

OVID *MET.* 9.1–97: THROUGH THE EYES OF ACHELOUS*

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Book nine of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* begins with Achelous telling Theseus and his companions the reason behind the lack of one of his horns. It turns out that the river god has lost it during a fight against Hercules, while they were both wooing Oeneus' daughter, Deianira. The other suitors, realizing that they would not stand a chance against such rivals as Hercules and Achelous, left the contest. While the whole competition seems initially to have depended on the ability to convince Oeneus through self-praise, Hercules' intolerance of the river god's sophisms causes the verbal duel to become a hand-to-hand fight. This fight results in Achelous' defeat and loss of both Deianira and his horn.

The whole episode is told by Achelous, and describes the same happenings as those narrated in Soph. *Tr.* 6–19.¹ A fundamental difference from *Trachiniai* consists in the way that Ovid characterizes his Achelous, as opposed to the terrible, beastly monster described in *Tr.* 10–21 by Deianeira. The river god had already proved to be a flawless host and a pious figure at the end of *Met.* 8. His approach to the contest underlines even further his reliance on rhetorical skills, sophistic-style reasoning and well-shaped witticism.

Achelous' narration of the first part of the fight is framed by two similes:

*et modo ceruicem, modo crura micantia captat,
aut captare putes, omnique a parte lacessit.
me mea defendit grauitas frustraque petebar,*

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¹ Apart from *Met.* 9.32–81, Soph. *Tr.* 9–19 is the only account we have that explicitly presents Achelous in three different shapes, although in the Sophoclean passage he does not seem to have a fully human form: on this matter, see M. Clarke, 'An Ox-fronted River-god: Sophocles, *Trachiniai* 12–13', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 102 (2004), 97–112. For other extant narrations of the struggle, see Diod. Sic. 4.35.3 f.; *schol. in Il.* 21.194; Apollod. 2.7.5; Hyg. *Fab.* 31. All accounts, apart from Sophocles' and Ovid's, say that Achelous fought Hercules in a bull's shape; in particular, Hyginus mentions Achelous' ability to shape-shift into anything he chose, but also that he fought Hercules as a bull.

*haud secus ac moles, quam magno murmure fluctus
 oppugnant; manet illa suoque est pondere tuta.
 digredimur paulum, rursusque ad bella coimus,
 inque gradu stetimus certi non cedere; eratque
 cum pede pes iunctus, totoque ego pectore pronus
 et digitos digitis et frontem fronte premebam.
 non aliter uidi fortes concurrere tauros,
 cum pretium pugnae toto nitidissima saltu
 expetitur coniunx; spectant armenta pauentque
 nescia, quem maneat tanti uictoria regni.*

(Met. 9.37–49)

And now he grasps at my nape, now at my flashing legs, or you would think he does, and attacks me from every side. My heaviness protects me and I am reached for in vain, not unlike a boulder, against which the waves dash with great roar: it does not shift, safe in its own weight. We draw apart a little, then rush together again to the fray and stand firm in our tracks, each determined not to yield. Foot locked with foot, I was exerting pressure by leaning forward with all my frame, with fingers against fingers, and brow against brow. Not unlike that, I saw two strong bulls rush together when they strive for the sleekest heifer in the whole pasture as the prize of conflict. The herd looks on in fear, not knowing to which one victory will grant so great a domination.

The first simile (40 f.) is a reference to *Aen.* 7.586–90, when Latinus is being pressured to start the hostilities against the Trojans; the second one closely follows the bull simile that introduces Aeneas' and Turnus' final clash (*Aen.* 12.715–19).²

The likening of Latinus to an unmovable rock at *Aen.* 7.586–90 is paradoxical since, only a few lines after, the king will give in to the pressure and accept the need to declare war against the Trojans.³ We would expect Achelous to be similarly close to defeat, especially since, up to this point, the initiative has been exclusively in Hercules' hands: as Achelous himself admits (39), only his supernatural weight is saving him. But, all of a sudden, he presents himself as fighting on even terms against Hercules (42–5). The concept is reinforced by the reference to *Aen.* 12.715–19, which suggests, through the bull simile, an uncertain clash between Turnus and Aeneas.⁴ Once again, however, the course of the fight is steered back onto its proper track:

² See F. Bömer, *Metamorphosen. Buch VIII–IX* (Heidelberg, 1977), 286–8.

