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**Tradition and Interpretation in Statius' *Achilleid***

– Summary –

PhD Thesis, Budapest, 2011  
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The subject of my thesis is a text on the periphery of the classical literary canon. Statius' *Achilleid*, as a Silver Latin and unfinished epic poem, had received for a long time scant attention by classical philologists and the wider reading public alike. In recent decades, however, it has become a popular text for study, primarily in English scholarship. In my thesis I continue this work through intertextual interpretations. In five independent but interrelated chapters I discuss the relation of the *Achilleid* to the Greco-Roman literary tradition on the one hand, and to its own textual and interpretive tradition on the other. I also investigate what picture does the *Achilleid* suggest of tradition as such, and the emergence and history of the tradition concerning Achilles in particular.

### 1. Text and Tradition

In my first chapter – which serves also as a general introduction and a summary of previous scholarship – I discuss first the unfinished state of the *Achilleid*, reviewing how that was perceived and interpreted (or even questioned) in the Middle Ages and modern scholarship. In the proem the narrator promises to tell about the whole life of Achilles (1.1–7; *ire per omnem ... heroa ... tota iuvenem deducere Troia*), supplementing Homer's *Iliad*. The poem, however, breaks off after 1127 lines (2.167). This first section of Achilles' epic biography is enough only to tell one major story: how the hero was hiding on the eve of the Trojan War in women's clothes on the island of Scyros, trying to get close to the beautiful princess Deidamia. In this sense, we may see Statius as the author of the “most unfinished” Roman epic. Surprisingly, however, recent studies of the *Achilleid* have allowed us to see the poem as less unfinished in many respects than before. The completed section of the text shows signs of careful and sophisticated composition, and in Peter Heslin's interpretation it is a kind of “prospectus” intended for limited publication. John Penwill even suggested that the *Achilleid* might be a complete poem only made to look like an unfinished one. Reviewing Heslin's and Penwill' interpretation we can state that both discuss the (un)finished state of the *Achilleid* on historical and genetic terms. From the point of view of my thesis, however, this “philological” approach is of relatively little interest. Much more important is the “hermeneutic” unfinishedness of the *Achilleid*, which is the result of the discrepancy between what is promised in the proem and what is actually narrated in the poem. Thus, when I call the *Achilleid* an unfinished poem, I am referring to this phenomenon in the first place.

The debate concerning the (un)finishedness of the *Achilleid*, however, has not been opened, only re-opened by classical scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the Middle Ages the status of the text was also subject to debate, although discussed primarily in the context of the proem, not the whole text. In introductions (*accessus*) to the *Achilleid* we find the interpretation that *deducere* in 1.7 refers not to the narrator “guiding through” Achilles the Trojan War but, on the contrary, “keeping him away from it”. This reading ignores the

possible meanings of *omnem heroa* and seems to suggest that its author tried not to interpret the proem itself in the first place, but to show that a poem which looks unfinished is, after all, finished. We also know the opinions of some famous Italian poets and humanists. In a 15<sup>th</sup> c. manuscript the anonymous author of a note on the last line of the *Achilleid* reports on a debate between Dante, who maintained that the poem is unfinished (cf. *Divine Comedy*, Purg. 21.92–3), and Giovanni del Virgilio and Petrarch (cf. *Ep. Seniles*, 11.17.6), who thought of the *Achilleid* as a finished poem. The most interesting interpretation, however, is that of Francesco Nelli, who in a letter to Petrarch (1362) states that Statius is purposefully ambiguous in the proem, allowing readers to see the *Achilleid* as both finished and unfinished. Nelli thus seems to discover the same balance between finishedness and unfinishedness of the *Achilleid* suggested by some modern scholars.

