

NESTOR'S CENTAUROMACHY AND THE DECEPTIVE VOICE OF POETIC MEMORY (OVID *MET.* 12.182–535)

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OVID'S ACCOUNT OF THE Trojan War and of Aeneas' subsequent voyage is frequently interrupted by stories that could be regarded as digressions from the main narrative, such as the Judgment of Arms, the story of Hecuba, and the Scylla-Galatea episode. In the case of many of these stories, the interruption can be explained partially in terms of generic contrast; the epic narrative is interrupted by a *controversia*, a tragedy, or a pastoral romance. Some can be explained by Ovid's use of extra-Homeric sources, such as the Cyclic epics.¹ But the relevance and placement of one of the longest interruptions, the story of the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs (12.182–535), cannot be explained this way. Since the Centauromachy actually has a Homeric origin (*Il.* 1.247–84) and recounts that most epic type of scene, the battle, we cannot use the explanation that Ovid is playing one genre off another, nor can we argue that the epic form is being undercut by the intrusion of another genre, or Homer by the intrusion of the Cyclic poems. The relevance of the Centauromachy episode must be sought in its own narrative structure and placement, in Ovid's confrontation with the traditional epic form, here for the first time in the *Metamorphoses* on Homer's own ground. In this episode at the beginning of his "Iliad," Ovid uses conventions of traditional epic, especially the extended flashback, to call into question the reliability of epic narration and epic narrators and to suggest alternative perspectives on the canonical story of the Trojan War.

The Centauromachy episode and its entire context in Book 12 play on the readers' expectations about epic narrative and conventions, based on the complex temporal structures of Homeric and Virgilian epics. The *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* center around large flashbacks, narrated by the hero himself, recounting an earlier part of his adventures.² The *Iliad*, while not containing an extended flashback of this type, also depends on a complex time-structure, in which a single episode in the ten-year war, the "wrath of Achilles" incident, is made to stand for and encapsulate the entire conflict, so that the

1. Ludwig 1965, 62–65.

2. On the first-person flashback as a near-requirement of epic narrative, see Sternberg 1978, 35–55. On the time-structure of the *Odyssey*, see Olson 1995, 91–119; on the temporal structure of Odysseus' flashback, see Bergren 1983.

events of the *Iliad* can only be understood as a portion of the war which began with the abduction of Helen and will end with the sack of Troy.³

Ovid's readers may expect some similar temporal manipulation in his Trojan War narrative—after all, the preceding books of the *Metamorphoses* have not been without their temporal distortions.⁴ But at first appearance, Ovid's Trojan War seems to be laid out quite flat and straight: it begins in the opening lines of Book 12 with the abduction of Helen, proceeds through the events at Aulis, and speeds on to the Greeks' arrival in Troy ("after enduring many things," *multaque perpessae*, 12.38) and the first battles of the war, including the inaugural death of Protesilaus and Achilles' fight with Cygnus. Thus, Ovid's Trojan War begins with an amazingly condensed, fast-moving account, but not one in which events are narrated out of their chronological order. After the victory over Cygnus (whom Achilles fought in the first year because "Hector was put off until the tenth year of the war" [12.76–77]—as if Achilles foresaw the eventual length of the war), Achilles and the Greeks celebrate around the campfire and listen to Nestor talk (a familiar activity from the *Iliad*). After Nestor's speech, the narrative of the Trojan War picks up again in the first year and skims over, but does not completely omit, the next years of the war (which include the time when the unmentioned "wrath of Achilles" incident happened), until the tenth year, when Achilles is killed in the final episode of Book 12. The intervening years are covered in a one-line ablative absolute: *iamque fere tracto duo per quinquennia bello* (12.584). This line insures that all the years of the Trojan War are in fact mentioned in their chronological order, only in varying amounts of detail. On the surface, Ovid appears to have flattened out the traditional complexity of epic time and to have told the events in the order in which they are supposed actually to have happened.⁵

But of course this simplicity ignores the time-structure of Nestor's story. We can discuss two aspects of the story's temporality. First, its placement within the narrative of Book 12 is crucial. Nestor's telling of the Centauro-machy comes just at the point in Ovid's account of the war when readers, having come to rely on the apparently linear chronology, would expect more battle-narrative, but their expectations would be of Trojan battles, similar to those known from the *Iliad*—perhaps something like the burning of the ships, or one of the single-combat scenes. Certainly, readers might expect to hear something more about Achilles' exploits before his death. But although story-chronology tells us that episodes such as the burning of the ships or the duel with Hector "happened" before the death of Achilles, which Ovid puts at the end of Book 12, the famous Iliadic battles are not narrated by Ovid until Book 13, when they are recounted as flashbacks by Ajax and Ulysses, contenders for the weapons of the dead Achilles. Only then do we

3. On the issue of the *Iliad's* time-structure, in relationship to the entire war, see Aristotle, *Poetics* 23.1459a30–37; Horace, *Ars Poetica* 146–52; Sternberg 1978, 36–39.