³ See S. J. Harrison, 'Vergilian Similes: Some Connections', in F. Cairns (ed.), *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar*, vol. 5 (F. Cairns Editions, 1986), 101 f.; also N. Horsfall, *Virgil, Aeneid 7. A Commentary* (Leiden, 2000), 381 f., on Latinus' ephemeral resistance and on rock as a conventional symbol of inflexibility.

⁴ P. R. Hardie, 'Tales of Unity and Division in Imperial Latin Epic', in J. H. Molyneux (ed.), *Literary Responses to Civil Discord* (Nottingham, 1993), 69, sees a contrast between *Aen.* 12.684 ff. and 12.715 ff., since the first passage highlights the differences between Aeneas and Turnus, while the second eliminates them.

after only a few lines, Hercules has already regained the upper hand (51 ff.), and dominates his opponent until the end of the fight.

Lines 42–9 therefore constitute an ill-fitting exception within a fight that constantly sees Achelous in a position of clear inferiority. The river god's sudden capability to rival Hercules in wrestling is both unexpected (considering the implications of the reference to *Aen.* 7.586–90), and inconsequential because, until line 41, Achelous was completely unable to keep up with Hercules' prowess.⁵ It is not surprising to notice that Achelous follows lines 42–9 with two suspiciously unnecessary statements of the veracity of this part of his tale (*certum est mihi uera fateri* ['I am determined to tell the truth'] at 53 and *neque enim ficta mihi gloria uoce quaeritur* ['nor am I trying to gain glory by means of false words'] at 55 f.).⁶ The epic references implied by Achelous' words therefore hint at a fight less glorious than the river god likes to believe: as we will see, these are not the only elements that jar with the interpretation of the fight between Hercules and Achelous as a heroic tale.

An unconventional wrestling match

The struggle between Hercules and Achelous is a bare-handed fight and, in spite of its harshness, not a single blow is struck throughout its whole course. This might not be surprising, if we consider the traditional pattern of fights against shape-shifting deities.⁷ But, in this case, Hercules' aim is certainly not simply to hold Achelous fast until he stops struggling: Hercules savages his opponent, making liberal use of choke-holds, pinning techniques and body projections. In spite of the thematic affinity, one of the main examples of wrestling in epic sources, the contest between Aias and Odysseus in *Il.* 23.700–37, does not seem to offer substantial correspondences. Likewise, the epic boxing matches between Epeios and Eurialos (*Il.* 23.664–99), Odysseus and Iros (*Od.* 18.36–99), Polydeukes and Amykos (*Apoll. Rh. Arg.* 2.54–97 and Theocr. *Idyll.* 22.27–132), and Entellus and

⁵ Moreover, *rursus* (42) seems to imply, misleadingly, that Achelous had previously actively fought against Hercules in the preceding lines.

⁶ Although *certum est mihi uera fateri* might also refer to Hercules' weight, which seems to be unbelievable even to Achelous. For *pondus* and *grauitas* being used within a few lines, cf. *Met.* 9.270–3 and 287–9.

⁷ For examples of fights against shape-shifting divinities, see *Od.* 4.454–61 and Apollod. 2.5.9 on Proteus; Apollod. 2.5.11 on Nereus; Pind. *N.* 4.62–5 and Apollod. 3.13.5 on Thetis.