The *Achilleid* seems to have been a particularly popular text in the Middle Ages: we can infer that from the number of MSS (above 200) and the fact that the poem was also copied as part of a school anthology (*Liber Catonianus*) from the 13<sup>th</sup> c. onwards. It is frequently the case with the MSS representing this anthology that the *Achilleid* is presented in alternative book divisions. Modern editions divide the text in two books of unequal length (960+167 lines), and this division is supported by two late antique grammarians, Priscian and Eutyches. The alternative divisions present the text in two (674+453 lines), three, four, or even five books. These alternative divisions are also discussed in my thesis in context of the debate over the (un)finishedness of the *Achilleid*. They can be seen as experiments in making the poem look more finished, since – even if the biography is not made more complete in this way – the text meets more of the formal expectations regarding classical epic poems (number of books more than two; length of books relatively similar).

There was another way as well to make the poem more complete: it could be supplemented. In contrast to Maffeo Vegio's 630 lines Supplement of the *Aeneid*, however, only one line (rarely two) has been added to the text of the *Achilleid*. It is thus clear that the *Achilleis*-Supplement served other ends: instead of completing the biography, it only tried to give the last scene (Achilles' autobiographical speech on board the ship heading for Aulis) a more finished appearance. Even the last line of the “original” text is part of Achilles' speech, so one goal of the medieval supplement (*hec ait et puppis currens ad littora venit*) might have been signalling, in absence of quotation marks, the end of the speech. In addition to this narratological interpretation I also read the supplement metapoetically. Ship and sea voyage are frequently employed metaphors for poetry in classical literature, and are used by Statius himself in connection with finishing his first epic, the *Thebaid*. The medieval supplement makes the unfinished *Achilleid* end with the same image, although it is not used metaphorically, as the finished *Thebaid*, emphasizing the end of the process of poetic composition.

Even if the *Achilleid* is – in spite of its careful design, mentioned above – the most

unfinished epic in classical literature, the nearly 1200 lines completed of it are enough to make the reader draw some general opinion about it as a poetic text and compare it with other poems belonging to the same literary tradition. In the second part of the first chapter I discuss the tradition behind the *Achilleid*, instead of its textual tradition, reviewing the results of earlier scholarship. I try to draw an “intertextual map” of the *Achilleid*, discussing in short the relationship of Statius' epic with Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Ars amatoria*, Vergil's *Aeneid* and Catullus 64. This intertextual map serves as a basis for the interpretations presented in subsequent chapters.

## 2. Achilles and the Argonauts. Apollonius, Valerius Flaccus and Statius

In the second chapter I am discussing the relationship of the *Achilleid* with another Silver Latin epic, Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*. I show that the connection between the two texts is not limited to some passages (as suggested by earlier scholarship), but is maintained throughout the completed section of the *Achilleid*, although through different means and in various ways.

In the first 240 lines of the *Achilleid* the connection with the *Argonautica* is produced and maintained by a dense network of allusions. The first of these can be found right at the beginning of the *Achilleid* (1.25–9), in the description of the sea goddesses emerging from the waters of the Hellespont, and recalls a passage in Valerius' epic where the Argonauts sailing through the straits meet Helle, turned into a sea goddess herself. Critics have always emphasized how Valerius – in contrast to Apollonius – focuses on points of contact between the Argonautic and Trojan sagas; and this allusion at the beginning of the *Achilleid* hints, in a reciprocal way, to the connections between Achilles' life and the story of the Argonauts. In the next scene of the *Achilleid* Neptune denies Thetis' request to destroy Paris' fleet in a storm. This scene is usually interpreted as the most “Vergilian” in the *Achilleid*, recalling the storm of *Aeneid* 1. More thorough examination of the Statian text reveals, however, that the storm scene in Valerius' *Argonautica* 1 (itself recalling the Vergilian storm scene) mediates between the *Achilleid* and the *Aeneid*. Thetis can be compared not only to the Vergilian Juno, but also to the Valerian Sol and Boreas; Statius' Neptune to Valerius' Neptune and Jupiter.

