

A NEW MYTHOLOGICAL PATTERN FOR
JOHN LYLY'S *GALLATHEA*: ACHILLES ON SCYROS¹

One of the best ways of thinking about the genesis of John Lyly's *Gallathea*² is not so much in terms of sources, but rather in terms of patterns, because, like many other works of the Elizabethan Age, the play has been composed in the light of a series of precedents in the dramatic repertoire of the period and a series of patterns in Lyly's reading of the classics. Indeed, in the first line of his play Lyly alerts his audience to the intimate relationship between his story and classical precedents, opening his action with an obvious quotation from the first line of Virgil's first eclogue and naming some of his characters – Melebeus, Tityrus and Gallathea – after those of the Roman poet. He thus marks it as, in general, a work of the pastoral imagination, but, as Hunter³ has remarked, he immediately turns the political story of the eclogue into a mythological fantasy, drawing on other classical patterns, sometimes explicitly mentioned: Hesione, Polyphemus, and Iphis and Ianthe, whose precedent serves to solve the love tangle at the centre of the play. The alternative between an “honourable death” and an “infamous life” which exists for Phillida and Galatea, and the decision taken by Melibeus and Tityrus to disguise their daughters as boys in order to preserve their lives, suggests that Lyly also used the Achilles pattern of classical mythology, a hypothesis that I will try to demonstrate in this paper.

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² The spelling of the name adopted here is that of the Quarto edition (1592).

³ J. Lyly, *Galatea. Midas*, eds. G. K. Hunter and D. Bevington, Oxford 2000, 6.

1. JOHN LYLY'S *GALLATHEA*: AN OVERVIEW

1.1. MAIN PLOT

John Lyly's *Gallathea*, whose first known printed edition appeared in quarto in 1592⁴, develops in the main plot the theme of defiance of the gods. Neptune, offended with the inhabitants of North Lincolnshire, who had committed sacrilege against him in a previous era, sent them a devastating flood. Since then, he has been exacting from the local population a quinquennial tribute: the exposure of their fairest maiden to the sea-monster Agar⁵. Tityrus and Melebeus, the fathers of the girls most likely to be sacrificed – Gallathea and Phillida –, disguise them as boys and send them to the forest in order to evade the tribute. So disguised they meet and, each supposing the other to be a boy, fall in love. In the same woods, Cupid, dressed as a girl, inspires the nymph Telusa with a passion for the disguised Phillida, and Eurota and Ramia with a passion for the disguised Gallathea; but when Diana discovers the mischief, she sets him to untying love knots as a punishment. Meanwhile the natives, who have vainly offered Haebe as a substitute, are pardoned by the god on the confession of Tityrus and Melebeus; and in order to gratify the mutual passion of Gallathea and Phillida, Venus ensures the happy ending by undertaking to change one of them into a real boy⁶.

⁴ On the date of the play, cf. J.R. Brown, "A Note on the Date of Lyly's *Gallathea*", *Modern Language Review* 51, 1956, 220-1.

⁵ As R. Warwick Bond points out in his edition of J. Lyly –*The Complete Works of John Lyly*, Oxford 1902 (reprinted 1967), II, 565–, this name derives from the "eagre", the tidal wave on the Humber estuary. Cf. Also D. C. Allen, "Neptune's 'Agar' in Lyly's *Gallathea*", *Modern Language Notes* 49, 1934, 451-2.

⁶ I am referring here only to the main plot, but it must be remembered that *Gallathea* is an early example of the Elizabethan "three-level" play, dramas "which included, in addition to the standard main plot and subplot, a third distinct set of characters, usually of the clownish sort" (R. Levin, "The Elizabethan 'Three-Level' Play" *Renaissance Drama* new ser.2, 1969, 23).

