

# THE DEATH OF CHIRON: OVID, *FASTI* 5.379–414\*

Nocte minus quarta promet sua sidera Chiron semivir et flavi corpore mixtus equi.	380
Pelion Haemoniae mons est obversus in Austros: summa virent pinu, cetera quercus habet.	
Phillyrides tenuit; saxo stant antra vetusto, quae iustum memorant incoluisse senem.	
ille manus olim missuras Hectora leto creditur in lyricis detinuisse modis.	385
venerat Alcides exhausta parte laborum, iussaque restabant ultima paene viro.	
stare simul casu Troiae duo fata videres: hinc Aeacides, hinc Iove natus erat.	390
excipit hospitio iuvenem Philyreus heros, et causam adventus hic rogat, ille docet.	
respicit interea clavam spoliūque leonis, 'vir' que ait 'his armis, armaque digna viro!'	
nec se, quin horrens auderent tangere saetis vellus, Achilleae continuere manus.	395
dumque senex tractat squalentia tela venenis, excidit et laevo fixa sagitta pede est.	
ingemuit Chiron, traxitque e corpore ferrum: adgemit Alcides Haemoniusque puer.	400
ipse tamen lectas Pagasaeis collibus herbas temperat et varia volnera mulcet ope;	
virus edax superabat opem, penitusque recepta ossibus et toto corpore pestis erat:	
sanguine Centauri Lernaee sanguis echidnae mixtus ad auxilium tempora nulla dabat.	405
stabat, ut ante patrem, lacrimis perfusus Achilles: sic flendus Peleus, si moreretur, erat.	
saepe manus aegras manibus fingeat amicis: morum, quos fecit, praemia doctor habet.	410
oscula saepe dedit, dixit quoque saepe iacenti 'vive, precor, nec me, care, relinque, pater.'	
nona dies aderat, cum tu, iustissime Chiron, bis septem stellis corpora cinctus eras. <sup>1</sup>	

The story of the death and catasterism of Chiron is one of the most charming and skilfully-presented episodes in the *Fasti*. Ovid relates how Hercules, in the course of his twelve labours, came to Mount Pelion, and was hospitably received by the centaur Chiron and his pupil, the young Achilles. While admiring Hercules' splendid arms, Chiron drops one of the hero's poisoned arrows onto his foot. Despite desperate attempts to find a remedy, he fails to recover, but is transformed into the constellation of Centaurus.

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<sup>1</sup> The text used is that of the Teubner edition of E. H. Alton, D. E. W. Wormell and E. Courtney (Second edition, Leipzig, 1985).

This passage has attracted close scrutiny from Michael von Albrecht,<sup>2</sup> who uses it as a vehicle to examine Ovid's use of tenses in elegiac narrative, and Carlo Santini,<sup>3</sup> who looks for etymological word-play in the text. However, neither of these critics has drawn attention to the most interesting aspects of this narrative.

This paper, therefore, will attempt to show the subtlety with which Ovid exploits the potential of the episode. In particular, it will examine how the poet suppresses Chiron's hybrid nature in order to allow us to sympathize with him as with a fellow human; how he presents the character of Achilles in such a way that we see in his actions glimpses of the Homeric hero he will later become; and how he skilfully uses ambiguity in order to include within the narrative ironic presentiments of the deaths of both Achilles and Hercules.

### I. CHARACTERIZATION

Ovid brings off something of a coup merely in the cast of characters which he assembles for the Chiron episode. Achilles is traditionally known as the most illustrious of Chiron's pupils,<sup>4</sup> and Hercules' role in the death of Chiron is recorded in one side of the tradition.<sup>5</sup> However, Achilles and Hercules are not normally associated with *each other* in mythology. The bringing of these two consummate heroes together is, therefore, unexpected. The effect is all the greater in that the situation is a domestic one, rather than a scene more traditionally associated with heroic deeds.

