THE TRANSVESTITE ACHILLES

Statius' *Achilleid* is a playful, witty, and allusive epic in the manner of Ovid. As we follow Achilles' metamorphosis from wild boy to demure girl to passionate lover to fierce hero, the poet brilliantly illustrates a series of contrasting codes of behavior: male and female, epic and elegiac. This first full-length study of the poem addresses not only the narrative itself, but also sets the myth of Achilles on Scyros within a broad interpretive framework. This exploration ranges from the reception of the *Achilleid* in Baroque opera to the anthropological parallels that have been adduced to explain the myth of Achilles' transvestism. The expansive approach of this study, which contributes to discussions of Latin intertextuality, the early reception of Ovid, psychoanalytic perspectives on ancient literature, and theorizations of gender in antiquity, makes it essential reading not only for students of Statius, but also for students of Latin literature and of gender in antiquity.

P.J. HESLIN is a lecturer in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Durham.

The Transvestite Achilles

Gender and Genre in Statius' Achilleid

P.J. HESLIN

Ĩ



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

http://www.cambridge.org Information on this title: http://www.cambridge.org/9780521851459

© P. J. Heslin 2005

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset by the author in Adobe Caslon 10/12.3 and Ibycus Greek, using $\ensuremath{\mathrm{LMEX2e}}$

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-851459 hardback ISBN-10 0-521-851459 hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate. What Song the *Syrens* fang, or what name *Achilles* affumed when he hid himfelf among women, though puzling Queftions are not beyond all conjecture.

Thomas Browne, Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall

For Aideen

Contents

Acknowledgments \cdot ix

Introduction · xi

1. Opening Nights at the Opera 1641-1744 · 1

2. The Design of the Achilleid \cdot 57

3. Womanhood, Rhetoric, and Performance \cdot 105

4. Semivir, Semifer, Semideus · 157

5. Transvestism in Myth and Ritual $\,\cdot\,$ 193

6. Rape, Repetition, and Romance \cdot 237

7. Conclusion · 277 Works Cited · 301

Index Locorum · 331

General Index · 343

Acknowledgments

IT WAS Kathleen Coleman who first suggested that I should go off and read Statius, and ever since then she has been unfailing in her support for my work. At Trinity College, Dublin, she supervised from beginning to end the Ph.D. thesis from which this book has developed, providing constant encouragement and meticulous criticism. When she moved to Harvard, Kathy arranged for me to spend a year there as a visiting graduate student, and it was then that much of the present work was written or rewritten. I thank Gregory Nagy, Richard Tarrant, Richard Thomas, and the entire Department of the Classics for their hospitality, and Dean Christoph Wolff of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard for providing the generous financial support that enabled me to stay. I would also like to thank Gloria Ferrari and Albert Henrichs, who read portions of this work and made valuable suggestions.

I was fortunate to have had Stephen Hinds and Damien Nelis as examiners of my thesis; they gave me a great deal of encouragement and detailed suggestions for revision. I was also very lucky in the feedback I got from the readers for the press: Alessandro Barchiesi brought to my attention very many important items of bibliography of which I would otherwise have been ignorant, and Elaine Fantham's skeptical eye helped to improve the argument in a number of places. My editor, Michael Sharp, and my superb copy-editor, Angela Blackburn, generously put up with the idiosyncrasies of an author who insisted on designing his own book.

For various kinds of help along the way, I would like to thank: Harald Anderson, Jan Bremmer, Jonathan Burgess, Leslie Cahoon, John Dillon, Andrew Erskine, Edith Hall, Christine Morris, Peter Rhodes, Christopher Rowe, and Ben Tipping. I am grateful to my colleagues at Durham for allowing me a term of leave in 2002, which enabled me to finish the research for this book.

My greatest debt is to my wife, Aideen, for her patience and support.

Introduction

THE STORY of Achilles' childhood is not very familiar today, even among those who know a bit about classical mythology. It is as the hero of Homer's Iliad that Achilles is best known, and rightly so. In the Middle Ages, however, readers in Western Europe did not have direct access to Homer's great epic, and had to make do with various works in Latin that summarized the tale of the Trojan War. These pallid recapitulations could never fully convey the qualities that gave Achilles the reputation he always enjoyed as the greatest hero of Ancient Greece. Disappointment will also have met the medieval reader looking for vibrant portraits of the hero in the great works of classical Latin literature. In Virgil's Aeneid, Achilles is a figure already frozen in art, pictured on the walls of Juno's temple in Carthage. Ovid, who delighted in drawing alternative portraits of certain heroes drawn from the canon of epic, such as Ulysses and Aeneas, only shows us brief glimpses of Achilles, even in that part of the Metamorphoses that tells the story of the Trojan War. The reason for this reticence is easy to understand. If, as Virgil is credited with saying, it is easier to steal Hercules' club than to steal a line from Homer, then only a fool would try to compete directly with Homer's eternal portrait of Achilles in all of his pride, stubbornness, rage, and pity.

