Miszelle

Julene Abad Del Vecchio*

On the Use of *carcer* at Stat. *Achil.* 1.625

https://doi.org/10.1515/phil-2021-0100

**Keywords:** *carcer*, Achilles, horse-racing metaphor, Statius’ *Achilleid*, metapoe-tics

Halfway through the *Achilleid*, Achilles bemoans his apparent loss of masculinity whilst cross-dressed. During the Bacchic rituals on Scyros, and just prior to the reaffirmation of his maleness via Deidamia’s rape, he asks himself how long he will be able to endure the tricks of his “timid mother” (Stat. *Achil.* 1.624: *timidae ... parentis*), and “dissipate the first flower of virtue caged in an unwarlike prison” (1.625–626):

\[
\text{primumque imbelli carcere perdes} \\
\text{florem animi?}
\]

That Scyros is an emasculating and stifling *carcer* there is little doubt: the island is envisioned as an oppressive cosmos, which stands for the all-embracing, maternal urge that keeps him from war.\(^1\) I suggest, however, that Statius is here playing on a double sense of the word *carcer*. The poet is not only relying on the prison metaphor: he is also evoking the word’s meaning that specifically designates the starting place of the racecourse, referring to the enclosed stalls where horses would be kept before running.\(^2\)


\(^2\) ThL III 434.29–63. In the ThL, the *Achilleid*’s passage is instead given as an example of *carcer* standing metonymically for the captivity of a *vita otiosa*, cf. III 438.40. Commentators do not consider this image as a possibility, cf. P. Papinio Stazio, *L’Achilleide*, testo critico e commento a cura di S. Jannaccone, Firenze 1950; Dilke (n. 1); Stace, *Achilléide*, F. Ripoll et J. Soubiran, Louvain/Paris/

*Corresponding author: Julene Abad Del Vecchio*, University of Manchester, Department of Classics, Ancient History, Archaeology and Egyptology, Samuel Alexander Building, The School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, Oxford Rd, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK,
E-Mail: julene.abaddelvecchio@manchester.ac.uk

© Open Access. © 2021 Julene Abad Del Vecchio, published by De Gruyter. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
The interpretation which I proffer is in harmony with the passage’s context, with its immediate subject matter, and with the poet’s own previous descriptions of Achilles/the Achilleid. In Silva 4.7, Statius complains of the lack of inspiration for “[his] Achilles” (Stat. Silv. 4.7.22–24: tardius sueto venit ipse Thymbrae / rector et primis meus ecce metis / haeret Achilles, “the lord of Thymbra himself arrives slower than usual, and look! my Achilles is stuck at the first turning post”). The description of the Achilleid as making the first turn on the racecourse is, as Henderson noticed, strikingly appropriate to describe a poem that has stopped after its first book, and most importantly, it illustrates well Statius’ usage of chariot imagery to reflect on poetic endeavours, as well as the designation of Achilles himself as a steed. In the Achilleid, the hero donning feminine clothes for the first time is likewise compared by the narrator to an unruly horse – once free to roam the fields – being tamed (Stat. Achil. 1.277–282). Considering this equine parallel, the iunctura imbellis carcer, unique to Statius, could be interpreted as a sort of poetic enallage, since it is the fortis equus that gets to race (cf. the well-known Ennian horse reprised at Ov. Ars am. 3.595–596). The use of the metapoetic adjec-
tive imbellis (cf. Achil. 1.207) adds a layer of irony. Achilles, in denoting the starting gate as “unwarlike”, draws our attention to the fact that the adjective may be better suited to define him instead, cross-dressed and shying away from war. The irony underscores even more profoundly the chasm between his current situation and his epic aspirations, the monologue’s overall crux (Achil. 1.624–639).