1.2. CLASSICAL PATTERNS

Gallathea has attracted a great amount of attention in late years, even beginning to eclipse *Endymion* as the Lyly play. Regarded by Saccio as the “most perfectly executed and the most luminously clear of Lyly’s plays”⁷, and considered by recent scholars as his most striking dramatic achievement, *Gallathea* has been mainly vindicated by specialists in Gender Studies, who have emphasized its forthright accent on female same-sex love⁸. However, my interest in the piece does not hinge upon its condition as a starting point to map changing early modern conceptions of gender and theatricality, but rather in the use of classical patterns. Before putting forward new patterns, I will mention those which have been previously noted by scholars in the central plot:

1) the story of a virgin tribute paid to Neptune, which has various classical representatives: the daughter of Erechtheus of Athens⁹; Andromeda¹⁰; and Hesione, daughter of Laomedon of Troy¹¹, whose circumstances correspond better to those of *Gallathea*.

2) The myth of Polyphemus and Galatea¹², because, with the omission of Acis, Lyly observes the same classical pattern:

⁷ P. Saccio, *The Court Comedies of John Lyly: A Study in Allegorical Dramaturgy*, Princeton, New Jersey 1969, 98.

⁸ Cf., for example, Th. Jankowski, “‘Where there can be no cause of affection’: redefining virgins, their desires, and their pleasures in John Lyly’s *Gallathea*”, in V. Traub, L. Kaplan y D. Callaghan (eds.), *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, Cambridge 1996; Ch. Wixson, “Cross-Dressing and John Lyly’s *Gallathea*”, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 41.2, 2001, 241-56; and V. Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge 2002, 5-6, 287-8, 327-9.

⁹ Cf. D. S. 1.29.1; 4.76.1; Hyg. *fab.* 46; 48; 238, Apollod. 1.7.3; 1.9.4; 3.14.8; 15.1, 4 and 5.

¹⁰ Cf. Ov. *met.* 4.663-771; Hyg. *fab.* 64; *astr.* 2.11; Apollod. 4.3.

¹¹ Cf. Hyg. *fab.* 89; Apollod. 2.5.9 ; 3.12.3-4.

¹² Cf. *Il.* 18.45; Hes. *Th.* 250; Theoc. 11; Verg. *ecl.* 9.39-43; Ov. *met.* 13.750-897; Apollod. 1.2.7; Nonn. *D.* 6.300-1.

Gallathea is pursued by a monster, and although the eventual fate of the sacrificed virgins is obscure, it is distinctly hinted that it is a sexual one. The setting, the name and the color association all reinforce the correspondence between the Lylian situation and the Galatea myth.

3) The story of the change of sex (V.iii.139-58), confessedly borrowed from the tale of Iphis being transformed into a boy by Isis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (9.666-797).

2. A NEW THREAD IN SHOT SILK: ACHILLES ON SCYROS

These mythological elements are not used as anecdotes. As Saccio has pointed out, "they are not presented as self-contained, juxtaposed units in individual scenes. Rather, they lurk behind scenes, allusively present, deepening implications and adding resonance, dramaturgically subsumed into larger situations. They are threads in shot silk, rather than pearls strung in a necklace"¹³. Going on with the metaphor, it could be said that an important thread, that of Achilles on Scyros, has gone unnoticed for the moment. The story of Achilles' childhood and adolescence is not very familiar today, when it is as a hero of Homer's *Iliad* that he is best known¹⁴. In the Middle Ages, however, readers in Western Europe did not have direct access to Homer's great epic, and made use of various works in Latin that summarized the tale of the Trojan War. Yet other classical poem, Statius' *Achilleid*, which was widely known in the Middle Ages, specially through the *Libri Catoniani* – Latin reading anthologies which were used as textbooks from the IXth century –, provided an alternative sketch of Achilles, including episodes from Achilles' biography that did not feature in the canonical epic text: his early childhood in the care of Chiron¹⁵ and his interlude as a cross-dresser on the

¹³ Saccio, *The Court Comedies*, 102.

¹⁴ In this respect, cf. chapters 4 and 5 in S. L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*, Berkeley 1984.