One classical Latin poem that was well known in the Middle Ages did provide an alternative sketch of Achilles, at least in part. In the first lines of his epic *Achilleid*, Statius makes the bold claim that he intends to out-do Homer by providing us with a complete and comprehensive poetic biography of Achilles. Fortunately for his readers, Statius was no fool. As we shall see, he in no way intended to compete directly with Homer. Rather, much as Ovid had done with respect to Aeneas in the *Metamorphoses*, Statius chose episodes that did not overlap with the canonical epic text, and which have a far different tone. The *Achilleid* as we have it is brief and unfinished, and it includes only two episodes from Achilles' biography: his early childhood in the care of the halfman, half-horse, centaur Chiron, and his boyhood interlude as a draft-dodging

xii 脊 INTRODUCTION

cross-dresser on the island of Scyros. The contrast with Homer is stark: where Achilles' temporary withdrawal from the Greek forces in the *Iliad* results in bitter tragedy, his temporary withdrawal from military service on Scyros is the stuff of slapstick comedy and romantic melodrama.¹ Statius' comedy was once a very well-known text; its fame is attested by the one story from Achilles' childhood that is still known to the general reader: how he was dipped into the Styx by his mother, Thetis, as she held onto his heel. The myth of Achilles' vulnerable heel is not Homeric; it was preserved and disseminated by Statius. It may be hard for us to grasp completely the significance of the fact that for many centuries the most complete and compelling portrait of the great Achilles available to Western Europe was as the hero of a transvestite sex-farce.

The plot of the Achilleid as we have it begins with Achilles' mother, the sea-goddess Thetis, watching the ships of Paris steal away from Greece with Helen of Troy. Knowing that her son is fated to die in the course of the resulting war, she attempts to interfere with his tragic destiny. She first approaches Neptune in an attempt to sink Paris' fleet; but her request is rebuffed. She then heads to the cave of Chiron the centaur, who has been responsible for Achilles' upbringing, and she takes the boy away, deceiving Chiron about her real intentions. She brings her son to Scyros, an obscure island in the Aegean whose king, Lycomedes, has no sons. She asks Achilles to put on female clothing and to act like a girl. He resists, but when he catches sight of Deidamia, the king's beautiful daughter, and her sisters, he agrees that it might not be unpleasant to spend some time in their company. Thetis dresses him as a girl, instructs him in feminine comportment, and introduces him to Lycomedes as Achilles' sister; she warns the king to supervise "her" carefully. The scene then shifts to Aulis, where the combined forces of Greece are gathering to set out for Troy. The absence of Achilles is noted, and the prophet Calchas is called upon to discover the cause. He divines that Achilles has been hidden by his mother on Scyros, and Ulysses and Diomedes set out to find him. The narration then returns us to Scyros, where Achilles and Deidamia have grown very close, though his identity and his sex are unknown to her. He resolves finally to assert his manhood and so rapes her during a nocturnal celebration by the women of Scyros in honor of Bacchus; she eventually delivers a son. At that point, Achilles identifies himself to Deidamia, but they keep their relationship and their child a secret. Ulysses and Diomedes arrive on Scyros, where they are received warmly by Lycomedes; but they do not state the real reason for their visit. They lay out gifts for the king and his daughters, and one "girl" is more interested in the weapons than the jewelry. Ulysses whispers to Achilles that he knows his real identity, and, as previously arranged by Ulysses, a wartrumpet sounds out at that very moment. Everyone scatters, but Achilles grabs the weapons and runs to confront the fictional enemy. When calm is restored,

1 Thus Steadman (1967: 142).

INTRODUCTION 脊 xiii

Achilles confesses his true identity to Lycomedes, produces his son, and offers to marry Deidamia; on the day after the wedding, Achilles departs and the first book of the poem ends. In the small part of the second book that exists, Ulysses explains to Achilles the causes of the Trojan War, and Achilles tells Ulysses the story of his upbringing in the care of the centaur Chiron.

