How does one begin a poem about Achilles, the most famous of ancient warriors, celebrated in the most famous of epics, Homer's *Iliad*? This would be a daunting challenge for any classical poet, but one that Statius takes up in a playful and original way. Or perhaps it would be better to say “ways,” since Statius includes a number of episodes that individually might have provided a reasonable starting point: Thetis’ appeal to Neptune for help; her disguising of Achilles on Scyros; the marshaling of the Greek armies and Ulysses’ search for Achilles; the new beginning suggested by book 2. This paper will examine Statius’ experimentation with starting points. I will first explore how Statius uses the prologue to present his epic’s theme, scope, and position within the poetic tradition, and then investigate the various attempts of characters—particularly Thetis and Ulysses—to (in some sense) get the epic started. I will show how Statius’ play with beginnings, through its intertextual dialogue with previous epic, gives voice to a new and creative perspective on the identity and story of Achilles.

### The Prologue

Any discussion of beginnings in the *Achilleid* must start with the prologue in which Statius states the parameters of his poem and creates a poetic space for himself within the epic tradition:

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quamquam acta uiri multum incluta cantu
Maeonio (sed plura uacant), nos ire per omnem—
sic amor est—heroa uelis Scyroque latentem
Dulichia proferre tuba nec in Hectore tracto
sistere, sed tota iuuenem deducere Troia.

ACHIL. 1.3–7
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Although the hero’s deeds are very famous because of Homeric song (but more are available), may you allow me to cover all of the hero (so is my desire), to bring him forth with Ulysses’ trumpet as he hides on
Scyros and not to stop with Hector’s dragging, but to lead the young man through all of (the war at) Troy.

Statius freely admits the greatness of Homer’s *Iliad*, which had focused on Achilles’ rage at the end of the Trojan war, but declares that he will go beyond Homer and tell the hero’s whole life (*per omnem . . . heroa, 1.4–5*). His epic will begin with the un-Homeric episode of Ulysses’ discovery of Achilles on Scyros (*Scyroque latentem / Dulicihia proferre tuba, 5–6*), continue past Hector’s death (*nec in Hectore tracto / sistere, 6–7*; i.e., beyond the ending of the *Iliad*), and encompass Achilles’ deeds during the entire Trojan war (*tota iuuenem deducere Troia, 7*). Statius also lets us know that he will not write a traditional poem. His epic will be Alexandrian and particularly Ovidian in nature, as indicated not only by the use of parenthetic comments, suggesting room in the tradition for innovation (*sed plura uacant, 4*) and the motivating force of *amor* (*sic amor est, 5*), but also by the presence of the verb *deducere*, a word endowed with great metapoetic significance from the proem of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1.1–4), which gave voice to an integration of traditional epic (*perpetuum carmen*) and Alexandrian poetics (*deducite*). Statius has placed the *Achilleid* in rivalry with Homer but in alliance with Ovidian poetics.

The prologue’s opening line—the epic’s literal beginning—had already implicitly engaged Homer and the epic tradition on such grounds: *magnanimum Aeaciden formidatamque Tonanti*. The epic’s initial word, *magnanimus* (“great-souled”), is a compound that by its very nature picks out the elevated style of the epic genre, offering a translation of the Homeric epithet *megathumos*. In Latin poetry, it is used especially to describe heroic figures. By initiating the epic with this word, Statius endows Achilles with a defining quality of epic

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1 For Statius’ engagement with Homer, see Juhnke (1972) 162–72 and Taisne (2008).
2 See, e.g., Barchiesi (1996) 47.
3 As Heslin (2005) 80–2 argues, this passage might seem to violate the dicta of both Aristotle (*Poet. 1459a–b, 1451a*) and Horace (*Ars P. 147–9*) that a poet should not ploddingly retell the story of a character’s life, but Statius does not quite follow through on such claims in the prologue. See, however, Delarue (2008).
5 Moreover, at 1.8–13 Statius claims that the success of his first epic, the *Thebaid*, has placed him metaphorically among ancient poets who predate even Homer and the Trojan war itself. He also notes that the *Achilleid* will be a prelude to a later epic on the emperor Domitian (1.14–19). See esp. Barchiesi (1996) 49, 55–6; Hinds (1998) 97–8.
6 For example, in Latin epic *magnanimus* is used in Catullus of Minos (64.85); in Lucretius of Phaethon (5.400); in Vergil’s *Aeneid* of Aeneas (e.g., 1.260); Jupiter (12.144), and heroes more