

The Epic Midwifery of Thetis: Birth and Female Planning in Statius' *Achilleid*

In the two extant books of Statius' *Achilleid*, Thetis plays a much larger role in the life of Achilles than she is given in Homer's *Iliad*. The epic opens on her attempt to prevent the Trojan war before it begins by stopping Paris' ship from reaching Troy with Helen onboard.

Unsuccessful, she disguises her son as a daughter of Lycomedes on the island of Scyros, after which the epic's emphasis shifts to other subjects. P.J. Heslin posits that what we have of the *Achilleid* is defined by failure, and that Thetis becomes Statius' representative of that failure, and a foil to Juno's effective wrath in Vergil's *Aeneid*. In his argument, Thetis fails in her two goals of stopping Paris' ship from reaching Troy and preventing Achilles from joining the Trojan war where he will die.

While I agree that Thetis clearly is unsuccessful in her first goal, in this paper I will address Heslin's second assumed goal and whether it is in fact Thetis' primary motivation in this epic. Instead, I argue that Thetis is well aware she will not be able to save Achilles' life nor prevent him from participating in the Trojan war. Instead, she turns her attention to more far reaching goals, namely prolonging Achilles' life long enough for him to father a grandchild for her and prolong her family line. Thetis shows herself to be very concerned with childbirth, as seen in the three scenes of Achilles' birth presented to readers in the *Achilleid*. The first is his initial and literal birth. The second is his reformation as a maiden, complete with language describing his swaddling reminiscent of midwives' techniques with newborns depicted in Soranus' *Gynecology*. The third is Achilles' emergence as a man before the court of Lycomedes, revealing his identity to Ulysses and Diomedes. I hope to show that Thetis' care for progeny and family lines seems to be modeled on Venus'/Aphrodite's behavior in the *Aeneid/Iliad*. In this

reading, Thetis follows in her footsteps successfully, rather than failing to live up to Hera's model of a Homeric goddess.

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