In the light of the poet’s recurrent use of horse-racing symbolism to describe his poetic undertakings and the Achilleid’s protagonist, Achilles’ pensive words can be seen to assume a metapoetic tone. Scyros represents the beginning of Achilles’ life, here envisaged as the gate from which he will begin the race, “a time of eager expectation both from spectators and from the horses”. Achilles’ words in his soliloquy, a crucial turning point in the narrative, conjure up the fitting image of a horse raring to go, a bellator equus (Verg. G. 2.145) which has been confined, unwillingly and for too long, to an unwarlike carcer, antithetical to the vast, bellicose spaces longed for by the hero (Achil. 1.627–629). Aptly, the signal of the start of a race was sometimes given by the blast of a trumpet (Ov. Met. 10.652–653: signa tubae dederant, cum carcere pronus uterque / emicat, “the trumpets had given the race’s signal, when each, leaning forward, flashed forth from the stall...”), the same military instrument Ulysses needs to use to lure Achilles out of his disguise (Achil. 1.725), which is then played by Agyrtes during the hero’s decisive transformation into his epic self, the once more unbridled horse (Achil. 1.875–876: ... cum grande tuba sic iussus Agyrtes / insonuit, “when Agyrtes, as instructed, gave forth a loud sound from his trumpet”).

Although the two meanings of carcer may elicit a temporal mismatch, as “prison” indicates a forced and lasting stay, whereas “starting gate” a momentary, fervent state, the double meaning may be actualized by different focalizations. Whilst Achilles the first-person narrator views himself as a prisoner, via the ‘starting gate’ metaphor the poet ironically draws our attention to Achilles’ imminent (sexual) release, setting the scene for the Ovidian scenario that ensues, as we

---

6 The adjective traditionally describes poetry in polar opposition to the epic genre (e.g., Hor. Carm. 1.6.10; Ov. Am. 3.15.19). In the Achilleid, it suitably represents Lycomedes’ palace, detached from all things epic (Achil. 1.207).

7 In the words of B. J. Gibson (ed.), Statius Silvae 5, Oxford 2005, 192 on the horse-racing imagery in Stat. Silv. 5.2 and its appropriateness for Crispinus, who is beginning his political career.


are about to witness Deidamia’s rape (compare the elegiac charioteer of Ov. Am. 3.2). The end of the soliloquy shows his resolve to prove his manliness through sexual violence (Achil. 1.639), confirmation of which follows at once (Achil. 1.640–642). The metaphor flags to the audience the prompt outcome of his monologue, and suitably conveys the urgency of Achilles’ impulse.

It is, however, worth bearing in mind the following reflection of Rimell’s here, since an elegiac scenario may not be so readily disconnected from the world of war: “we are to learn from this poem that rape is not just a crime that happens in war or on the edge of war, but what war does and is; that, in other words, those realms we are taught to view as separate, or to be separated (domestic and military violence, closed-in elegy and roaming epic, the mother and the man) are undividable and indeed symbiotic”. Deidamia’s rape is Achilles’ first act as warrior, and the first act of war. The metaphor can in fact disclose more worrying expectations when read against the end of Georgics 1, where an inexperienced auriga (Octavian?) cannot keep hold of the chariot which has burst through the carceres (Verg. G. 1.511–512: saevit toto Mars impius orbe, / ut cum carceribus sese effudere quadrigae, “and wicked Mars rages throughout the world, as when from the starting gates the chariots issue forth...”). The moments that signal war are portrayed by Lucan (1.293–295) and Silius Italicus (8.278–283) in similar terms that convey impending conflict, as they equate, respectively, Caesar and the Roman mob to horses out of the gates. The parallels suggest that Achilles’ keenness may foretell a likewise uncontrollable scenario, and that his pent-up potential, first released through the rape, will eventually be irrepressible.

Be that as it may, interpreting carcer as a “starting gate” here, in addition to “prison”, helps the reader visualize the hero’s restlessness, encapsulating his all-consuming amor belli that urges him – the wild horse domesticated – finally to

---

10 The poet’s use of double meanings can be seen once more in the monologue, where perdes / florem animi may be ambiguously referring to the loss of virginity.
13 On the Achilleid’s “about-to-erupt potential”, see Rimell (n. 1) 255; 258–259.
burst out of his carcer’s confines, ready to start in earnest the epic race around the corner.

**Acknowledgements:** I am very grateful to Bruce Gibson, Adalberto Magnavacca and Alison Sharrock for their valuable comments, and to the journal’s anonymous referees for their advice.