¹⁵ This episode of his life was abundantly treated in the literature of the late Antiquity. Cf. Z. Pavlovskij, "The Education of Achilles as Treated in the Literature of the Late Antiquity", *La Parola di Passato* 20, 1965, 281-97.

island of Scyros¹⁶. The plot of the *Achilleid* begins with Thetis, Achilles' mother, attempting to interfere with the tragic destiny of her son¹⁷. Thetis knew that Achilles would either die young as a hero at Troy, or live an inglorious life at home; and she did her utmost to preserve his life, even going so far as to disguise him as a girl and sending him away to Lycomedes, king of Scyros. Are not the alternatives between glorious death and inglorious life, an overprotective parent and the device of crossdressing in order to overcome Fate the major points in the plot of Lyly's *Gallathea*? In the next sections I will discuss thoroughly whether Lyly used the Achilles pattern of classical mythology or whether the similarities may be explained as mere coincidences.

¹⁶ This episode has been treated by Bion (2), Ovid (*met.* 13.162-70, *ars.* 1.681-704), Statius (*Ach.* 1.207-885), Hyginus (*fab.* 96) and Apollodorus (3.13.8). P. J. Heslin, *The Transvestite Achilles. Gender and Genre in Statius' Achilleid*, Cambridge 2005, has just provided the first book-length study of Statius' *Achilleid*. In his work he has adopted an interdisciplinary approach, constructing a broad interpretative framework for this myth. The exploration ranges from the reception of the *Achilleid* in Baroque opera to the anthropological parallels that have been adduced to explain Achilles' transvestism. The whole of Achilles' legendary life is analyzed by M. Roussel, *Biographie légendaire d'Achille*, Amsterdam 1991, who pays attention to the Scyros episode in pages 123-41. For a comparison of his heroic life and that of Paris, cf. J. M. Blázquez, "Aquiles y Paris: dos héroes griegos antagónicos" in J. Alvar y J. M. Blázquez (eds.), *Héroes y antihéroes en la Antigüedad clásica*, Madrid 1997, 15-53.

¹⁷ In some of the oldest versions, particularly in that of *The Cypria* –summarized, according to many scholars, in the *scholia* B,D. and Gen. to line 326 of book 19 of Homer's *Iliad*– it is Peleus, Achilles' father, who sends him to Lycomedes: Πηλεὺς δὲ προγινώσκων ὅτι μοιρίδιον ἦν ἐν Τροίᾳ θανεῖν Ἀχιλλεῖα, παραγενόμενος εἰς Σκύρον πρὸς Λυκομήδην τὸν βασιλέα παρέθετο τὸν Ἀχιλλεῖα. Later, Lycophoron (Eust. *ad Hom. Il.* 19.327), Ovid (*ars* 1.687; *met.* 13.162-4), Statius (*Ach.* 1.228 ff. and 349-66), Hyginus (*fab.* 96), Apollodorus (3.13.8) and Servius (*Aen.* 2.477) have assigned this role to Thetis, maybe because οὐτε γὰρ τὸν Πηλέα εἰκὸς ἄριστον τῶν ἡρώων γενόμενον ὑπεκπέμψαι ποι τὸν υἱὸν πολέμους τε καὶ κινδύνους ἀποδράντα (Philostr. *Her.* 19.3).

2.1. THE ALTERNATIVE BETWEEN AN “INFAMOUS LIFE” AND AN “HONOURABLE DEATH”

When, in the start of the play, Tityrus explains to her daughter why he has disguised her as a boy, Gallathea makes a vigorous protest against her father’s plans on the ground that disguise is a dishonorable attempt to avert destiny (I.i.76-91):

GALLATHEA. Father, I have been attentive to hear, and by your patience am ready to answer. Destiny may be deferred, not prevented, and therefore it were better to offer myself in triumph than to be drawn to it with dishonor. Hath Nature, as you say, made me so fair above all, and shall not virtue make me as famous as others? Do you not know, or doth overcarefulness make you forget, that an honorable death is to be preferred before an infamous life? I am but a child, and have not lived long, and yet not so childish as I desire to live ever. Virtues I mean to carry to my grave, not gray hairs. I would I were as sure that destiny would light on me as I am resolved it could not fear me. Nature hath given me beauty; virtue, courage; Nature must yield me death; virtue, honor. Suffer me therefore to die, for which I was born, or let me curse that I was born, sith I may not die for it.