Once upon a time, Statius was not the obscure figure he is today; in the Middle Ages, he enjoyed a central place in the canon of classical literature. He was known mainly as the author of his epic *Thebaid*, a grim and extravagantly bloody telling of the tale of the Seven against Thebes. The *Achilleid* was also well known, not only as the minor work of a major author, but also in its own right as a standard school text.² It is easy to see the qualities that must have recommended it to medieval teachers: it is a brief and lighthearted text by a major author, which introduces students to an important idiom and meter along with some major characters from mythology; it also describes the exemplary education of the young Achilles, his affection for his teacher, Chiron, and his obedience to his mother.³

In the Renaissance, Homer was rediscovered by the West, and competing portraits of Achilles began to hold less intrinsic interest. Statius was the object of intense curiosity in early modern scholarship on account of the rediscovery of his Silvae, a text that posed many problems, but also finally revealed some accurate information about Statius' own life and circumstances, knowledge that had been lost in the Middle Ages. In fact, it may be that the discovery that Statius was not a particularly well-born or romantic figure, but rather a professional poet who earned his living with his pen, following in his father's trade, hastened the decline of his reputation as a writer. It did not help that many of the Silvae contain effusive panegyrics of Domitian, which Statius did not live long enough to recant after that emperor's downfall. Another problem for Statius was that his Renaissance admirers often had other axes to grind. When the elder Scaliger claimed that Statius was a better poet than Homer, he meant, of course, that he was more Virgilian.4 Likewise Malherbe, who preferred Statius over all other ancient poets, had a famously low opinion of Greek literature as a whole.⁵ With friends like these, Statius made even more enemies among the champions of Homer than his irreverent portrait of Achilles might have won him. Statius also suffered from the stigmatization of post-Augustan Latin as belonging to an inferior era: the so-called "Silver" age.⁶

Anyone who would defend the "classics" - Dryden, Sainte-Beuve, and Eliot

² It was one of the school texts of graded difficulty that made up the so-called *Liber catonianus*. On this tradition, see Clogan (1998: 1–3) and Anderson (forthcoming).

³ Anderson (forthcoming) gives some evidence for this attitude in the Middle Ages.

⁴ Scaliger (1561: 325aD), on which see Anderson (forthcoming).

^{5 &}quot;Vie de M. de Malherbe, par M. de Racan" in Lalanne (1862: vol 1, lxx).

⁶ On the origins of "Silver" latinity as a judgmental term, see Mayer (1999); on the quarrel between Gronovius and Cruceus over the quality of Statius' latinity, see Anderson (forthcoming).

xiv 🍞 INTRODUCTION

included – will need to define what a classic is. More often than not, the definition has been determined by the requirements of that defense rather than by a disinterested inquiry. Certain writers such as Lucan and Statius who were unquestionably "classics" to an age that accepted the authority of antiquity *tout court* found themselves fenced outside of newer, more restricted, and thus more easily defended, definitions of classicism. In the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, Statius was, you might say, a victim of friendly fire.⁷ Take one important text from that polemic, *L'art poétique* of 1674, in which Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, who was on the side of the *anciens*, advises the aspiring epic poet to choose an appropriate hero as his subject:

tel que César, Alexandre, ou Louis, Non tel que Polynice et son perfide frère. On s'ennuie aux exploits d'un conquérant vulgaire. N'offrez point un sujet d'incidens trop chargé. Le seul courroux d'Achille, avec art ménagé, Remplit abondamment une Iliade entière. Souvent trop d'abondance appauvrit la matière.⁸

one such as Caesar, Alexander, or Louis, not one such as Polynices and his traitorous brother. The adventures of an undistinguished hero are tedious. Do not expound a topic too full of incident; a careful description of Achilles' displeasure alone fills the *Iliad* to overflowing. An excess often spoils the material.

Though no poet is named, the consecutive references to Polynices and his brother, Eteocles, and to Achilles, who are the quasi-heroes of the *Thebaid* and the hero of the *Achilleid* respectively, clearly identify Statius as Boileau's epic bore. Boileau has insightfully noticed that the preface of the *Achilleid* jokes about flouting Aristotelian "best practice" for writers of epic; but as we shall see (below, p 80), the insinuation that Statius was willing to flood his readers with an undifferentiated mass of biographical detail (*trop d'abondance*) about Achilles is quite unjust.

