CHAPTER 11

Similes and Gender in the *Achilleid*

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The *Achilleid* represents gender as something both innate to an individual and constructed for that individual through social norms and acculturation. Achilles, for example, delivers a soliloquy in which he laments that he compromises his masculinity by repressing his desire to have sex with Deidamia (1.624–39). He then decides to rape her and thus “prove” his masculinity. According to Achilles’ logic, the act of penetration, in this case dependent upon his biological status as a male, determines his masculinity. However, after the rape, Achilles continues to dress and act like a girl for months, and he does so successfully because he had been taught the proper movements, actions, and dress of a woman (e.g., 1.325–31, 580–3). Achilles’ mastery of culturally constructed symbols of femininity thus balances his biologically determined masculinity.

Some dimensions of the poem’s handling of gender reflect Roman *Realien* and attitudes, but the *Achilleid* also constructs its approach to gender by drawing upon the literary past. The Homeric Achilles casts the largest shadow over Statius’ character, but a multitude of other literary figures also form a significant backdrop for Achilles. In this chapter, I argue that the first two similes of the *Achilleid* both anticipate and outline the treatment of Achilles’ gender throughout the poem. Statius’ opening simile (1.165–6) recalls the Vergilian simile that likens Aeneas to Apollo (*Aen.* 4.143–50). Statius, however, moves in a slightly different direction than the Vergilian simile in that he highlights Achilles’ ephebic and liminal status. The second simile also highlights Achilles’ ephebic nature by comparing him to Castor (*Achil.* 1.180–1). In this sense, the two similes, located in close compass, reinforce one another and emphasize their common theme. At the same time, the second simile draws upon a deep nexus of poetic comparisons from Catullus, Vergil, Ovid, Propertius, and Callimachus. In particular, Statius draws upon Callimachus’ Athena as a model

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2 For the programmatic importance of the initial simile in the *Achilleid*, see Feeney (2004) 89–91. Hunter (2006) 83–5 and Hardie (1998) 92 discuss the programmatic role of opening similes in, respectively, the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*.
3 For the emphatic force of proximate similes, see Serv. *ad Aen.* 12.923; Nünlist (2009) 293.
for masculinity and martial excellence combined with feminine attributes. Moreover, Statius elsewhere introduces Minerva at moments in the narrative that are crucial for the poem’s treatment of gender. In this allusive manner, Statius’ simile establishes a programmatic template for Achilles and broader dynamics of the poem.

The Opening Simile

The first simile caps Achilles’ entry into the poem shortly after Thetis has arrived at Chiron’s cave and wants to hide her son:

ille aderat multo sudore et puluere maior,
et tamen arma inter festinatosque labores
dulcis adhuc uisu: niueo natat ignis in ore
purpureus fuluoque nitet coma gratior auro.
necdum prima noua lanugine uertitur aetas,
tranquillaeque faces oculis et plurima uultu
mater inest, qualis Lycia uenator Apollo
cum redit et saeuis permutat plectra pharetris.

ACHIL. 1.159–66

He was present, older, and with a lot of sweat and dust, but nevertheless amidst weapons and his hastened labors, he was still sweet to look upon. A purple flame swam on his snowy face, and his hair glistened more attractively than yellow gold. His early age was not yet changing with a sprouting beard, and the torches in his eyes were calm, and his face was very much like his mother, such as when the hunter Apollo returns from Lycia and exchanges his fierce arrows for the lyre quill.

At the most obvious level, Achilles has just returned from the hunt and thus Statius exploits Apollo’s association with the hunt (e.g., Xen. Cyn. 1.1). Moreover, the simile exploits the treatment of Achilles and Apollo as near equivalents, and in this particular context, Apollo’s ephebic and ever youthful attributes are relevant (e.g., Callim. Hymn 2.36). After all, Thetis’ child is described in terms that recall Statius’ own description of Parthenopaeus (ipso sudore et

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