Dares (*Aen.* 5.368–471) seem to show no more than marginal connections with *Met.* 9.1–97.⁸

Nevertheless, on a structural level, *Met.* 9.37–49 shows many similarities to Apoll. Rh. *Arg.* 2.67–89. In the latter, Apollonius draws a fundamental difference between the boxing style of Amykos and that of Polydeukes: the Bebrycian king tries to overwhelm his opponent from the very beginning, while Polydeukes takes his time, dodges the blows, and studies Amykos in order to find his weak spots, while returning blow for blow. When Amykos strikes with what seems to be a fatal chop, Polydeukes takes the blow on his shoulder, while going past the king's guard with an inside step, and defeats him with a bone-breaking counter (*Arg.* 2.90–6):

<i>Arg.</i> 2.68–89	<i>Met.</i> 9.31–49
Amykos' rush (70–5)	Hercules' rush (37–8)
Polydeukes' resistance (75–7)	Achelous resistance (39)
simile: skilled pilot avoiding the waves (70–3)	simile: cliff resisting the waves (40–1)
offensive boxing stalemate (82–5) with simile about the shipwrights (79–82)	
the fighters draw apart (86–7)	the fighters draw apart (42)
another clash (88)	another clash (42)
	offensive wrestling stalemate (43–5)
simile: two bulls fighting for a heifer (88–9)	simile: two bulls fighting for a heifer (46–8)

Ovid's passage makes a variation from the structure of that of Apollonius' by shifting the collocation of the stalemate, and by ignoring the simile describing shipwrights hammering layer upon layer. It is interesting to note that *Arg.* 2.79–85 is probably meant to recall *Il.* 23.712–13: Odysseus and Aias are competing in the wrestling match at Patroklos' funeral games, and their grip on each other is compared to a craftsman joining the rafters of a house to withstand the winds.⁹ Such a deliberate avoidance of a pertinent reference to the

⁸ See D. Nelis, *Vergil's Aeneid and the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius* (Francis Cairns Publications, 2001), 10–21 on boxing matches in Homer, Apollonius, and Virgil.

⁹ This allusion to the wrestling match in *Iliad* 23 would actually find an even more appropriate place at *Met.* 9.37–49, especially since the fight between Hercules and Achelous is much closer to a wrestling match than a boxing one.

Iliad is even more significant if we consider how Ovid reshapes the other simile found in *Arg.* 2.70–3. Polydeukes' skilful dodging of Amykos' brutal blows is likened to a crafty pilot able to avoid the worst of the waves' shock just narrowly (*τυτθόν*, *Arg.* 2.71). The impression of a skill-versus-brute-power contest is thus reinforced by the partial dodge that opens the path to Polydeukes' victory (*Arg.* 2.92–6).¹⁰

In order to understand fully how Ovid reworks such a differentiation of the two fighters, it is necessary to consider how Virgil works along the same lines. The Apollonian distinction between skill/speed and power is in fact employed by Virgil within the boxing match at *Aen.* 5.362–472. Virgil is even clearer than Apollonius in this respect at *Aen.* 5.430 f.: *ille [Dares] pedum melior motu fretusque iuuenta, hic [Entellus] membris et mole ualens* ('the one nimbler of foot and confident in his youth, the other powerful in the bulk of his limbs'). Dares is the fast and technical boxer, impressive both in his shadow-boxing before the match (*Aen.* 5.376 f.) and in his attacking and dodging skills during the fight (*Aen.* 5.439–48). Entellus is more of a power-based type, as his giant frame (*Aen.* 5.421–3) and staying power (*Aen.* 5.456–60) show: since, as he himself admits (*Aen.* 5.395 f.), he is slowed down by age, he chooses a 'turtling' approach to the fight, shielding himself with his arms instead of dodging, and observing his opponent in order to find an opening for a knockout blow (*Aen.* 5.437 f.). Virgil's main variation on the Apollonian passage occurs at the end of the fight: Entellus, the power-fighter, fails to connect with a powerful punch and slips but, instead of having his mistake punished by his more skilled opponent, he is spurred by his own shame for falling to the ground. From that moment on, he one-sidedly batters Dares to defeat (*Aen.* 5.443–60).