4. Grimal 1958; on the limited role of time, in contrast to other features, in the structure of the *Metamorphoses*, see Galinsky 1975, 85.

5. In the terminology of Genette 1980, narrative time coincides with story time.

hear of those famous battles featuring the Homeric characters. Since Ovid apparently wanted to save those stories for the *narratio* of the two rhetorical pieces in Book 13, he could not use them in the narrative of the war itself. But how could he skip over the entire Trojan War without some sort of battle-narrative? The Cygnus episode, an exploit of Achilles from early in the war, provides a glimpse of Achilles in action, but cannot on its own effectively bridge the entire gap from year one to year ten. The blatant attempt to substitute Cygnus for Hector (12.76–77) only makes the unHomeric and unheroic nature of the Cygnus episode more apparent. What is needed is an episode that is both appropriately violent, to satisfy the audience's expectations of Iliadic battles, and appropriately lengthy, to give the illusion of the passage of nine years' time. Ovid's choice is the Centauromachy: it provides numerous opportunities for creative gore, and, with Nestor as narrator, can be made to seem to take the place of several years of fighting.⁶

A second temporal aspect of the Centauromachy is its placement in story-time—that is, when it is supposed to have “happened” relative to the main story, the Trojan War. Since the Centaur-battle occurred in the distant past (some two hundred years ago, as Nestor says), with the narrator as a participant,⁷ his account of the battle thus provides the first-person flashback familiar from the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*. At the point in story-chronology when the Iliadic battles actually happened, we hear not of those battles but of one in which an Iliadic character took part much earlier, in the company not of Homer's heroes but of their fathers. While the primary models for the lengthy epic flashback are certainly those in *Odyssey* 9–12 and *Aeneid* 2–3, we can find a model for the intergenerational epic flashback in Nestor's tale to Telemachus in *Odyssey* 3; Telemachus hears stories of the exploits of his father's contemporaries.⁸ In addition, the original Homeric Centauromachy, told briefly by Nestor in a flashback, has intergenerational instruction as its purpose; Nestor attempts to show that the men of the previous generation, who were better and stronger than Achilles and Agamemnon, listened to his advice.⁹ Thus, in Homer as well as in Ovid, the extraordinarily long-lived Nestor provides a link, both narrative and personal, between the time of the Trojan War and that of the Centauromachy.

6. On the Centauromachy as a substitution for the battle-narratives of the *Iliad*, see Ellsworth 1980, 25–26 (the Centauromachy “makes the leap from [the war's] beginning to the tenth year less jarring”) and Nagle 1989, 117. On Ovid's relish in describing gore, see Galinsky 1975, 126–28, although I do not agree that *variatio* in the manner of deaths is Ovid's “main concern” in this episode. Fränkel 1945, 102 delivers what he apparently considers the ultimate insult against the bloodiness of Ovid's Centaur-battle: “The narrative sounds more like Lucan than Ovid.”

7. Nestor himself is now in his third century, and he was young at the time of the battle: 12.182–88.

8. The long-windedness of Homer's Nestor is so well demonstrated by his speeches in *Odyssey* 3 that in *Odyssey* 15, when Telemachus passes through Pylos again, he carefully sidesteps any encounter with Nestor, in order to avoid delaying his journey home. We may also note that here Homer “needs” his narrative to move quickly and deliver Telemachus home, so that the two threads of his story—Telemachus' journey and Odysseus' homecoming—can now be reunited; Homer is able to accomplish this narrative requirement by playing on the established personalities of his characters. On the reconciliation of the chronology of this portion of the *Odyssey*, see Olson 1995, 91–119.

9. On Nestor as narrator of the Homeric Centauromachy, see Austin 1966, 301.

Again, however, the apparent simplicity of “then-versus-now” is deceptive. By using this aged narrator, Ovid complicates the temporality of the entire flashback. As Nestor recounts the episode, he several times emphasizes both the temporal remoteness of the Centauromachy and the problems that arise from this remoteness. Claiming at the beginning of his narrative that he remembers the battle clearly, he also admits that he is an extremely old man and that old age causes forgetfulness (*Met.* 12.182–88):¹⁰

“quamvis obstet mihi tarda vetustas
multaque me fugiant primis spectata sub annis,
plura tamen memini, nec, quae magis haereat, ulla
pectore res nostro est inter bellique domique
acta tot, ac si quem potuit spatiosa senectus
spectatorem operum multorum reddere, vixi
annos bis centum; nunc tertia vivitur aetas.”

