading of these lines to mine, see Feeney 2004.

²⁷ Cyrino 1998:221.

²⁸ The idea that the feminine clothing has somehow penetrated Achilles' body is corroborated at the end of the poem, when, on board the ship to Troy, Ulysses prods Achilles about what happened on Scyros (2.35-38), asking "Did your mother defile you with feminine robe?" 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. An example of actual penetration-by-clothing is Hercules' death from the *peplos* given to him by Deianira (cf. Ovid, *Heroides* 9). For the myth of Pentheus as animating subtext, see note 25. For Ovidian "metamorphosis through violation of bodily boundaries" see Hardie 2003:41ff and Segal 1998.

under the image of false sex”).²⁹ But elsewhere he homes in precisely on the physical details, to humorous and titillating effect. Witness the farcical comedy of Thetis’ bluffing speech to Lycomedes explaining why Achilles is such a “strapping girl”:

*‘hanc tibi,’ ait, ‘nostri germanam, rector, Achillis
(nonne vides ut torva genas aequandaque fratri?)
tradimus. arma umeris arcumque animosa petebat
ferre et Amazonio conubio pellere ritu.
tu frange regendo
indocilem sexuque tene, dum nubilis aetas
solvendusque pudor; neve exercere protervas
gymnadas aut lustris nemorum concede vagari.
intus ale et similes inter seclude puellas’.* (1.350-362)

I give this girl into your keeping, o king, the sister of my Achilles (don’t you see how fierce she looks, how like her brother?). She is high-spirited, and asked for weapons on her shoulders and a bow, and to shun marriage as the Amazons do ... break and tame the unruly wench and keep her in her sex, till it is time for marriage and the loosening of modesty. Don’t let her practice wild wrestling or wander in the woods. Raise her indoors and shut her up among girls like herself.

Achilles’ cross-dressed body calls attention to the performative and imitative aspect of all gender — to quote Butler again, its “radical contingency” — and yet also to the phenomenological absurdity of it.³⁰ This oscillation between gender definition and counter-definition, between reality and illusion, is exemplified by the ironic description of an ungainly yet still charming Achilles taking part in female-only Dionysiac dances:

*illum virgineae ducentem signa catervae
magnaue difficili solventem brachia motu
(et sexus pariter decet et mendacia matris)
mirantur comites.* (1.603-606)

²⁹ Hinds 1998:135f. discusses Horatian and Ovidian parallels for this elision between gender illusion and reality: e.g. Hor. *C.* 2.5.21-24 and Actaeon in *Met.* 3.250.

³⁰ See Butler’s comments on drag: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative nature of gender itself — as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are assumed to be natural and necessary” (1990:137-138).

As he leads the standard of a virgin troop and clumsily waves his huge arms (his sex and his mother's lies are equally becoming), his companions marvel.

Statius manages to construct an Achilles who is simultaneously convincing as a girl (within the poem's own system of interpretation) and ridiculous (to the reader). The veiled yet continually evoked body of the transvestite always then becomes the site of the reader's curiosity and anxiety — forcing questions of belief, plausibility, of how and why (not). We might go further and say that the gender ambiguity of Achilles dressed as a girl is presented as simultaneously a parody of a real *virgo* and a parody of the budding hypermasculine epic hero.

Achilles' rape of Deidamia signals a second key Ovidian intertext for the poem: this time it is not the epic *Metamorphoses*, but Ovid's elegiac dating manual, the *Ars Amatoria*. Ovid's version of the rape in the *Ars Amatoria* is the only extant literary treatment of Achilles on Scyros before Statius:

*turpe, nisi hoc matris precibus tribuisset, Achilles
veste virum longa dissimulatus erat.
quid facis, Aeacide? Non sunt tua munera lanae;
tu titulos alia Palladis arte petas.
quid tibi cum calathis? clipeo manus apta ferendo est:
pensa quid in dextra, qua cadet Hector, habes?
reice succinctos operoso stamina fusos!
quassanda est ista Pelias hasta manu.
forte erat in thalamo virgo regalis eodem;
haec illum stupro comperit esse virum.
viribus illa quidem victa est, ita credere oportet:
sed voluit vinci viribus illa tamen. (AA 1.688 ff.)*

Basely, had he not so far yielded to his mother's prayers, Achilles had disguised his manhood in a woman's robe. What are you doing, Aeacides? Wools are not your business; you seek fame by another art of Pallas. What have you to do with baskets? Your arm is fitted to bear a shield. Why do you hold a skein in the hand by which Hector shall die? Cast away the spindle wrapped about with laborious windings! That hand must shake the Pelian spear. It chanced that in the same chamber was the royal maiden; by her rape she found him to be a man. By force indeed was she overcome, so one must believe; yet by force did she wish to be overcome all the same.