The alternative between an infamous life and an honourable death may, of course, be considered commonplace. In fact, Hunter (*Lyly*, 97), arguing that the same idea appears in *Euphues* (2.184.7) - “better it were to die with grief than live with shame”-, maintains that Lyly drew his inspiration from popular ancient proverbs like *Melius est bene vinci, quam male vincere* or *Melius est mori quam vivere moleste*. More recently, Wixson¹⁸ has emphasized that Gallathea’s rhetoric is charged with Calvinistic doctrine as well as notions of the divine right of kings, naturalizing the social order and preaching honorable submission to “destiny”, which, in the play, is associated with the will of the ruling figure, Neptune. Although, to be honest, this alternative is

¹⁸ Wixson, “*Cross-dressing*”, 241-56.

not clearly stated in Statius – the closest statement to this is that of Thetis in *Ach.* 1.256-8¹⁹-, it must be remembered that when Gallathea stresses that her disguise leads to dishonour rather than to the triumphant reputation for virtue that sacrifice would bring, her attitude recalls that of Achilles, who is reluctant to be dressed as a girl. As a matter of fact, when Thetis attempts to disguise him in women's clothes, memories of his father and fosterer as well as his nature (*indoles*) prompt him to resist initially (*Ach.* 1.274-6)²⁰; and he eventually repudiates his female disguise as a *maternum nefas* (*Ach.* 2.44).

2.2. OVERPROTECTIVE PARENTS

An overprotective parent is precisely the second ingredient that leads me to think that the similarities between the situation of Achilles and that of Gallathea and Phillida are not the product of chance. Both Thetis and Tityrus (and his double Melebeus), in removing all choices from their children, in curtailing activities that involve risk, in fighting their battles and in weakening their children's belief in their ability to solve their own problems, fit the description of an overprotective parent²¹. While Thetis' grief and anxiety over the inevitable death of her son – *materno in corde timores* (*Ach.* 1.42) – signal the beginning of the *Achilleid's* action, Tityrus' overriding preoccupation with the life of his daughter is betrayed from the beginning of *Gallathea*.

¹⁹ *nunc inpar tibi, nate, genus, praeclusaque leti / tantum a matre via est; quin et metuenda propinquant / tempora et extremis admota pericula metis.* The alternative between an "infamous life" and an "honourable death" can be found instead in *Il.* 9.410-6, where Achilles explains that, according to her mother, he must choose between a short life filled with everlasting glory and a long, anonymous life. For Achilles' double destiny, cf. Ruiz de Elvira, *Mitología clásica*, Madrid 1982², 345-8. Lyly may have known this excerpt through Latin or English versions like, for example, the literal translation into Latin prose by Andreas Divus, which appeared at Venice in 1537.

²⁰ Only his violent lust for Deidamia convinces him to stay on Scyros dressed as a girl.

²¹ On maternal anxiety in Statius' *Achilleid*, cf. D. Mendelsohn, "Empty Nest, Abandoned Cave: Maternal Anxiety in *Achilleid* I", *Classical Antiquity* 9.2, 1990, 295-308.

Explaining to his daughter why he has dressed her as a boy, he states (I.i.65-72):

TITYRUS. I would thou hadst been less fair or more fortunate, then shouldst thou not repine that I have disguised thee in this attire; for thy beauty will make thee to be thought worthy of this god. To avoid, therefore, destiny, for wisdom ruleth the stars, I think it better to use an unlawful means, your honor preserved, than intolerable grief, both life and honor hazarded, and to prevent, if it be possible, thy constellation by my craft.

