

## Epic Masculinity in Transition in the *Achilleid*

Recent studies have commented on the paradox of masculinity: although characterised as the norm, the point of fixity against which women are defined as the other, it has remained silent and hidden from view – “everywhere but nowhere” (J. Tosh: *History Workshop Journal* 38, 1994). As the archetypal virile genre of wars and heroes, epic poetry seems to exemplify this invisibility, yet closer examination shows that representations of male heroism in epic are not monolithic but are fluid, diverse and fraught with ambiguity. In his incomplete Latin epic, the *Achilleid*, Statius challenges the certitude of our knowledge of classical masculinity, and illuminates the instabilities of men’s position within the epic text. Lacking the brutality of the *Thebaid*, Statius’ second epic has until recently been discounted as a curiosity, although our understanding of its generic *poikilia* has been refined in the light of contemporary Latin studies on intertextuality. Critics have noted the playfully Ovidian and elegiac character of the *Achilleid* on account of the poem’s domestic setting, its themes of youth and love, and its inversion of masculine and feminine worlds. Statius’ poem eschews battle-narrative, focusing instead on the myth of young Achilles in female dress: Thetis, anxious that her son should not die at Troy, secretes Achilles among the maidens of Lycomedes’ court on Scyros disguised as a girl. The main section of the poem details Achilles’ sexual awakening in the bucolic atmosphere of the island, culminating in the exposure of his feminine masquerade by the masculine Realpolitik of Ulysses.

Scholars have used theories of inversion in male initiatory rituals to argue that Achilles’ transvestism, like that of Hercules, reinforces his masculinity, allowing him to incorporate the feminine within his universal hero status. Such interpretations view the *Achilleid* simply as part of a broader mythic continuum and underestimate the poem’s complex gender-systems and negotiations with the epic genre. In this paper I read Statius’ retelling of the myth as a self-conscious text which explores – and inverts – the polarity between coded masculine bodily integrity and feminine penetrable vulnerability. In the *Achilleid* the epic hero is endangered, not by other warriors, but by the female: Achilles’ cross-dressing is depicted as a physical metamorphosis and evocations of his androgyne beauty conjure a sense of his body as vulnerable and unstable. Ovid’s gender-ambiguous figures Hermaphroditus, Narcissus, Iphis and Caeneus, are clear influences but Statius also aligns his Achilles with the virginal warriors of Roman epic such as Pallas and Parthenopaeus, and the failure of these epic boys to perform the transition into heroic manhood remain ominous subtexts. From the outset then, Achilles is inscribed as a liminal and ambivalent figure who functions as a site where the issues and anxieties of epic – and Roman – manhood might be played out within the poem. This paper draws on recent work on the *Achilleid* to investigate how its complex post-Virgilian, post-Ovidian representation of Roman epic manhood also bears implications for our understanding of Roman constructions of epic as a genre. I argue that the poem poses an intrinsic connection between the ambiguities of the masculine and those of epic itself: if the presence of woman in epic is generically subversive and transgressive, then the presence of the proto-typical epic hero Achilles dressed as a woman is doubly so. Alison Keith has commented on how Ovid innovates in the *Metamorphoses* by juxtaposing male heroic endeavour with female incursion into the sphere of masculinity. Statius’ *Achilleid* takes this juxtaposition further – and inverts it: the poet constructs the Scyros episode, not as a subversive female foray into the realm of epic masculinity, but as an incarceration of the epic hero in the feminine milieu of dancing, weaving and *amor*. Here ‘woman’ is an obstacle to the trajectory of the epic hero not only in the forms of Thetis and Deidamia, but also in the metamorphic *body* of Achilles himself. The sentimentalising, titillating ‘harem-narrative’ of the *Achilleid* closes in on the hero, penetrating the integrity of his masculine body and robbing him of his heroic agency. Achilles’ maleness is finally activated when he dons his *arma*, enabling him to leave unwarlike Scyros for Troy with vow to expiate his shameful cross-dressing ‘phase’: *hoc excusabitur ense / Scyros et indecores, Fatorum crimina, cultus*. (2.44-5). The rhetoric of concealment, suppression and penetration that characterizes much of the episode is countered – and *almost* ‘redressed’ – by this physical emergence as a male subject; his masculinity is both protected and *enacted* by the accoutrements of warrior manhood. Combining close attention to literary detail with larger cultural perspectives on Roman ideologies of masculinity, I argue that the Scyros episode – and Statius’ Achilles – becomes an experimental laboratory in which Roman epic manhood is put under pressure and transformed.