The primary character in the episode is, of course, Chiron. The sympathetic nature of the character is apparent from the outset. In line 384 he is referred to in the words 'iustum...senem', and the epithet will be picked up in line 413 by 'iustissime' and represents the traditional portrayal of Chiron. Homer, for example, had called him *δικαιοτάτος Κενταύρων*.<sup>6</sup>

Lines 385–6 go on to give an example of this quality, namely his suppression of the warlike instincts of Achilles. Of all the subjects which Chiron is reported elsewhere to have taught Achilles – medicine, music, hunting, astronomy, prophecy and law<sup>7</sup> – Ovid mentions only the playing of the lyre. The stark contrast between the peaceful art of music which Achilles practises under Chiron's supervision and the savagery with which Achilles will subsequently kill Hector invites our admiration for the achievement of Chiron. For it is clear from the word 'detinuisse' (386) that Chiron is engaging Achilles' hands in an act that is contrary to the boy's natural temperament.<sup>8</sup>

The extent of Chiron's success in his role of tutor is indicated towards the end of the passage by the piety which Achilles feels towards his teacher. In lines 407–8, Achilles' grief is compared to the sort of thing he might feel if his own father were

<sup>2</sup> M. von Albrecht, 'Zur Funktion der Tempora in Ovids elegischer Erzählung', in M. von Albrecht and E. Zinn (edd.), *Ovid* (Darmstadt, 1968), pp. 451–67.

<sup>3</sup> C. Santini, 'Lettura Strutturale ed Etimologia in un Catasterismo dei Fasti', *MCSN* 1 (1976), 49–56.

<sup>4</sup> See F. Bömer, *Publius Ovidius Naso. Die Fasten. Band II: Kommentar* (Heidelberg, 1958), p. 314.

<sup>5</sup> Eratosthenes, *Catasterisms* 40; Hyginus, *De Astronomia* 2.38; Scholiast on Caesar Germanicus, *Aratea* 417. <sup>6</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 11.832. <sup>7</sup> See Bömer, loc. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Diodorus Siculus (3.67.2), Apollodorus (3.4.9) and Aelian (*Varia Historia* 3.32) report how Hercules was taught the lyre by Linus, but killed his tutor in a fit of rage. The contrast between this story and Chiron's success in restraining Achilles' instincts makes Chiron's achievement all the more remarkable.

dying. Then, as if this comparison were not proof enough of the strength of Achilles' feelings, the simile becomes a metaphor. Chiron is no longer compared to a parent, but in line 412 Achilles actually calls him 'care... pater'.

Further evidence comes from the urgency with which Achilles acts when Chiron is wounded: the repeated use of the word 'saepe' in lines 409–11 and the juxtaposition of the verbs 'dedit, dixit' with asyndeton in line 411 add to the impression of frantic activity. Especially notable is line 412, where direct speech is used to break into the narrative with striking effect. The parenthetical 'precōr', 'care' and 'pater' break up the syntax of the sentence to achieve the staccato sound of Achilles' sobbing:<sup>9</sup> 'vive, precōr, nec me, care, relinque, pater'.

Ovid's Chiron, then, is a responsible teacher of the peaceful arts who has inspired enormous affection in his charge. This characterization has a dual function: firstly, it provides the justification for Chiron's elevation to the sky as a constellation;<sup>10</sup> secondly, it increases the pathos we feel as we observe the agonies that he suffers.

Indeed there is one particular device through which we are encouraged to sympathize with Chiron. In the central portion of the narrative Ovid suppresses the hybrid nature of the centaur in order to allow us to envisage him as a fellow human. He is described as 'senex' (lines 384 and 397), 'heros' (391), 'doctor' (410) and 'pater' (412) – all terms which would naturally suggest a human.

When the poisoned arrow falls, it strikes him 'laevo... pede' (398). The word 'pes' is a general term, applicable to all species. Its use here, in preference to the word 'ungula', which applies specifically to a horse's hoof, plays down the centaur's hybrid nature. Moreover, the phrase 'laevo pede' cannot usefully designate which hoof it was that the arrow struck, for, as a centaur, Chiron has four legs, and two left feet! The term is appropriate, however, to the human form which the reader is encouraged to imagine.

It seems to me that a similar game is at work with the word 'corpus' in the piece. When Ovid wishes to portray Chiron as the constellation Centaurus, he draws attention to the distinctive double form of the centaur. At line 414 the plural form 'corpora' could be seen as a humorous allusion to the fact that – owing to his hybrid nature – Chiron's body is in fact composed of two bodies.<sup>11</sup> In the portion of the narrative where Ovid wishes to make us feel sympathy for Chiron there is no such use of the plural. The singular form 'corpore' on lines 399 and 404 hints rather at a single, pure-bred, and – I would argue – human form.

Moreover, Ovid's technique of characterization extends beyond the depiction of Chiron. An examination of the portrayal of Achilles in the narrative reveals an interesting relationship between the child in the story and the hero familiar from Homer's *Iliad*.