And when she claims that dying with honour is preferable to living infamously, he answers (I.i.92-4):

TITYRUS. Alas, Gallathea, to consider the causes of change thou art too young, and that I should find them out for thee, too, too fortunate.

2.3. CROSSDRESSING AS A DEVICE TO OVERCOME FATE

But just in case this was not enough evidence of the dependence of Lyly's work on the Achilles pattern, there is a third element which makes the similarities more striking: the device of crossdressing as a means to avoid Fate, as we can appreciate in *Ach.* 1.252-60 –

'Si mihi, care puer, thalamos sors aequa tulisset,
quos dabat, aetheriis ego te complexa tenerem
sidus grande plagis, magnique puerpera caeli
nil humiles Parcas terrenaque fata vererer.
nunc inpar tibi, nate, genus, praeclusaque leti
tantum a matre via est; quin et metuenda propinquant
tempora et extremis admota pericula metis.
cedamus, paulumque animos submitte viriles
atque habitus dignare meos.'

– and twice in *Gallathea*, once for Gallathea (I.i.65-72) – an excerpt which has been previously quoted and commented –, and once for her double, Phillida, who is also reluctant to be

dressed as a boy, but appears to be more docile and obedient than Gallathea (I.iii.1-26):

MELEBEUS. Come, Phillida, fair Phillida, and I fear me too fair, being my Phillida. Thou knowest the custom of this country, and I, the greatness of thy beauty; we both, the fierceness of the monster Agar. Everyone thinketh his own child fair, but I know that which I most desire and would least have, that thou art fairest. Thou shalt therefore disguise thyself in attire, lest I should disguise myself in affection in suffering thee to perish by a fond desire whom I may preserve by a sure deceit.

PHILLIDA. Dear father, Nature could not make me so fair as she hath made you kind, nor you more kind than me dutiful. Whatsoever you command I will not refuse, because you command nothing but my safety and your happiness. But how shall I be disguised?

MELEBEUS. In man's apparel.

PHILLIDA. It will neither become my body nor my mind.

MELEBEUS. Why, Phillida?

PHILLIDA. For then I must keep company with boys, and commit follies unseemly for my sex, or keep company with girls and be thought more wanton than becometh me. Besides, I shall be ashamed of my long hose and short coat, and so unwarily blab out something by blushing at everything.

MELEBEUS. Fear not, Phillida. Use will make it easy, fear must make it necessary.

PHILLIDA. I agree, since my father will have it so, and fortune must.

One may argue that the transvestism of the heroine was a common trope in early modern literature, but, as Shapiro notes, Lyly's use of the "cross-gender disguise is rare for the mid-1580s and does not recur in his later works"²². As only five plays between

²² M. Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy*

1570 and 1590 contain heroines in a male disguise, *Gallathea* can be identified as an early appearance of this trope in English drama. Yet more, while the heroines of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, *As you like it* and *Twelfth Night* or Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* decide to disguise themselves as boys in the pursuit of love and/or marriage, in Lyly's *Gallathea*, as in the *Achilleid*, the teenagers are obliged by their parents to crossdress simply in order to avoid Fate.

3. LYLÝ'S *GALLATHEA*: ENGLISH OR LATIN SOURCES?

Once these striking similarities are observed, the last step is to track down the sources. Did John Lyly know Statius' *Achilleid*? Given the fact that this Latin author was, as it has already been explained, widely known in England even in the Middle Ages, it is likely that Lyly modelled his idea of Achilles' childhood and adolescence on the pattern provided by Statius. Indeed, *The Libri Catoniani* included this minor work of the Latin poet, which exerted a great influence upon earlier English authors, like Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower. The *Confessio amantis*, the most acclaimed work of the latter, is particularly interesting