The “failed” storm scene in the *Achilleid* is followed by the Thessalian episode, in which Thetis visits Chiron to fetch and hide Achilles. The Argonauts also start their journey from Thessaly, and the Statian text frequently recalls Valerius' Thessalian episode. The connection between the two texts (signalled by an introductory allusion in 1.98) is all the more interesting since Achilles – still a baby – also appears in the *Argonautica* episode in both Apollonius' and Valerius' account. The *Achilleid* recalls the Valerian version in particular, in which Achilles meets his father Peleus. In connection with the Thessalian episode I also discuss Achilles' song performed in Chiron's cave, which has as one of its

subjects the wedding of the hero's parents. In this passage the *Achilleid* again recalls the *Argonautica*, more exactly the ecphrasis of the Argo: the ship, according to Valerius, was decorated with scenes, among others, from Peleus' and Thetis' wedding. Both the Statian and Valerian works of art – one verbal, the other visual – refer back to Catullus 64. The wedding served as the frame for the ecphrasis of the bed cover in Catullus; Valerius turns the Catullan frame into an ecphrasis, while Statius restores the Catullan order by having Achilles present the wedding in song again.

After the Thessalian episode the density of allusions to Valerius suddenly drops in the *Achilleid*; only a few of the can be found later, especially at the end of the episode on Scyros. I discuss not just these allusions, however; I argue that the reader – partly as a consequence of the close relationship the first section of the *Achilleid* has with the *Argonautica* – may discover important similarities between the Achilles' adventure on Scyros and the story of the Argonauts. Some of these similarities recalls both Apollonius' and Valerius' version; others, however, presuppose the Valerian version. The story of Achilles on Scyros can be compared to two sections of the *Argonautica*. One of them, and the more obvious, is the Argonauts' stay on Lemnos: both Jason and Achilles postpone fulfilling their heroic duties for a woman, and on both islands gender roles are blurred (the Lemnian women are fighting instead of the men they killed; Achilles is wearing women's clothes). I also discuss the similarities between Deidamia and Hypsipyle, confirmed in the *Achilleid* by a conspicuous, although not previously discovered, allusion (1.940–2, 952–5). Achilles' stay on Scyros can also be compared to the Argonauts' stay in Colchis. Seen in this context, it is Ulixes rather than Achilles who plays a role similar to Jason. Both have the mission of reclaiming something or someone: the Golden Fleece and Achilles.

In conclusion we can state that there are two kinds of contact between the texts of the *Achilleid* and the *Argonautica*. One is based on similarity between characters or scenes (e.g. Jason and Achilles); the other on contiguity between the stories narrated (see Achilles' presence at the departure of the Argonauts). It is this latter kind which is the most interesting with regard to the planned epic biography of Achilles. The farewell of Peleus and Achilles is not elsewhere recalled in the *Achilleid* as we have it, thus Valerius' poem in this sense supplements the *Achilleid* just like the *Achilleid*, according to the narrator's promise in the proem, supplements the *Iliad*: the supplementing text, it turns out, is itself in need of being supplemented.

### 3. Achilles' Choice. The Dawns of the hero in the *Iliad* and the *Achilleid*

In *Iliad* 9 the Homeric narrator states that Achilles attacked Scyros. The variant of the myth told in the *Achilleid* is obviously in contradiction with this Homeric story: Achilles is hiding on the island in women's clothes. The *Achilleid* is thus not only “un-Homeric”: it is

“anti-Homeric”; the story told by Statius, however, presents the hero with a choice very similar he makes in the *Iliad*. On Scyros he has to choose between love and war; in the last year of the Trojan War the choice is made between long life and glorious death. In the third chapter of my thesis I do not intend to give a full picture of the intertextual relationship of the *Achilleid* and the *Iliad*; I discuss how the presentation of the story of Achilles on Scyros, i. e. Achilles' “first choice”, is framed in the *Achilleid* by allusions to Achilles' “second choice”, i. e. his return to fight in the *Iliad*.