In Ovid, the problem of Achilles' ambivalent gender and compromised phallic potency is immediately settled by aggressive penetration. Amy Richlin states:

“When we want to know the gender of the adolescent hero dressed in women’s clothing, the signifier of his maleness is his ability to commit rape”.³¹ And as Peter Heslin has astutely observed, if the narrator of the *Metamorphoses* demonstrates an understanding of gender as culturally constructed and therefore mutable, the love instructor of the *Art of Love* is a staunch essentialist — at least in this bit. In the gender-system of the *Ars Amatoria*, masculinity will inevitably assert itself through a man’s natural role as aggressor, just as woman’s role is to suffer physical force, because “she’s asking for it really”.³²

Statius’ version of the rape adapts and alters his Ovidian model. On the one hand Achilles’ infiltration of the female-only rites is depicted — in part — as an erotic stratagem from New Comedy, with Achilles cast as potentially rampant male lurking undiscovered among vulnerable virginal females, his transvestism accentuating rather than compromising his masculine sexual power by lending it the illusion of innocuousness.³³ Yet the comic-phallic strain is tempered by an emphasis on Achilles’ radical isolation from the other girls — and from himself. His alienated subjectivity is most strongly evinced in his soliloquy in the woods just before the rape in 634-639:

*ast ego pampineis diffundere brachia thyrsis
et tenuare colus (pudet haec taedetque fateri)
iam scio. quin etiam dilectae virginis ignem
aequaeuamque facem captus noctesque diesque
dissimulas. quonam usque premes urentia pectus
vulnera? teque marem (pudet heu!) nec amore probabis?
(Ach. 1.624-639)*

But I now know how to spread my arms with wands of vine and spin thread (shame and disgust to confess it!). And more, you conceal your passion for your beloved girl, your coeval fire, night and day, a prisoner. How long will you suppress the wound that burns your breast? Even for love (for shame!) will you not prove yourself a man?

Here Achilles bewails his situation, and engages in a dialectic with his split self, switching between first and second persons: *ego ... scio ... dissimulas ... premes ... teque ... probabis?* Statius’ Achilles repeats — to himself — the Ovidian love instructor’s outraged injunctions to him in *Ars* 1.688-695, but by recasting them in

³¹ Richlin 1992:169.

³² Heslin 2005:274.

³³ Cyrino 1998:227 argues for this interpretation of the rape scene: Achilles’ drag simply enhances his masculine sexual potency.

an interior monologue Statius elevates them from a mock-heroic to a quasi-tragic register, his lament about his quasi-emasculated persona evocative of the anguished monologue of Attis in Catullus 63, a young worshipper of the goddess Cybele who bewails his *actual* self-castration during a ritual trance. Isolated from his girlish “peers” yet also from himself, Achilles is a *captus* (637) in his own body, concealed in his “unwarlike prison” (*imbelli carcere*, 625-626).

Like the reflection in the pool in Ovid's Narcissus story, which is both object of Narcissus' love and obstacle to the attainment of that love, Statius sets up Achilles' disguise as a variation of the elegiac *paraclausithyron*, the trope of the lover-poet barred from his beloved by a closed door. Achilles' feminine guise allows him access to Deidamia, yet simultaneously excludes him from physically acting upon his erotic feelings for her. On Scyros, Statius has attenuated the “barrier” between the lover and the fulfillment of his desire to the extent that it is only Achilles' “female” body that prevents them from enjoying each others' full presence. Thus the transvestite Achilles is rendered impotent in two paradoxical ways: he is ineffective as a man because he cannot be fully actualised as masculine, but, he is “castrated” as a woman because he *has*, rather than lacks a penis, which prevents him from being a whole (or “real”) woman.³⁴ Achilles' response is to counter the penetration (*vulnera*, 639) he has experienced though his love for Deidamia (and the concomitant violation of his masculine gender identity), with a penetration of his own.³⁵