After this claim about the clarity of his memory in spite of his age, Nestor’s narrative immediately becomes vague about time. He tells Achilles that his father Peleus would have been among the female Caenis’ suitors, but he was either already married or perhaps just engaged to Thetis (*temptasset Peleus thalamos quoque forsitan illos, / sed iam aut contigerant illi conubia matris / aut fuerant promissa, tuae*, 12.193–95). Why is Nestor unable to remember when Peleus and Thetis were married? To Nestor’s audience of Greek warriors, his forgetfulness on this point must seem improbable; after all, the wedding of Peleus and Thetis was a landmark event in the mythological history of Greece, and was in fact the occasion for the origin of the Trojan War, in which they are all now fighting. But readers of the *Metamorphoses* know that different literary accounts place the marriage of Peleus and Thetis at different times and that the chronology of this entire period is so vexed that poets from Callimachus and Apollonius to Ennius and Catullus exploit it.¹¹ Through Nestor’s vagueness on this crucial question of the timing of the marriage of Achilles’ parents, Ovid alludes to the complex chronology of the whole array of literature on epic journeys, battles, and heroic exploits. By pointing out the variations between versions, Ovid suggests his own, and any narrator’s, ability to manipulate a story’s chronology.

Other moments in Nestor’s story remind us of our reliance on the narrator’s fallible memory. After recounting prodigious amounts of detail, Nestor admits certain gaps in his memory; listing the men Caeneus killed, he says “I don’t remember their wounds, I just noted their number and names” (*Met.* 12.459–61):

10. See Zumwalt 1977, 215.

11. On this chronological controversy as seen in Catullus 64 (the Latin model for any subsequent large-scale flashback), see Thomas 1982; Zetzel 1982; and Weber 1983. Another temporal uncertainty of Nestor’s appears in 12.447–48: wishing that the Trojan War had occurred back in the days of the Centauromachy, when he was young enough to fight Hector, Nestor concedes that in those days Hector was either “not born or just a boy” (*illo sed tempore nullus / aut puer Hector erat*). But why should there be any question about whether Hector was yet alive two hundred years ago?

Quinque neci Caeneus dederat Styphelumque Bromumque
 Antimachumque Elymumque securiferumque Pyraemon;
 vulnera non memini, numerum nomenque notavi.

Nestor has already listed so many other wounds in such detail that it seems implausible that in only this one case his memory would fail him. The catalog-like nature of his account here may be a parody of Homeric battle-narrative, meant to remind us of the epic narrator's traditional insistence on his need for aid from the Muses.¹² When describing an *aristeia*, Homer's narrator asks for help in listing the hero's victims and the order in which they died (e.g., *Il.* 11.218–20). Homer's narrator sometimes claims to be helpless without the aid of the Muses, as before the Catalog of Ships (*Il.* 2.484–93).¹³ Virgil repeats this Homeric convention before Turnus' *aristeia* in the Trojan camp, with a prayer for Calliope's help in recounting the list of Turnus' victims.¹⁴ Ovid's Nestor, however, asks no such aid with his catalog or *aristeia*-narrative; he simply leaves gaps. Unlike the more superhuman Homeric or Virgilian narrator, Nestor has no outside source of authority. Our reliance on him is complete, for he is our only informant, an all too human one.

In spite of his lack of aid from the Muses, Nestor is concerned with creating an illusion of credibility and reliability for his narrative.¹⁵ He takes pains to note his own vantage point as a witness, although it is logically unlikely that any set of mortal eyes could have had a good view of so many incidents in the thick of a very bloody battle. In the "catalog" of Caeneus' victims cited above, Nestor implies that he is referring to some sort of official record of the battle, and sounds ridiculously like a war-correspondent with his notebook or portable tape-recorder, who might say, "My notes contain no mention of the exact wounds which killed these people." Searching for other proof of his reliability, Nestor urges Achilles to verify the details by asking Peleus (*scit tuus hoc genitor*, 12.440), and shows a scar he supposedly received in the battle (*signa vides, apparet adhuc vetus inde cicatrix*, 12.444).¹⁶

But Nestor's efforts to demonstrate the reliability of his story are undermined. His scar, unlike Odysseus', does not guarantee anything.¹⁷ Peleus is not available to verify his story. Nestor also admits that Caeneus' exact end is unknown (*exitus in dubio est*, 12.522) and that the metamorphosis into a

12. Nagle 1989, 116.

13. Richardson 1990, 178–82.

14. In *Aen.* 9.528, *mecum ingentis oras evolvite belli*, Virgil's Muse seems to have a written text to refer to, since *evolvite* suggests the unrolling of a scroll, as Hardie 1994, *ad loc.* points out. Nestor, too, implies the possibility of a written text about the Centauro-machy: *notavi* (*OLD* s.v. *notare*, 10b).