Heroines and Female Pages, Ann Arbor 1994, 221. Recent criticism on Shakespearean comedies has significantly focused on topics such as cross-dressing and the boy actor. Feminist scholars have undertaken specially the study of comedies like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590-1594), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-98), *As You Like It* (1599) and *Twelfth Night* (1601), in which the female protagonist disguises herself as a man. In addition, there has been extensive comment on the theatrical fact of an all-male acting company on the Renaissance stage in England. In this respect, cf. C. Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies", in J. Drakakis (ed.), *Alternative Shakespeares*. London and New York 1985, 166-90; Ph. Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage", *PMLA* 102, 1987, 29-41; or S. Orgel, "Nobody's perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, 1989, 7-29. The evident similarities between Lyly and Shakespeare in the treatment of this trope had already been analyzed by H. Davis, "Shakespeare and Lyly", *Poet Lore* 5, 1893, 179-80, at the end of the XIXth century.

because it includes the story of the education of Achilles in the care of Chiron (4.1963-2013) and his stay as a cross-dresser at Lycomedes' court, including his love for Deidamia (5.2961-3216)²³. Zambreno has remarked that the excerpt about Achilles' education in the care of the Centaur is preceded by several similar stories of the rite of passage into adulthood - Pygmalion (371-436), "which is a maturation story at least insofar as it is about the creation of an adult human being"; Iphis and Ianthe (451-505); Phaethon (979-1034); Icarus (1035-71); Rosiphelee (1245-446) and Jephthah's daughter (1505-595)²⁴ -, and, what is more, these stories about the transition to adulthood are followed by additional fables about death or danger to young men or children and their subsequent education²⁵. From my point of view, taking into account the almost correlative presence of the myths of Jephthah²⁶, Iphis and Achilles in this book, it would not be strange if Gower's masterwork had been the source of inspiration for John Lyly's *Gallathea*²⁷, but that must be discussed elsewhere. Whether the

²³ According to M. F. Zambreno, "Gower's *Confessio Amantis* IV, 1963-2013: The Education of Achilles" *Essays in Medieval Studies* 3, 1986, 141, both may be considered equally important parts of Achilles' maturation: "war is only half the sphere of adulthood. Achilles' initiation as lover is contained in the Deidamia episode".

²⁴ The only story which interrupts the sequence is that of Demophon and Phillis (631-878), but Phillis is specifically described as "of yong age" (743). Of these stories, all but Rosiphelee and Jephthah's daughter are at least partially from Ovid. Rosiphelee is similar to a story in Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore*, though Gower has altered it considerably, and Jephthah's Daughter is from *Judges* 11. All are also stories of love, war, and/or growth.

²⁵ Zambreno, "Gower's *Confesio Amantis*", 132.

²⁶ Jephthah's daughter is the Biblical story of the general who swears to sacrifice the first person he sees on coming home; that person is his young, virginal daughter. Although there are many differences in its treatment, this plot, as that of Lyly's *Gallathea*, is mainly characterised by the motif of the father who must sacrifice his daughter.

²⁷ After all, Lyly's play could also be considered a "maturation story". It must be remembered that transvestism is a characteristic feature of initiation rites and it is therefore found in myths about young heroes on the verge of adulthood. Cf. M. Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite. Mythes et rites de la bisexualité dans l'Antiquité classique*, Paris 1992², 5-27; K. Dowden,

dramatist drew his inspiration from English or Latin sources, or from both, is something that cannot be clearly settled in this brief article. In conformity with the notion that many Elizabethan plays must be explained not so much in terms of sources, but rather in terms of patterns, my principal aim in this paper has been to demonstrate that Lyly used the Achilles pattern of classical mythology.

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Death and the Maiden: Girl's initiation Rites in Greek Mythology, London 1989, 69-79; and J. N. Bremmer, "Transvestite Dionysos", in M. W. Padilla (ed.), *Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece. Literature, Religion, Society*, London-Toronto 1999, 183-200, who offers an illuminating review of evidence linking adolescence and cross-dressing in ancient Greek myth and rituals.