After his soliloquy, Achilles assails Deidamia in secret:

*sic ait et densa noctis gavisus in umbra
tempeſtiva ſuis torpere ſilentia furtis
vi potitur votis et toto pectore veros
admovet amplexus ...
illa quidem clamore nemus montemque replevit;
ſed Bacchi comites, diſcuſſa nube ſoporis,
ſigna choris indicta putant; fragor undique notus
tollitur, et thyrsos iterum vibrabat Achilles.*

(1.640-643, 645-648)

³⁴ Achilles' “inbetweenness” echoes the comments of Mnesilochus to the effeminately-attired Agathon in Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazousae* (141-143): “If you were raised as a man, where is your cock? Where is your cloak, your Spartan boots? If a woman, where are your tits?”

³⁵ Statius' description of Achilles' first sight of Deidamia describes this love as an intensely physical sensation, which pierces him to the bone, and spreads outward through the rest of his body: 1.303-306. On love as a *vulnus* see Sharrock 2002:98. Also Barthes 1990:14: “A man is not feminised because he is inverted, but because he is in love”.

So he spoke, and, happy that in the night's thick darkness, silence lies still upon his secret action, he gains his desire by force, launching true embraces with his whole heart ... The girl filled the wood and the mountain with her cries, but Bacchus' companions shake aside their cloud of slumber and think it is a signal for the dance. From all sides the familiar shout is raised and Achilles once more brandishes the thyrsus.

As we saw above, the narrator of the *Ars Amatoria* explained Achilles' rape of Deidamia as a straightforward assertion of his masculinity, an Ovidian / Richlinian intersection of pleasure with violence, culminating in the erasure of the female subject ("by her rape she found him to be a man", *AA* 1.693). In the *Achilleid*, however, Achilles' rape arises from his own profound *lack*: his "true embraces" (*veros ... amplexus*, 642-643) are an attempt not only to annul the trickery of Thetis, but to assert his true subjectivity and to reclaim his body (e.g. "his whole breast", *toto pectore*, 642) as male. In this objective it partially succeeds: Achilles reveals himself to Deidamia as a man and demonstrates his potency by fathering a child, Pyrrhus. Yet as an assertion of masculine agency, the rape is also problematic. Firstly, its enveloping and stifling pastoral setting immediately complicates categories of penetrator and penetrated: it takes place during female-only rites, in a feminised, even vaginal landscape — a cave (*antrum*) — with the rapist dressed as a woman.³⁶ Equally problematic is the fact that the object of Achilles' desire has also been presented to us as a near-mirror image of himself (in her first appearance in the poem at 1.293-300, Deidamia's beauty is described in strikingly similar terms to Achilles' own beauty as a fresh-faced ephebe at 1.161-2; the primary difference is that unlike Achilles, Deidamia *is* a "real woman". This play of (dis)identification muddies rather than simply reaffirms the codified opposition between the genders in epic and the distribution of power and vulnerability between male and female. Moreover, the rape changes little *materially* for Achilles: he retains his feminine drag after the rape for at least nine months, until his son is born. All he has accomplished it would seem, is share his "crime" with Deidamia (*commune nefas*, 669), but it remains a secret. Even his love for her remains something that must still be suppressed and concealed (*occultus amor*, 856). In Statius' account, Achilles' muffled attempt at sexual agency is therefore an implicit rejection of the Ovidian notion, propagated in his version of this scene in the *Ars*, that rape is an effective statement of a hero's masculinity.³⁷ Something more than male sexual potency is required to rectify *this*

³⁶ For the epic trope of female identification with a landscape, see Keith 2000: ch.3.