The Thessalian episode, discussed in my previous chapter, recalls not only the *Argonautica*, but *Iliad* 18 as well, where Thetis visits Hephaestus to request new armor for Achilles. In the *Achilleid* the goddess also pays a visit, but this time she visits Chiron to fetch Achilles himself. Instead of armor, the hero is presented with female clothes on Scyros. Later a shield plays an important role in the discovery of Achilles; this shield cannot but recall the famous Homeric shield, but its ecphrasis – especially when compared to the *Iliad* – is conspicuously brief and takes just three lines. The narrator of the *Achilleid*, it seems, purposefully omits an ecphrasis the reader probably expects.

The description of the shield is followed by a description of dawn in the first lines of *Iliad* 19. In the *Achilleid* we find three dawn descriptions, all of which are closely related to Achilles' transformations from male to female, and *vice versa*, and all of which also recall the dawn at the beginning of *Iliad* 19. I discuss that in detail, and in context of the light imagery present in *Iliad* 18–19. Achilles' return to fight brings metaphoric light to the Achaeans in Homer, and his withdraw from fight is characterized by the her himself as an absence of light. The dawn opening *Iliad* 19 thus also marks the “dawn of a new Achilles”. The same can be said about the first dawn described in the *Achilleid* on the arrival at Scyros: the island, however, is characterized in the poem as a land of shadow and darkness, so the dawn turns out to be a metaphoric sunset, the beginning of a period when Achilles suspends his heroic and male identity.

The second and third dawn in the *Achilleid* introduce the day of Achilles' discovery on Scyros and his departure from the island. The second dawn description is the shortest, but it is the one which most closely follows the Homeric description. The third dawn description – which is found at the beginning of a book (2.1–4), just like its Homeric counterpart – is the most detailed, and gets the longest discussion in my thesis. Darkness – says the narrator in this dawn description – covered Earth as a kind of shroud, and Sun removes this shroud. There is an obvious similarity between the uncovering of the Earth and the discovery of Achilles. The shroud of darkness covers and hides Earth just like the female clothes cover Achilles, and Dawn “disrobes” Earth just like Ulixes makes Achilles drop the female clothes. The dawn description, however, does not end here: in its second part a different world-model is outlined, according to which night is caused not by a shroud covering the Earth, but by the lowering of the Sun's torch. In poetic texts, of course, it is usual to describe the same event through two images; I base my

interpretation, however, on the presumption that in this case the two images describe two different phases of dawn, which can be separately compared to Achilles' discovery, i. e. his metaphoric “dawn”.

Finally in this chapter I discuss how and why the Sun is called *genitor lucis coruscae* in this dawn description. Drawing on Horace's *carmen* 1.34, I interpret the phrase as a periphrasis for *Diespiter*. Discovering *Diespiter*, i. e. Jupiter, behind the *genitor lucis* may have an interesting impact on the interpretation of the *Achilleid* as a whole. Jupiter does not appear in the poem as an active character, and his primary role seems not to be that of the “father of gods and men”, but of the father who could have been Achilles'. This “could have been” father-and-son relationship is judged differently by characters in the poem. Thetis is indignant at the fact that the king of the gods did not become the father of her son; Neptune and the narrator, on the other hand, emphasize that similarities can be discovered between Achilles and Jupiter even in absence of direct blood relation. According to Neptune, Achilles is going to be such an eminent hero that people will think he is Jupiter's son; the narrator compares the hero to the god in two similes, both as epic hero and love hero. The dawn description opening *Achilleid* 2 fits into the line of these similes, but it is also a kind of synthesis, suggesting no Achilles' metaphoric “night” and “day”, but the moments of transition between these states.

Framing the story of Achilles on Scyros with dawn descriptions recalling *Iliad* 19 suggests that the life of the hero is characterized not by randomly occurring, but by predictable and periodically repeating metamorphoses. Achilles is thus not subject to the laws of cosmos, rather lives in some kind of harmony with them. The poet of the *Iliad* already hinted at the similarity between Achilles' return to fight and the workings of the cosmos; Statius, however, further elaborates the parallel, suggesting that this harmony is not limited to the event narrated in the *Iliad*, but existed during the hero's stay on Scyros as well, and potentially extends to his whole life.

