

The Hero's Expanded Family. Familial and Narrative Tensions in Statius' *Achilleid*

Abstract

In the *Achilleid*, Statius plans to *ire per omnem... heroa*, representing Achilles not only in the entire span of his life, but in the whole complex of his personality: this also means showing the hero in all the complexity of his family relationships. More than one father and a mother 'too mother' (*nimis... mater*), one foster-father and a sort of foster-brother, a feigned sister who is the hero himself in disguise, a beloved/raped/wife and a soon-to-be-abandoned son, a 'father'-in-law who at last sends Achilles to war, even the prospect of future involvements with *Tyndaris*, a *barbara coniunx*, a *captiva* (alluding to Helen, Medea, Briseis): familial bonds – biological and acquired, existing and prospective, factual and virtual ones – are multiplied in this poem, creating a complex family structure that matches the literary complexity of the epic.

Family tensions engender narrative tensions. As a would-be son of Jupiter and a child of *de facto* separated parents, compromised by his 'unequal birth' (*impar genus*), who is entrusted to a semiferine, sole foster-father and is then snatched from him by his mother, Statius' Achilles is disputed by competing parental and poetical projects. His divine mother brings him down to the comedy of deceits and the love story of the Scyros episode, while his absent father cannot assure his heroic-epic destiny, and the virile training by his preceptor, preparing him for a grand literary future (*nescio quid magnum*), is momentarily forgotten. Different relatives try to impose different narratives on Achilles, each of them struggling to direct the poem according to her or his own poetic agenda.

Multiple familial roles mobilize different poetic traditions and genres, spanning from comedy to erotic elegy, to heroic epic. At Lycomedes' court, disguised as Achilles' sister among Dedamia's sisters and companions, the hero enters yet another familial context: a single father family, and an all-female one; this will soon become his new, short-lived extended family, thanks to a surprise wedding with the raped woman, celebrated in the presence of the rape-conceived child, with the consent of the hitherto unsuspecting father-in-law – a true family comedy. Before that, the amusing scene of Achilles' courtship of Deidameia, and, later, the 'lament of the abandoned heroine', delivered by her as a wife, contrast the erotic to the epic *côté* of the hero, exploiting Ovid's *Ars amatoria* and *Heroides*.

Discovered by Ulysses under his feminine disguise, and willingly restored to his epic CV, the day after the marriage Achilles embarks for Aulis and Troy, apparently fulfilling the martial epic expectations placed on him as Peleus' son. On the ship, requested by Diomedes to narrate his upbringing on mount Pelion, the hero rejoices in constructing an epic image of himself as Chiron's pupil. However, even this posture of Achilles as a quasi-Iliadic hero is an object of irony on the narrator's part – much in the spirit of the *Metamorphoses*. Striving to put the Scyros episode in parentheses, this pretentious Achilles would deny family stories, sentimental ties, and poetic relations which have made him very different from a unidimensional, archaic epic hero: the narrator deflates his claims, in a detached and ironic mood. Even in the imminence of the Trojan war, Statius follows in the footsteps of Ovid's deviant epic. Not only Achilles' hyper-epic autobiography conflicts with the signs of his elegiac nostalgia, but his very performing the Iliadic Achilles' 'Anger' is shaped by the erotic-elegiac re-interpretations of Homer – even his future at Troy promises to be different from the Homeric one. The hero whom we have seen falling victim to l/Love is perhaps ready to become a lover-warrior, as much as he has been a warrior-lover.

In the *Achilleid*, the many sides of Achilles, pointed out by his multiple familial – and literary – relations, oppose and relativize each other; as he shows him in his various family ties, Statius constructs a multi-layered hero, shaped by different poetic traditions. While different characters, including Achilles, strive to assert, or censure, a different poetic memory, the

narrator succeeds in creating a multi-dimensional hero, more complicated than the Homeric one. By putting his protagonist at the centre of an 'expanded family' – a complex structure of affections, and literary affiliations – Statius has transformed Achilles into the complex hero of a 'modern' epic.