The French champions of a narrow and dogmatic classicism were extremely influential on the literary criticism of Restoration and Augustan England.⁹ The project of constructing a new Augustan age depended on equating the English civil wars with the Roman civil wars, the end of the Commonwealth with the end of the Roman republic, and the restoration of Charles II with the inauguration of the principate of Augustus. The anticipation of some that Charles would be a benign and glorious ruler was mixed with the fears of others that he would rule as a despot, and this mixture was heavy with implications for the

⁷ On the *querelle*, see Levine (1999: 121–47).

⁸ L'art poétique 3.250-6, text given in Collinet (1985: 246).

⁹ For the influence of the French critics Boileau and Le Bossu on Dryden, see Levine (1999: 53–61); for Le Bossu and Dryden, see further Thomas (2001: 134–6).

INTRODUCTION 脊 XV

way contemporaries viewed Rome and its literature. Royalists who idealized the reign of Augustus and the poets of his age, especially Virgil and Horace, anathematized "tyrants" like Nero and Domitian and the poets such as Lucan, Statius, and Martial who had prospered under them.¹⁰ The mixture of Restoration political ideology and French literary polemic was potent, as both discourses tended to narrow the authority of Roman antiquity to the exclusion of many non-Augustan writers. This Royalist background informed the work of John Dryden, and he in particular deserves a great deal of the blame for the decline in Statius' reputation.¹¹

Dryden's most widely disseminated work, his translation of the *Aeneid* (1697), carries a preface that begins with a vitriolic attack on Statius.¹² He calls him a "Capaneus of a poet," meaning that he foolishly tried to imitate the genius of Homer and Virgil, just as in the *Thebaid* the impious and overreaching Capaneus had scaled the walls of Thebes, scorning the gods and his own limitations, only to be struck down by Jupiter's thunderbolt. Statius cannot win, for when he dares to depart strikingly from the Virgilian model, Dryden accuses him of going "out of his way, as it were on propense Malice to commit a Fault." Damned by Dryden if he emulates Virgil too closely, damned if he strikes out on his own, Statius only pleases the "middle sort of readers," whose taste rises above the pure vulgarity of Martial, but who cannot appreciate the restraint and taste that sets Virgil apart. Statius is here not even allowed the faint praise Dryden paid him in an earlier work, that he was "the best versificator next to Virgil."¹³

Statius and Lucan both wrote Latin in a more condensed and rhetorical style than Virgil had done, and it is on the basis of this style that Dryden says "they affect greatness in all they write, but it is a bladdered greatness."¹⁴ In an earlier work, the "Parallel of poetry and painting" (1695), the father of English literary criticism went into a bit more detail about this charge:

Lucan and Statius often ventur'd them [metaphors] too far, our Virgil never. But the great defect of the Pharsalia and the Thebais was in the

10 On Domitian seen at the time as the antithesis of Augustus, see Erskine-Hill (1983: 214f, 308f).

- 11 Not only did Dryden help to narrow the canon, but he also narrowed the interpretation of Virgil, as Thomas (2001: 122–53) demonstrates; on "Dryden and the Augustan idea", see Erskine-Hill (1983: 213–33).
- 12 Hooker et al. (1956– : vol 5, 267f).
- 13 "A Discourse on the original and progress of satire" (1693) (Kinsley and Parfitt, 1970: 216). This is no change of heart; Dryden had always loathed Statius. One of his earliest extant poems (1660) is a set of commendatory verses on the publication by his patron and future brother-in-law Sir Robert Howard of the first English translation of the *Achilleid* (Hooker et al., 1956– : vol 1, 17–20); he applauds the translator for improving on Statius' "lamely rough" original. From that point onward, and throughout his career, Dryden had frequent recourse to Statius as an example of bad ancient poetry, usually in order to demonstrate how perfect were Homer and Virgil in comparison.