15. Zumwalt 1977, 215.

16. As others (Conte 1986, Hinds 1987, Miller 1993) have shown that Ovidian words with meanings such as "I remember" may be interpreted as allusions to previous texts, I tend also to be suspicious that words such as "old" may allude to older literature: does the "old scar" allude to Odysseus' famous scar, which is the occasion of a "virtual flashback" in the mind of the aged Eurycleia? See de Jong 1985.

17. A similarly specious use of a scar occurs in *Met.* 13.262–65, where Odysseus himself shows off wounds he claims were suffered in the Trojan War.

bird was suggested by a seer (12.524–32), who was believed merely because of his own *auctoritas*, not because of any concrete evidence.¹⁸ After Nestor ends his story, its completely subjective nature is revealed when one of the listeners, Tlepolemus, asks why no mention was made of his father Hercules in Nestor's narrative, "for certainly my father used to tell me that he had conquered cloud-born Centaurs" (*certe mihi saepe referre / nubigenas domitos a se pater esse solebat*, 12.540–41).¹⁹ The obvious result of Tlepolemus' objection is to call Nestor's account into question: Would not the Centauromachy story look rather different with the inclusion of Hercules? Nestor admits that he edits Hercules out of all his stories, in vengeance for his brothers whom Hercules killed. So by Nestor's own admission, all of his stories may be influenced by his personal animosities. But another problem is raised by Tlepolemus' question: Hercules does not in fact appear to have participated in the Centauromachy, although he was known to have had encounters with Centaurs during his lifetime.²⁰ Tlepolemus cites his father as a reliable source, just as Achilles was urged to consult his father Peleus to verify Nestor's version of events. But either Tlepolemus interpreted his father's story incorrectly, conflating the various Centaur incidents, or Hercules misled Tlepolemus about his exploits. Are stories heard at the feet of one's elders to be believed? Are such stories always interpreted correctly by their audiences, or can they be colored by the audience's personal biases?²¹ Nestor begins the story of Lapiths and Centaurs because he feels it is appropriate to Achilles' current situation; Achilles' recent conquest of the supposedly invulnerable Cygnus reminds Nestor of Caeneus, another invulnerable warrior.²² Since Achilles remains the primary audience throughout the story, naturally the interests of another listener, such as Tlepolemus, may not be served.²³ The "real" story of the Centauromachy is inaccessible to us, because all we have is Nestor's personally-slanted, age-impaired version, engineered to the needs of one particular audience; other audiences, such as a radically pro-Hercules one, might demand another treatment of the episode, even if it led to a mythological blunder such as the inclusion of Hercules in an adventure he did not have.²⁴ Through Tlepolemus' question, Ovid appears to be demonstrating how easily the mythological tradition can be manipulated or reworked for the needs of a character, audience, or narrator.

By means of Nestor's frequent but imperfect resemblance to the narrators of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, Ovid also calls attention to some of the ways in which those narrators strain credibility, logic, or precedent. Nestor's

18. On the doubts over Caeneus' end, see Galinsky 1975, 177–78.

19. Mack 1988, 130–31: "Nowhere else in the *Metamorphoses* does Ovid pull the rug out from under a narrator so completely as he does here. . . ." See also Zumwalt 1977, 216.

20. Bömer *ad Met.* 12.210–535 and 536–48 on Hercules and Centaurs.

21. The possibility of misinterpretation by Tlepolemus is raised by Nagle 1989, pp. 116–17, n. 46. Bömer, *ad Met.* 12.536–48, comments that Homer's Tlepolemus is also anxious to sing his father's praises: *Il.* 5.638–42.