Achilles' youth forms an explicit contrast with the maturity of Hercules and the senility of Chiron. He is 'puer Aeacides' (line 390) and 'Haemonius... puer' (400). His youthful nature also exhibits itself in his inability to refrain from touching the lion's skin of Hercules.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A similar effect is achieved by Ovid at *Heroides* 21.58, where the rhythm reflects Cydippe's hysteria, and *Metamorphoses* 1.504, where it indicates Apollo's breathlessness. See also [Longinus], *De Sublimitate* 22.

<sup>10</sup> See Hyginus, *De Astronomia* 2.38; von Albrecht, op. cit. [n. 2], p. 455; L. Braun, 'Kompositionskunst in Ovids *Fasti*', *ANRW* II.31.4 (1981), 2365.

<sup>11</sup> The poetic plural is, of course, common in the *Fasti* (see J. G. Frazer, *The Fasti of Ovid* [London, 1929], vol. IV. p. 2; Bömer, op. cit. [n. 4], pp. 92–3).

<sup>12</sup> Mr A. S. Hollis has pointed out to me that the idea of the young child playing with the lion's skin may have occurred to Ovid as a result of the story, which appears in Pausanias

But despite his youth, Achilles' heroic status is not in doubt. The genealogical and geographical terms 'Aeacides' and 'Haemonius' are traditional ways of referring to a hero. Moreover, the first mention of Achilles in the passage is a reference to the killing of Hector. This detail immediately makes the reader conscious of the link between the Achilles we observe in this episode and the Achilles of the *Iliad*.

Final confirmation of Achilles' heroic status can be found in the parallels between Achilles and Hercules. They are 'Troiae duo fata' (389), Hercules because he sacked the city after Laomedon had refused to pay him for his services in slaying a sea-monster<sup>13</sup> and Achilles because he killed Hector and thus precipitated the end of the Trojan War. Their equivalence is stressed in line 390 by the balance in the line ('hinc puer Aeacides, hinc Iove natus erat') and in the way that both heroes are referred to in terms of their genealogy. This equivalence is re-asserted at line 400 by the similarity of their reactions to Chiron's wounding: 'adgemit Alcides Haemoniusque puer'.

Ovid also uses the literary tradition with some subtlety in his characterization of Achilles, taking two memorable attributes of the Homeric Achilles and using them to suggest that the child in the narrative already contains within him the germ of the great hero of the *Iliad*.

Firstly, there is the way in which Achilles' piety towards Chiron manifests itself in his thinking of the centaur as a father. In the scene in the twenty-fourth book of the *Iliad*, where Priam entreats Achilles to return the body of Hector, the trigger which causes Achilles to feel pity for the king is the comparison which Priam makes between himself and Peleus, Achilles' father.<sup>14</sup> Achilles observes the pitiful state of Priam, and is struck by a desire to weep for his own father, for he knows he is destined not to be able to care for Peleus in his old age.<sup>15</sup>

Ovid's remark 'sic flendus Peleus, si moreretur, erat' (408) puts the reader in mind of the Homeric Achilles' sympathy for the suffering of old men, and the cause of that sympathy – namely that he identifies their sufferings with those which are in store for his own father. Achilles' show of devotion to Chiron, which is revealed in lines 407–12, can be seen not just as an index of the affection that he has for his tutor, but also as a surrogate act of piety to Peleus, in which Achilles acts out the scene which he will not be able to act out on his true father's death.

A second reminiscence of the Homeric Achilles occurs in the prominence given in the passage to the hero's hands.

At lines 385–6, Chiron is said to have taught not Achilles, but his hands, which will one day kill Hector. This striking usage is then repeated at lines 395–6, where it is said not that Achilles could not keep his hands from touching the lion's skin<sup>16</sup> but that Achilles' hands could not keep themselves from touching it. The repetition of this unexpected usage places great emphasis on the hands, which seem to have a life of their own. Further emphasis is provided by line 409, in which the polyptoton 'manus...manibus' highlights the contrast between Chiron's feeble hands and Achilles' comforting hands.

The prominence of the word 'manus' has been explained by Santini<sup>17</sup> as being a pointer to the derivation of the name Chiron from the Greek word χείρ, meaning

(1.27.8), about the young Theseus and Hercules' lion's skin. Mr Hollis suggests that Ovid may have known this story from a treatment of it in Callimachus' *Hecale*.