³⁷ Heslin 2005:275.

epic's inverted gender system.³⁸ It is worth noting, however, that gender definition in the *Ars* is more complex than Ovid's Achilles passage (and Heslin's reading of it) would suggest on its own. Rather than simply reinforcing stereotyped gender types, taken as a whole Ovid's erotic instruction manual sets up a witty play between them, e.g. between the idea of active masculine lover and passive feminine beloved, or hypermasculine epic warrior and effeminate elegiac lover.³⁹ Thus Statius' problematisation of Achilles' attempt at achieving masculinity here might be seen to comment ironically on Ovid's humorously one-dimensional account, in which Achilles realises his Homeric warrior manhood at the same time as he realises his sexual potency. In other words, Statius "out-Ovids" Ovid, as it were. For if Ovid's amatory Achillean poetics function as a kind of "failed intertext" in the *Achilleid*'s rape episode,⁴⁰ a failed corrective to Achilles' earlier ambiguity, Ovidian metamorphosis triumphs in the climactic revelation scene, where Achilles is finally exposed as, or rather *transformed* into, a man.

Appropriately, Achilles' second transformation-scene in the poem occurs, like the first one, through a devious intervention, this time the masculine *Realpolitik* of Ulysses, who acts as a masculine corrective to the manipulations of his mother Thetis. The dynamic of concealment and display that characterises the entire Scyros episode intensifies when Ulysses first arrives on the island in search of Achilles and penetrates the feminine milieu, piercing all of its inner chambers with his unadulterated male gaze, probing for a "girl" with an ambiguous physique (742-749; 761-766; 794-796). In contrast to his insular feminine surroundings, Achilles' intense gaze mirrors that of Ulysses, and reaches out to it. He carries himself "upright with his face and eyes wandering about" (*erectum genasque oculisque vagantem*, 764); he listens greedily to Ulysses' words, "drinking them in with vigilant ear" (*intentum vigilique haec aure trahentem*, 794-795), his eyes are

³⁸ The rape passage in the *Achilleid* also has a number of highly significant intertextual similarities to Ovid's account, mentioned briefly above, of Peleus' rape of Thetis which results in the birth of Achilles (*Met.* 11.264 f.). I have not had space to delineate them here, but they are discussed in depth by Heslin 2005:286-88. In contrast with what Ulysses describes at *Ach.* 2.37 as his "too much mother", Heslin notes that Achilles' father Peleus has been almost totally elided from the text as we have it, hardly mentioned until Achilles casts off his women's clothing. Although other people try to fill the void of the father (Chiron, Thetis, Lycomedes), they fail in some way: "it is only when Ulysses arrives and whispers the name "Peleus" in Achilles' ear that he sheds his female identity and embarks upon his destiny" (286). Mendelsohn 1990 also has insightful points on the absence of the father in the poem.

³⁹ A point noted by Cowan 2007, which I develop here.

⁴⁰ For the idea of "failed intertext" in Statian epic — a reenactment of a passage in earlier epic, but which self-consciously fails to achieve in narrative terms what the model does — see Hershkovitz 1997, esp. 37-38.

glued to Ulysses as he leaves the hall (*haeret / respiciens Ithacum coetuque novissimus exit*, 804-805). Now — unlike his previous deceptive ambiguity — Achilles is conspicuous as a comically unconvincing girl: he scorns the harmonious formations of the girl's dances: “together they raise and together lower their wands and complicate their steps” (*pariter levant pariterque reponunt / multiplicantque gradum*, 830 ff). He projects himself out from the throng instead and disrupts their uniform movements: “then indeed, then above all does Achilles stand out, caring neither to keep his turn nor to join arms; then more than ever does he scorn the delicate steps and attire, and breaks the chorus and throws all into great confusion” (*tunc vero, tunc praecipue manifestus Achilles / nec servare vices nec brachia iungere curat; / tunc molles gressus, tunc aspernatur amictus / plus solito rumpitque choros et plurima turbat*, 835-838). Through this interplay evoked between the male gaze, individual male display and female sequestration within the conformity of the group, Statius draws a stark distinction between the girls' placid herd-like sensibility, their “unadventurous sex and nature” (*sexus iners et natura*, 848), and Achilles' manly striving for presence, visibility and physical individuation.

As soon as he grasps the shield Ulysses has laid in front of him, Achilles' physical emergence or “coming out” begins:

*infremuit torsitque genas, et fronte relicta
surrexere comae; nusquam mandata parentis,
nusquam occultus amor, totoque in pectore Troia est.*

(1.855-857)

He cried out and rolled his eyes, the hair stood up from his forehead.
His mother's command is forgotten, his hidden love is forgotten,
Troy is in all his heart.