#### 4. *Semina laudum. Fame and poetry in the Achilleid*

Similarly to *Iliad* 9, Achilles does appear in the *Achilleid* as a performer of song, and not just once: Statius' hero apparently has an even more intimate connection with poetry than Homer's. Achilles sings in Chiron's cave, on Scyros in the company of Deidamia, and in the autobiographical speech at the end of the *Achilleid* as we have it he mentions the musical education he received from Chiron. In addition to the hero's songs, the narrator mentions that Chiron used to sing about the heroes of old for his pupil. In the fourth chapter I discuss these *Achilleid* passages from two aspects. I am not only investigating how they recall the hero's performance in *Iliad* 9, but also how the *Achilleid* employs and further transforms the previously developed, adapted Latin version of the “terminology of *kleos*” found in archaic Greek epic poetry.

Chiron's "pedagogic" poetic performances are described by the narrator as *monstrare lyra veteres heroas alumno* (1.118). I interpret this line – just like the other *Achilleid* passages in this chapter – in relation to the Greek epic formula κλέα ἀνδρῶν (ἀείδειν). I also compare it with the more traditional *veteres viri* of the Latin literary language, and the female form *veteres heroides* found in non-epic poems, also in Statius (*Silvae* 3.5).

In the interpretation of Achilles' song in Chiron's cave (which has received the most attention in earlier scholarship) I am focusing on the introductory lines (1.186–9), where the narrator gives a conspicuously detailed description of how Chiron brings and tunes the lyre, and then hands it over to his pupil. This description first emphasizes the emotional effects of poetry, then the technical skill expected from the performer; finally, by employing the verb *elicere* (also a *terminus technicus* for the summoning of divinities and souls of the dead), it also seems to hint at the divine support needed for poetic success. I also discuss *chelys*, referring metonymically to the lyre, which in my interpretation recalls in this passage Hermes' invention of the lyre. Comparing the *Achilleid* passage with the Homeric Hymn to Hermes reveals that in addition to Catullus 64 (which, just like Achilles' song, narrates Theseus' fight with the Minotaur and the wedding of Achilles' parents), the hero's song has another model as well: the first ever song played on the lyre by Hermes, partly about the god's parents. Moreover, it is not only the songs, but also the performers – Hermes and Achilles – who can be compared to each other: for example, Achilles used to steal cattle (at least this is the charge made by the nearby centaurs), just like Hermes.

In the same passage (and on two more occasions in the *Achilleid*, in connection with Achilles as bard), the word *fila* refers to the strings of the lyre. This metaphor – taking into account the thematic similarity between Achilles' song and Catullus 64 – itself can be interpreted as one of the "chains" that link the *Achilleid* passage to the Catullan epyllion, and detailed examination of the passage reveals that textile metaphors form a network just like in Catullus. In connection with this passage I also discuss another metaphor: the narrator states that Achilles sings about "the seeds of glory" (*canit ... laudum semina*, 1.188–9). This expression, not found in earlier Roman poetry, is used (together with some variants) several times by Statius. Refining the usual interpretation of *semina laudum*, I discuss how the narrator of the *Achilleid* transforms the more traditional phrase *laudes virorum canere*, recalling the notion of 'source' found in the Greek κλέα ἀνδρῶν, but not expressed by the Latin *laudes*. The metaphor *semen* can also be interpreted in context of the vegetative imagery of κλέος, suggesting that fame in itself is just a kind of "seed" to be turned into a "flower" by the poet in artistically formulated laudatory song.

On Scyros Achilles sings again, and also teaches Deidamia how to play the lyre. The description of the teaching process is again detailed, and Achilles' performance is also interesting in many respects, although it is summarized by the narrator very briefly (1.577–9). Achilles sings about himself, although in the third person to maintain his cover. I read this performance again in connection with Catullus 64. The opening words of the

summary (*quo vertice Pelion*) recalls the first line of the *epyllion*, while the subject of the song reminds us of the song of the Parcae in Catullus. The song, however, as a biography of Achilles, is not just a “poem in the poem”: it is also an “Achilleid in the *Achilleid*”.