<sup>13</sup> The story is told by Ovid at *Metamorphoses* 11.212–15.

<sup>14</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 24.486–7: μνήσαι πατρός σοῖο, θεοὺς ἐπιείκελ' Ἀχιλλεῦ, | τηλίκου ὥς περ ἐγών, ὁλοῶ ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ.

<sup>15</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 24.540–1: ἀλλ' ἔνα παῖδα τέκεν παναώριον· οὐδέ νυ τόν γε | γηράσκοντα κομίζω.

<sup>16</sup> The translations of Frazer and Bömer are misleading in this respect.

<sup>17</sup> Santini, op. cit. [n. 3].

'hand'. However, this theory depends – rather implausibly perhaps – on the reader imagining Chiron's hands mirroring the actions of Achilles' hands in playing the lyre and handling the lion's skin.

The word 'manus' is associated with Achilles rather than with Chiron in Ovid's account, and the hands of Achilles have a direct resonance in referring to the hero of the *Iliad*. At two climactic moments of that poem – the death of Patroclus in Book XVIII and the meeting of Priam and Achilles in Book XXIV – Homer focuses on Achilles hands, which are characterized as *ἀνδροφόναι*.<sup>18</sup>

Priam's remarkable act of kissing the hands that killed so many of his sons endows the hands with a distinctive literary significance. This is exploited by Ovid in his emphasis of these hands at childish play – in strumming the lyre and touching Hercules' lion's skin – and in the comforting of the father-figure Chiron. Behind the innocent activities of the young Achilles' hands, there remains, however, the threat of future deeds. As is pointed out at line 385, they will one day send Hector to his death: 'olim missuras Hectora leto'.

## II. IRONY

Besides the attention devoted to the depiction of the characters of Chiron and Achilles, the passage is also enlivened by the use of irony.

Consider, for example, the reversal of roles which takes place when Hercules arrives at Chiron's home. Although he is a teacher – he is called 'doctor' at line 410 – Chiron now finds himself asking questions, while Hercules is cast in the role of instructor: 'ille docet' (line 392).

A similar reversal is found at line 409. Whereas Chiron had once supervised the movement of Achilles' hands (lines 385–6), when Chiron is dying, Achilles moves the hands of his ailing master. The irony of the situation is explicitly pointed out by Ovid in the following line: 'morum, quos fecit, praemia doctor habet'.

The major source of irony in the passage is, however, the wounding of Chiron.

Chiron receives Hercules hospitably, unaware that this will expedite his own death. When he first sees Hercules' arms, the centaur exclaims, 'vir...his armis, armaque digna viro'. This comment constitutes more than a mere verbal trick of the sort dear to Ovid.<sup>19</sup> The word 'vir' contrasts with Chiron's own status as 'semivir' (line 380) and 'senex' (lines 384 and 387). Chiron is not a 'vir', and so he is unfit to handle the arms of Hercules.<sup>20</sup> When the arrow falls onto his foot as he tries to handle the arms, Chiron's utterance that the arms are 'worthy of a man' is seen to have been ironically prophetic.

Even at this stage, we are led to believe that Chiron's status as a healer might save him. He draws the arrow out of the wound, but he is unable to draw out the poison. At lines 401–2, he seeks to use herbs to effect a recovery. The word 'tamen' indicates a change of mood after the groans of the previous line, but the famous healer is, in fact, unable to counteract the effect of the poison.<sup>21</sup> The irony is made clear by the

<sup>18</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 18.316–17: τοῖσι δὲ Πηλεΐδης ἀδινού ἑξήρχε γόοιο, | χεῖρας ἐπ' ἀνδροφόνους θέμενος στήθεσσιν ἑταίρου; 24.478–9: χερσὶν Ἀχιλλῆος λάβε γούνατα καὶ κύσε χεῖρας | δεινὰς ἀνδροφόνους, αἱ οἱ πολέας κτάνον υἱας.

<sup>19</sup> A close parallel for this line occurs at *Metamorphoses* 5.345. For Ovid's use of antimetabole, see S. F. Bonner, *Roman Declamation* (Liverpool, 1949), p. 154; for his general predilection for verbal trickery, see J.-M. Frécaut, *L'esprit et l'humour chez Ovide* (Grenoble, 1972), pp. 45–58; J. Booth, 'Aspects of Ovid's Language', *ANRW* II.31.4 (1981), 2686–700.