In the rape of Deidamia, Achilles had made an attempt to repair the fracture between his concealed gender and his physical persona through sexual aggression (*toto pectore veros / admovet amplexus*, 1.642-643). The rape proved ultimately inadequate in recovering some kind of integrated Achillean selfhood, his attempt at “coming out” through “true embraces”, i.e. penetration, stifled by the unepic, clandestine setting. It is only here, finally, in the presence of the Greek heroes, that the power of machinating Thetis and of his elegiac *amor*, both of which had contrived to block Achilles' entry into Homeric manhood, melt away, as the armour in Achilles' hand unites his *totum pectus* with his true “masculine essence”,

his epic destiny, *Troy: totoque in pectore Troia est*.⁴¹ Achilles' initial metamorphosis into a girl is thus replayed — and unmade — with epic hero Ulysses replacing mother Thetis as metamorphic agent, this time *undressing* Achilles:

... iam pectus amictu
laxabat, cum grande tuba sic iussus Agyrtes
insonuit; fugiunt disiectis undique donis
implorantque patrem commotaque proelia credunt.
illius intactae cecidere a pectore vestes,
iam clipeus breviorque manu consumitur hasta
(mira fides) Ithacumque umeris excedere visus
Aetolumque ducem: tantum subita arma calorque
Martius horrenda confundit luce penates,
immanisque gradu, ceu protinus Hectora poscens,
stat medius trepidante domo, Peleaque virgo
quaeritur (1. 874-884)

Already Ulysses was loosening the clothing from his chest, when Agyrtes blew a loud blast from his trumpet as ordered. They flee, throwing the presents in all directions, and entreat their father, believing that a battle has been stirred up. The garments fall untouched from Achilles' breast, his hand devours the shield and shortened spear (strange but true) and his shoulders seem taller than the Ithacan and Aetolian captains; with so fearsome a light do the sudden weapons and martial ardour flood through the dwelling. Towering, he stands in the centre of the trembling house, as though calling for Hector right there. Peleus' "daughter" is nowhere to be found.

In a wonderfully Homeric touch, Achilles' heroic male body is activated, made "operative", by the armour that Ulysses sets in front of him.⁴² In the "dressing up" scene, Thetis actively subdued and constrained Achilles' body with clothing and

⁴¹ There is also an interesting interplay between line 1.857, *totoque in pectore Troia est*, and Statius' promise in the proem that he will "lead the youth through the whole of Troy": *tota iuvenem deducere Troia* (1.7). On *deducere* as a declaration of Ovidian poetics, see *Met.* 1.4.

⁴² Compare *Iliad* 19.384-386: "And brilliant Achilles tried himself in his armour, to see if it fitted close, / and how his glorious limbs ran within it, and the armour became as wings / and upheld the shepherd of the people" (trans. R Lattimore, Chicago 1951). On the hero's accoutrements and arms as direct extensions of his body, see also Vernant 1991, esp. 37.

feminine accoutrements; here however, Ulysses' assistance is barely required as Achilles' physique seems to swell, "Incredible Hulk"-like, repelling the girl's clothing simply through the upward and outward force of his own physical materialisation. Here too we find Ovidian precedent: Achilles' turbo-charged development into a man exaggerates Ovid's description of Iphis' transformation from girl to boy in *Met.* 9.786-791:

*sequitur comes Iphis euntem,
quam solita est, maiore gradu, nec candor in ore
permanet, et vires augentur, et acrior ipse est
vultus, et incomptis brevior mensura capillis,
plusque vigoris adest, habuit quam femina. nam quae
femina nuper eras, puer es!* (Ovid. *Met.* 9.786-791)

Iphis walked beside her as she went, but with a larger stride than was her wont. Her face seemed of a darker hue, her strength seemed greater, her very features sharper, and her locks, all unadorned, were shorter than before. She seemed more vigorous than was her girlish wont. In fact you who but lately were a girl are now a boy!