In his autobiographical speech closing the *Achilleid* as we have it Achilles mentions that he received musical education from Chiron: *fila sonantia plectro ... quaterem priscosque virum mirarer honores* (2.156–8). The starting point for my interpretation is again a comparison with Greek *kleos*-terminology. I argue that *honor* here is a translation of τιμή rather than κλέος, and that Achilles emphasizes through his choice of words (just after he joined the Greeks preparing for the Trojan expedition) that he values not only fame, but also honour paid to the hero in his lifetime; the honour whose absence is the direct cause of the hero's famous wrath in the *Iliad*.

### 5. Memory, Forgetting, Tradition. Achilles' Autobiography

In the last chapter I discuss how Achilles himself shapes the tradition about his own life in *Achilleid* 2, and especially in his autobiographical speech about his childhood with Chiron.

Critics have always regarded a passage in Pindar's Nemean 3 about the hero's childhood as the source of Achilles' speech in the *Achilleid*. I examine in more detail how Statius presents us with a picture about the education of Achilles very different from Pindar's. The Greek poet is of the opinion that true excellence an innate quality not be reached by education; Statius, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of learning and education, and suggests that even the best possible education cannot ensure that the hero – in Pindar's metaphor – will “firmly set his feet” in every moment of his life.

The relationship of the Statian and Pindaric texts is, however, much more complex and paradoxical. In various passages of the *Achilleid* we read that the Greeks preparing against Troy have very scant information about the childhood of Achilles (since the hero has lived in isolation from the Greek community, and was hiding later on Scyros), but they want to know more. There exists thus an “empty tradition” waiting to be filled by the hero himself. This is what happens already on Scyros, when Achilles sings about himself for Deidamia; this song, however, is the beginning of a private, family tradition. The public tradition regarding Achilles' childhood is established in his autobiographical speech. In literary historical terms, Achilles' speech recalls the Pindaric epinicion composed centuries earlier; but according to mythical chronology it is Achilles' Statian speech, made on the eve of the Trojan War, which takes precedence. According to the fiction of the *Achilleid*, it is this speech which establishes the mythical tradition about the hero's childhood which is the source for both Pindar's Nemean 3 and Statius' own *Achilleid*.

Achilles establishes a tradition – but also tries to cover something of his past, his hiding on Scyros. It is a story which has no place in the “official” biography of the epic hero and which the hero does not recall happily and does not want to speak about. He

hints at that in the last sentence of his speech (and the *Achilleid* as we have it); but the possibility that the events on Scyros are going to be forgotten is also mentioned earlier in the *Achilleid*, at the end of Book 1. In the closing section of the chapter I discuss this “narrative of forgetting”, and finally I re-examine the relationship of the Homeric and Statian accounts of Achilles' stay on Scyros. In my interpretation, the *Achilleid* presents the reader (of course, only as part of the fiction) with an explanation of why Homer does not mention Achilles' hiding: this could be because the story became a taboo quite early, right after Achilles left the island. The memory of this story, however, could not be deleted completely. This is suggested by the existence of the *Achilleid* itself (in addition to other works of art), and there appears someone in *Achilleid* 2 who seems to be interested in preserving the memory of the events on Scyros: Ulixes can count the discovery of Achilles as his personal success, contributing to his own fame.

Statius' unfinished epic – and this is the conclusion of both the last chapter and the thesis –, in addition to being in constant dialogue with literary tradition, is also a poem *about* this tradition; its protagonist, “Achilles” seems to be not just a person, but the corpus of the stories about Achilles, the tradition concerning Achilles. In this sense, the *Achilleid* can be read as an aetiological poem which tells about the origins not of an institution or custom, but a mythical and literary tradition.