¹⁴ Hooker et al. (1956– : vol 5, 327).

xvi 🍞 INTRODUCTION

Design; if that had been more perfect, we might have forgiven many of the bold strokes in the Colouring; or at least excus'd them: yet some are such as *Demosthenes* or *Cicero* could not have defended.¹⁵

The reference to Demosthenes and Cicero encodes a perceptive observation about the heavily rhetorical style of Lucan and Statius; but Dryden's point is merely that this is one more example of their undisciplined excess. He goes on to offer a critique of the first lines of the *Silvae*:

Virgil, if he could have seen the first Verses of the *Sylvae*, would have thought Statius mad in his fustian Description of the Statue on the brazen Horse. But that Poet was always in a Foam at his setting out, even before the Motion of the Race had warm'd him.¹⁶

Again, this contains a perceptive comment on the tightly packed intensity of Statian narrative, but it is turned to unjust purposes. Dryden knew that the *Silvae* of Statius were minor, occasional poems, for he had published some of his own miscellaneous verse under the title of *Sylvae* in imitation of Statius. It is hardly fair to compare an ad hoc description of Domitian's equestrian statue with Virgil's most polished work, and Samuel Johnson later censured Dryden for having been arbitrary and unfair to Statius here.¹⁷ In another essay, Dryden quotes the "thundering" first line of the *Silvae* to compare it with the fist line of the *Eclogues*; the royalist political subtext is made explicit there: "Virgil had all of the majesty of a lawful prince, and Statius only the blustering of a tyrant."¹⁸ In the "Parallel of poetry and painting," however, Dryden cites the first line of the *Achilleid* as an example of bad poetry, rather than that of the *Silvae*:

The soberness of Virgil, whom he read it seems to little purpose, might have shown him the difference betwixt *Arma virumque cano*, and *Magnanimum Æacidem*, *formidatamque tonanti progeniem*. But Virgil knew how to rise by degrees in his expressions: *Statius* was in his towring heights at the first stretch of his Pinions.¹⁹

As Boileau had done, Dryden thought he had detected bombast in the opening of the *Achilleid*; as we shall see when we look at this passage closely (below, p 80), Statius in fact knew full well the Aristotelian strictures that Boileau and Dryden charge him with ignoring. The beginning of the *Achilleid* teases the

- 15 Hooker et al. (1956– : vol 20, 73f).
- 16 Hooker et al. (1956– : vol 20, 73f).
- 17 "His [Dryden's] remarks on ancient or modern writers are not always to be trusted ... Statius perhaps heats himself, as he proceeds, to exaggerations somewhat hyperbolical; but undoubtedly Virgil would have been too hasty if he had condemned him to straw [the madhouse] for one sounding line. Dryden wanted an instance, and the first that occurred was imprest into the service." Johnson's "Life of Dryden" (Hill, 1905: vol 1, 105).
- 18 "Preface to The Spanish Friar" (Kinsley and Parfitt, 1970: 191).
- 19 Hooker et al. (1956– : vol 20, 73f).

CAMBRIDGE

INTRODUCTION 脊 xvii

reader by declaring the author's intention to flout every rule of epic propriety; if one reads beyond the first few lines, it is clear that Statius does not in fact carry through on this mock threat. This allegation of Statian bombast was an old one, and one could offer as a rebuttal the words of the elder Scaliger over a century before Dryden, as he defended the very same words of the first line of the *Achilleid* against precisely this charge:

An verò tumor est, quum Achillem vocat *magnanimum*? quum *Æacidem*? at Virgilius quoque Æneam sic. An quum ait, *formidatam Iovi progeniem*? nonne hoc Themis dixit? et vulgatum est. Sanè illi nesciunt quid sit tumor in oratione.²⁰

Is it bombastic when he [Statius] calls Achilles "great-souled"? When he calls him "grandson of Aeacus"? But Virgil also spoke of Aeneas in this way. Or is it when he says "the offspring feared by Jupiter"? Isn't that what Themis said? It's a well-known fact. These people [Statius' critics] truly do not know what bombast is.

Dryden goes on in the same essay to approve of the beauty of a few lines of the Thebaid, which describe the start of a horse race, but his praise is mixed with scorn, and he cites them merely in order to reiterate his image of Statius as an overeager racing horse.²¹ Dryden's judgment was hugely influential, and one can see his image of the Silver Latin poet as a rider in poor control of his mount reappear in Swift's Battle of the Books, where "Lucan appeared upon a fiery horse of admirable shape, but headstrong, bearing the rider where he list over the field."22 Pope had begun to translate the Thebaid in his youth and in this effort he was heavily influenced by Dryden's translation of the Aeneid. As a Catholic living in the wake of the Glorious Revolution and the Act of Settlement that confirmed the succession of the elector of Hanover to the English throne, Pope apparently found relevance in this mythical tale of switching monarchs and foreign meddling.²³ But he left this piece of juvenilia unfinished and he published it later with expressed embarrassment at his choice of material. In the preface to his translation of the *Iliad*, he follows Dryden's example by using Statius as a negative foil for Homer's genius.²⁴

In this way, the impulse to defend antiquity against the products of modernity resulted in a Neoclassical streamlining of the canon that excluded poets like Lucan and Statius who once occupied a central place in the Western literary tradition. These poets then faded into obscurity. Lucan has always had

²⁰ Scaliger (1561: 324bC).