<sup>20</sup> See von Albrecht, op. cit. [n. 2], p. 456, n. 17.

<sup>21</sup> The irony of the doctor who cannot heal himself is a common motif. Ovid's use of the theme is noted by M. von Albrecht ('Ovids Humor', in Albrecht and Zinn, op. cit. [n. 2], p. 422).

polyptoton 'ope... opem' in lines 402–3: although Chiron soothed the wound with various remedies, the poison defied remedy.

Some points of irony in the passage are, I believe, more subtle than the examples I have just considered. There are two places in particular where the irony depends on allusion to episodes outside the dramatic situation of Chiron's death.

At line 398, we are presented with the picture of a foot pierced by an arrow: 'laevo fixa sagitta pede est'. As I have already argued, the description is more appropriate to a human form than to the semi-equine form of Chiron. In fact, the image of a human foot shot by an arrow is peculiarly appropriate to one of the bystanders, for Achilles is destined to perish in the Trojan War, shot in the heel by an arrow.<sup>22</sup>

At this stage, it would be convenient if I could show that Achilles' left foot was traditionally the one thought of as being the one struck by Paris' arrow. However, there are no helpful literary sources,<sup>23</sup> and the archaeological evidence<sup>24</sup> reveals no clear consensus on this point. But even if there was no precise distinction in the tradition about which foot was struck, it is still possible to appreciate the dramatic significance of the scene for the watching Achilles.

Furthermore, we find a similar allusive technique at work in lines 405–6. As the poison spreads through Chiron's body, we are told of the mingling of Chiron's blood with the poisonous blood of the Hydra: 'sanguine Centauri Lernaeae sanguis echidnae / mixtus'.

Now it is Hercules' turn to sense in Chiron's misfortune a foreshadowing of his own death. For Hercules' death is brought about when his wife Deianira sends him a garment once worn by the centaur Nessus.<sup>25</sup> This garment is smeared with Nessus' blood, and this blood has been infected by the poisonous blood of the Hydra from one of Hercules' arrows. The liquid on the shirt causes Hercules intolerable suffering, to escape from which he has himself placed on a pyre on Mount Oeta.

The description given in lines 405–6 of the blood of a centaur mingled with the blood of a Hydra could – if taken out of context – equally refer to the death of Chiron or Hercules, depending upon whether the word 'Centauri' refers to Chiron or Nessus. As at line 398, the description has a significance outside its role in the narrative, pointing to the future death of one of the onlookers. It is not surprising, therefore, to note the reaction of Hercules and Achilles when the arrow lodges in Chiron's foot: 'adgemit Alcides Haemoniusque puer'.

Many scholars have viewed the *Fasti* as a fundamentally flawed work, claiming that a long elegiac poem on the subject of the Roman calendar was not congenial to Ovid's talent.<sup>26</sup> Recently, however, it has become common for critics to argue that the poem's literary qualities have been undervalued.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, the Chiron episode

<sup>22</sup> R. J. Rabel ('Hippothous and the Death of Achilles', *CJ* 86 [1991], 130) sees a similar irony at work at *Iliad* 17.288–303.

<sup>23</sup> See O. A. W. Dilke, *Statius: Achilleid, edited with introduction, apparatus criticus and notes* (Cambridge, 1954), p. 94.

<sup>24</sup> The relevant material is listed in D. Kemp-Lindemann, *Darstellung des Achilleus in Griechischer und Römischer Kunst* (Frankfurt, 1975), pp. 218–22.

<sup>25</sup> The story is told by Ovid himself at *Metamorphoses* 9.101–272. The description of the poison in that account ('Lernaeae virus echidnae', 158) bears a close verbal resemblance to the description in the *Fasti* of the poison which kills Chiron.

<sup>26</sup> For example, H. Fränkel, *Ovid: A Poet Between Two Worlds*<sup>3</sup> (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), p. 148; J. A. Barsby, *Ovid: Greece and Rome New Surveys in the Classics. No. 12* (Oxford, 1978), p. 29; W. R. Johnson, 'The Desolation of the *Fasti*', *CJ* 74 (1978), 7–18; R. Syme, *History in Ovid* (Oxford, 1978), p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> See especially J. F. Miller, 'Research on Ovid's *Fasti*', *Arethusa* 25 (1992), 1–10.

reveals the poet handling his material with consummate skill; Ovid does not appear to be struggling to come to terms with the task he has set for himself, but displays the same artistry which characterizes his finest work.

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