At the beginning of the poem we saw Achilles' body altered and feminised by woman's clothing in a replay of an Ovidian sex-change. Now, through another overblown re-enactment of an Ovidian transformation, Statius' Achilles has at last achieved something resembling the extravagant virility of the adult hero of Homeric martial epic. In a new language of essentialism, the heroic body is vindicated; its inner *virtus* materialises and bursts out of its feminine gender identity. It is as if the encroachment on his physical integrity effected by the women's clothing (compare Ulysses' reference a little later in the poem to the "violation" of the dress: *violavit amictu*, 2.35) has been suddenly reversed; and it surely does not press the text too hard to read *intactae* (878), here referring to the clothes that fall off him of their own accord, as also obliquely signifying the body of Achilles himself, restored to its original undefiled state.

Statius' *Achilleid* addresses the boundaries and morphology of the heroic male body and of epic masculinity by adapting to his own ends Ovidian models of gender from the *Metamorphoses* and the *Ars Amatoria*. In a kind of "back to the future" move, Statius' first century AD Latin text prewrites archaic Homeric epic and confronts the ethos of heroic agency through the lens of a Hellenistic and Ovidian gender poetics, and finally recuperates a gendered hero who resembles, in some shape or form, the familiar Homeric hero — yet is also different. In its extant first book, the *Achilleid* goes some way towards fracturing received notions of heroic masculinity and weaving alternative narratives of gender identity and desire

— only to finally and dexterously reorient these narratives onto a trajectory which would seem to lead logically back towards a traditional epic Trojan showdown of manliness on the battlefield. For at the point where the poet seems just about to make that final rupture of the conceptual bind between sex and gender, he pulls back — *re-fabricating* a mythic masculinity that seems, in its end result if not in its process, to segue smoothly into the “phalloheroic” Homeric ideal. But as self-conscious readers of epic, we ignore this oscillating trajectory at our peril. Indeed, it would be a mistake to view the whole previous narrative as simply building towards this moment of full masculine embodiment. For surely it is the *journey* itself, rather than its *telos*, that undermines and reconfigures our notions of masculinity, to the extent that when Achilles *does* become the man recognisable from Homeric epic, he is nonetheless entirely different: epic heroism *itself* has undergone a transformation. Homer will never be the same again.

The alternation between constructionist and essentialist understandings of sexuality (between nature and nurture) in the poem precludes any straightforward interpretation of the poem's gender representation. Achilles' gender is represented as irreducibly biological and material (his performance as a girl leaves a lot to be desired, his masculinity constantly about to rupture his disguise), yet at other times his gender appears to be constructed and determined by external or social forces (Thetis' clothing and the girlish environment of Scyros feminise Achilles, while the armour and influence of Ulysses push him towards masculinity). Peter Heslin explains the poem's ambivalent attitude toward gender as simply expressing the obvious:

For Statius as for any writer in antiquity, biology is destiny, but that destiny may be thwarted, for it needs a suitable environment to develop. Gender in the *Achilleid* is not only natural and inevitable, but it is also, to an extent, socially constructed (2005:295).

Evidence for complex, contradictory and ambivalent understandings of gender in the ancient world can be found in a wide range of ancient texts, so I do not wish to contradict Heslin's ultimate point that Statius was a man of his time in this regard: in Rome masculinity was *both* a natural status *and* an achieved condition concomitant with adulthood.⁴³ Yet I wonder if, rather than only reaching outside the text to a partially hazy socio-sexual context to justify the *Achilleid*'s ambiguous

⁴³ See Winkler 1990:50 for an analysis of how the ancient sex / gender system was founded on contradictory assumptions that masculinity was at once a fact of nature and “a duty and hard-won achievement” or Gleason 1995:390 on masculinity as “grounded in ‘nature’ yet ... fluid and incomplete until firmly anchored by the discipline of an acculturative process”. For a different take on the *Achilleid* in its socio-cultural context, see Barchiesi 2005.

gender representation, we could perhaps find an equally, if not more, satisfying motivation *within* the poem itself: specifically, in the poem's ambivalence towards its own epicness and Statius' ambivalence to his own identity as epic poet, as set out so carefully and ironically in the prologue. If Achilles embodies in the most emblematic way the protagonist of epic poetry, a figure who functions as a symbol for the heroic *epos*, Statius' poem of a cross-dressing Achilles is surely a provocation of the institutionalised essentialism of the epic genre. One might go further and propose that, in Statius' self-consciously secondary hands, Achilles' gender ambiguity has become a figure for the strategies of generic appropriation, cross-fertilisation, supplementation and transformation central to any new composition of epic itself.

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