²¹ The lines he cites are Stat. *Theb.* 6.400f, which, as Mozley (ad loc) points out, Pope later translated and inserted into his *Windsor Forest* (151-4). It seems likely that Dryden's praise here and his comment about the difficulty of translating them recommended Statius' lines to Pope as a challenge.

²² Ross and Woolley (1984: 16).

²³ This is the thesis of Aden (1973).

²⁴ Mack (1967: 4f, 6).

xviii 脊 INTRODUCTION

his partisans, but Statius is still very poorly known. The *Thebaid* as a whole, despite some excellent recent work, is still something of a critical enigma; for example, the most up-to-date commentary available on many of its books is the wildly idiosyncratic 1664 edition of Barth. The *Achilleid*, on the other hand, has been well served by commentaries, but until now there has been no full-length general monograph devoted to it in any language. A number of scholars, particularly Ovidians, have turned their hand to the *Achilleid* in recent years, and it is from their work that the present study takes its bearings.²⁵ The *Achilleid* deserves to be better known than it is, if only because it was in the Middle Ages one of the most widely read poems in Europe. It may also be that the *Achilleid* can provide an easier "way into" the Statian epic corpus than the *Thebaid*: it is short, light-hearted, and witty, whereas the *Thebaid* is long, serious, and, for the most part, gloomy.

The present book is not a comprehensive study of the *Achilleid*; I have largely restricted myself to the Achilles-on-Scyros story that forms the core of the poem as we have it. So I have barely touched upon the long episode that describes the mustering of the Greek fleet at Aulis and the setting forth to Scyros of Ulysses and Diomedes (1.397–559); and more could have been said about Achilles' narrative of his early upbringing with Chiron (2.96–167; see below, p 170). I have focussed on a few particular themes: the relationship of the *Achilleid* to the epic tradition and to the mythical biography of Achilles, Statius' manner of characterization, and the way he explores the nature of sex and gender. It will sometimes be necessary, however, to venture far from Statius' text in order fully to explore the issues raised by the myth he narrates.

So this book will begin not with the *Achilleid* itself, but with an examination of its reception in Baroque and eighteenth-century opera. My first chapter illustrates the influence that Statius' work continued to have, even at the point where it was beginning its slide into oblivion. As we shall see, the curious circumstance of Achilles on Scyros reflected quite precisely the situation of the ancient hero on the Baroque stage. For when the male protagonist of early opera, usually a brave and noble hero drawn from the pages of ancient myth or history, opened his mouth to sing, what issued forth was a preternaturally high voice, an unmasculine voice. The librettists writing for the paradoxically heroic castrati and prima donnas of Baroque opera often turned to the paradoxical representation of masculinity offered by Statius' text when exploring that issue.

There are a number of reasons I want to look first at the reception of the *Achilleid* and the Scyros myth in early opera. Since it is now an obscure text that was once much better known, taking a backward look at earlier appropriations helps to limn the compelling issues that were once at stake in its interpretation and reinterpretation. It also provides a way of introducing the

25 Feeney (2004: 85, n 2) conveniently outlines this tradition of scholarship, pointing to the contributions of Koster (1979), Fantham (1979), Rosati, Barchiesi (1996) and Hinds (1998 and 2000).

INTRODUCTION 🍞 xix

reader to the Scyros myth, in terms of both its general content and also the various potential modalities of narration that it presents. This discussion can even serve to highlight, in a negative way, the narrative choices that Statius declined. More generally, foregrounding the reception of the text is a statement of intent. Instead of treating this reception as a pendant to a discussion of Statius, I want to illustrate that previous ways of reading the *Achilleid* will necessarily inform ours, howsoever distantly and indirectly.