22. For a different view of the relevance of Achilles' presence to Nestor's narrative, see O'Bryhim 1988, 49–53.

23. Nestor addresses or refers to Achilles during the Centauromachy narrative at 12.191, 193, 363, 440.

24. See Galinsky 1975, 177–78.

narrative brings out some of the implausibilities of extremely long-term recollections. How can anyone remember what happened in such detail after so many years? How can Aeneas list all those Sicilian place-names with such confidence in their order? How can Odysseus remember just how many and which ones of his men went on a given mission? Nestor's stress on his status as an eyewitness, against all probability, reminds us of problems of perspective in other epic embedded narratives. Where exactly is Aeneas located when he sees the death of Priam? How does he know the manner of the Greeks' exit from the horse? The final undercutting of Nestor's reliability also suggests some similar questions that we may have harbored about previous epic narrators. If Odysseus made up so many other stories about himself, why couldn't he be making up the one he tells the Phaeacians? Why does Aeneas' account of his activities during the sack of Troy differ so much from the account given by other sources? But finally, Nestor's insistence on his authority and control of his narrative reminds us of our complete dependence (at least during the course of a given act of narration) on the narrator for perspective, memory, and objectivity. Like Odysseus, Nestor has outlived all the corroborating witnesses to his story, so we must take his word, however improbable, for the events he recounts.²⁵ Odysseus may be a pathological liar, but he is the source Homer chooses to give us for the wanderings. The "real" story of the wanderings, other than Odysseus' version, is unavailable to us. Aeneas may have an agenda, but he is Virgil's chosen narrator for the fall of Troy, and, like Dido, we have no choice but to believe him. Ultimately, as Nestor's dubious narrative shows us, the epic poet closes off all other possible versions of the story by his selection of a particular narrative voice. The *Metamorphoses*, by pointing out these closures in previous epics, opens up the gaps again, asking "What if?" about traditional epic situations and narratives. What if, for example, the epic narrator's memory fails him? What if all the different versions of epic chronology are correct? What if, as Nestor suggests (12.445–48), *he* had been a young man during the Trojan War and had his own chance to fight Hector and be the hero of an *Iliad*?²⁶

Although the Centauromachy may be, to some extent, a parody of the epic flashback, it is nevertheless a useful and relevant one. The Centauromachy serves an important structural function, for its immense size suggests to the reader the passage of a long period of time during the main story; after this flashback, the nine-year jump to Achilles' death does not seem so drastic. In

25. Odysseus could, in an imaginary and ideal court, bring in characters such as Circe or Aeolus to back up his account, but all his mortal companions have perished, and no one can verify his entire story of the wanderings. Likewise, Nestor, as he suggests, could in theory be backed up by Peleus, but we know that Peleus is far away in Greece, never to be seen again by Nestor's addressee, Achilles.

26. The Centauromachy, like some other flashbacks in the *Iliad*, may attempt to represent a kind of "Ur-epic," narrating stories from before the time narrated by Homer, such as the time when Nestor was young. We may compare Apollonius' setting of the *Argonautica* in the generation before the Trojan War; see Goldhill 1991, 284–333. Another pre-Iliadic episode in the *Metamorphoses* is 12.11–23, the snake omen at Aulis, which reproduces a flashback in *Iliad* 2.299–329 to a time *before* that narrated in the *Iliad*; on this episode see Musgrove 1997.

addition, the strange nature of the episode's narrator suggests questions about epic narration in general, especially the first-person flashback and the reliability of narrators. The Centauromachy highlights features of the epic tradition that will continue to be important in Ovid's Trojan stories throughout Books 12–14. Its hyper-epic goriness points to the contrasts that will constantly be seen in subsequent books between the impersonal violence of epic and the pathos of elegy, as when, for example, the super-hero Ajax commits suicide for reasons of Homeric *kleos*, but is then metamorphosed into a purple flower inscribed with an elegiac lament, the inspiration of Apollo's elegiac laments for Hyacinthus.²⁷ The complexity of temporal structure will only increase in the next two books, culminating in the multi-level embedding of the Scylla-Galatea stories (13.730–14.74). The reliability questions raised by personal narrators will be brought out by the two competing perspectives on the Trojan War presented by Ajax and Ulysses in their “debate” over the arms of Achilles. The Centauromachy is neither irrelevantly nor capriciously placed; it is exactly where Ovid needs it to be. Ovid uses it to bring his “Iliad” into conflict with its epic predecessors and to suggest the possibility of other versions of epic narrative besides the canonical texts.²⁸

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27. On the elegiac connections of Ajax's death, see *Met.* 10.205–6, where Hyacinthus' death is explained as the origin both of Apollo's elegiac songs and of the purple flower that will eventually be inscribed with Ajax's name (10.215–16).

28. The author appreciates the helpful comments and suggestions of Sara Mack, Julia Dyson, Calvin Byre, the referees of this journal, and the audience members at the 1997 CAMWS meeting.

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