My second chapter turns to the Achilleid itself, and comes to grips with the questions of closure, form, genre, and literary affiliation posed by the poem's unfinished state, its extravagant and maddeningly vague proem, and its evocation of widely disparate - one might say even contradictory - literary models. First I try to account for the present state of the work, to vindicate its coherence despite its unfinished state, and to explain why it exists in the form we have it. The next section comprises close readings of several passages where the nature of Statius' poetic program is most clearly visible. The first is an analysis of the proem of the Achilleid (1.1–19), where the poet announces his subject and his intentions for the work. This passage is a difficult one, as evidenced by the diametrically opposing views on the intended final shape of the Achilleid that it has given rise to; nevertheless it can offer some important clues regarding the nature of Statius' project and his method of working. The next passage of interest is a scene in which Achilles accompanies himself on the lyre as he sings a heroic song (1.188–94); this passage offers an interesting metapoetic reflection on the nature of Statius' own heroic song. Given the pious debt to Virgil that Statius acknowledges at the end of the Thebaid, he has often been viewed as a plodding and too-faithful imitator of Virgil. In an attempt to revise this estimation, this chapter concludes with a collection of places in the Achilleid where Statius engages with Virgilian models in a distinctly playful, Ovidian fashion.

Issues of Virgilian intertextuality bring us to Thetis, who dominates the action of the beginning of the *Achilleid*. Chapter 3, "Womanhood, Rhetoric, and Performance," is a discussion of femininity as it is enacted not only by Achilles, but also by the "real" female characters in the poem, especially Thetis and Deidamia. As we shall see, Achilles is not the only person in Statius' poem who sometimes finds it difficult to maintain proper female decorum. Issues of femininity and intertextuality are closely related in the *Achilleid*, because its "female" characters tend to be successful in their masquerade of womanliness to the extent that they invoke the correct literary precedents. Via their attempts to emulate models of epic femininity, such as the avenging Juno, the motherly Venus, or the abandoned Ariadne, these characters are given by their author access to a kind of literary self-awareness, even though there is always a degree to which the entire discursive network of Latin literature is designed to exclude the full participation of women, real and fictional.

Chapter 4 turns to a closer examination of Achilles, beginning with his

XX 脊 INTRODUCTION

early childhood. It compares the birth, infancy, and education of Achilles as narrated by Statius with its depiction elsewhere, especially in Homer, Apollonius, and in the visual arts. It takes its title, "*Semivir, Semifer, Semideus*," from three adjectives that are applied in the *Achilleid* not to Achilles but to Paris, Chiron, and the Argonauts, as "half-man," "half-beast," and "half-gods" respectively. Statius constructs Achilles as a similarly liminal figure, suspended between masculinity and femininity, humanity and bestiality, mortality and divinity, such that the terms describe him too.

The "liminal" period of cross-dressing at Scyros between Achilles' quasiferal childhood and his manhood is often interpreted as an echo of an initiation rite. My fifth chapter, "Transvestism in Myth and Ritual," discusses the contexts of Achilles' cross-dressing. I investigate the origins and development of the myth as far as the sources will allow, before turning to prehistory and thinly documented Greek ritual practice. The claim that Achilles' crossdressing echoes an early ritual practice purports to be based on evidence from comparative anthropology, which I have tried here to collect and evaluate. We shall see that the anthropological evidence does not necessarily support the usual interpretation of the myth of Achilles on Scyros, but it does provide a valuable background for evaluating the ritual language that Statius himself uses to describe this episode.

Chapter 6, "Rape, Repetition, and Romance," returns to the topic of gender that was broached in chapter 3, but this time the focus is on masculinity rather than femininity, and on Achilles' manhood in particular. It is a discussion of gender and paternity as they are articulated by the phallic humor and the sexual violence that accompany Achilles' eventual assertion of his sex and the beginning of his career as a hero. By comparing the *Achilleid* with the only other completely surviving ancient narrative of the hero's stay on Scyros in Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, we arrive at some conclusions about how Statius views the nature of masculinity.

If the *Thebaid* is more Virgilian than Virgil, then the *Achilleid* is more Ovidian than Ovid, and my concluding chapter looks at the way Statius constructs a dialogue with Ovid on the nature of gender identity and gender metamorphosis. This discourse looks forward to the operas discussed in the first chapter, and the differences between Ovid and Statius also anticipate some of the particular divergences between the varying psychoanalytic accounts of how sexual difference comes about. Issues surrounding gender identity are attracting intense critical scrutiny at the moment, and the *Achilleid* can claim a great deal of interest in this regard. This circumstance may provide an occasion for the *Achilleid* to gain a few more readers; if so, Statius' witty and inventive poem will repay them richly.