Ovid chooses a different path, to differentiate his passage from Apollonius': instead of reversing the outcome of the struggle, he completely reworks the fight's implications by placing speed, skill, and power all on Hercules' side. The hero is able to attack from all directions (37 f.) and to turn the tide when he is in a tight spot (50–4). On top of this, we can see how his grip is fearsome (77–9) and that he is able to whirl Achelous to the ground with a simple push (53–4). On the other hand, Achelous can only rely on his supernatural weight and his shape-shifting skills in order to last just a bit longer, since all he is

¹⁰ On this concept see especially Nelis (n. 8), 17. A possible model for Polydeukes' dodge is *Od.* 18.95–7.

able to accomplish in terms of proper hand-to-hand fighting are a stalemate (43–5) and a fruitless hold on Hercules (50–1).¹¹ Achelous himself admits, possibly without even realizing how detrimental this is to his own glory, that he was saved from Hercules' impressive rush only by his *grauitas* (39). This concept is further emphasized by the simile about the cliff and the waves (*haud secus ac moles...suoque pondere est tuta*, 39–41).¹²

What in earlier sources was a truly epic struggle will turn out in the Ovidian narration to be a power/speed/skill-versus-weight/shape-shifting contest. The two fighters are for the moment closely matched, but not in terms of real battle-prowess: a truly remarkable all-round fighter is tying with a rather incompetent one, and this only because of the latter's skills that have little to do with personal valour and strength. Achelous' un-heroic impression, already sketched by the opening words of his tale (*Met.* 9.5–8), is thus reinforced without even the need for him to be shown in a losing position.

The Hercules–Achelous fight in *Met.* 9 also addresses two especially Homeric themes: boasting and confrontation between men and gods. Even at the beginning of the confrontation (31 f.), we find the reversal of the Homeric overtones about how foolish and pointless it is for a man to challenge the gods. It is in fact the river god who is (rightly) worried about confronting the hero in terms of sheer might. Achelous' speech is full of sarcasm and confidence in his own divine status, since he takes for granted an especially Homeric concept: the unquestionable superiority of gods over men.

*contra ego 'turpe deum mortali cedere' dixi
(nondum erat ille deus) 'dominum me cernis aquarum
cursibus obliquis inter tua regna fluentum.
nec gener externis hospes tibi missus ab oris
sed popularis ero et rerum pars una tuarum.
tantum ne noceat, quod me nec regia Iuno
odit et omnis abest iussorum poena laborum.
nam, quo te iactas, Alcmena nate, creatum,
Iuppiter aut falsus pater est aut crimine uerus.
matris adulterio patrem petis. elige, fictum esse*

¹¹ Since he is *inferior uirtute*, as he says (62).

¹² Cf. especially *Arg.* 3.1293–6: here Jason is likened to a rocky reef that withstands the waves. But a subtle difference is given by the fact that Jason succeeds in resisting Aietes' bull's rush by setting his feet wide apart (εὖ διαβάς), which is a sign of competence, as underlined by the use of εὖ, and not simply thanks to his weight. Cf. also *Aen.* 5.438, where Entellus decides to stay motionless and deal with his opponent's attacks by *corpore...modo atque oculis uigilantibus*: this too is a deliberate strategy, since Entellus knows only too well the limits imposed by his ageing body.

*Iouem malis an te per dedecus ortum.
 talia dicentem iamdudum lumine toruo
 spectat et accensae non fortiter imperat irae,
 uerbaque tot reddit: 'melior mihi dextera lingua.
 dummodo pugnando superem, tu uince loquendo'* (Met. 9.16–30)

In reply I said: 'It is shameful for a god to give way to a mortal' (Hercules was not a god yet); 'you behold in me the lord of the waters that flow down their twisting course through your realm. Nor will I be an alien son-in-law sent from foreign shores; but I shall be one of your own countrymen, a part of your own kingdom. Only let it not be to my disadvantage that queenly Juno does not hate me and that I lack any imposed labours as penalty. For Jupiter, from whom you boast that you have sprung, O son of Alcmena, is either not your father or he is your real father to your disgrace. Through your mother's sin you seek your father. Choose, either that your claim to Jove is false or that you were born from shame'. While I am saying this he glares at me with grim look and does not control his burning wrath, and replies thus: 'My right hand is better than my tongue. As long as I defeat you in battle, you can win with words.'

Such a skilled display of rhetoric shifts the balance in favour of Achelous, or at least this is what the river god thinks.¹³ What happens next is totally unexpected for him, since Hercules' reply merely consists of a fair dose of scowling and a sharp '*melior mihi dextera lingua. Dummodo pugnando superem, tu uince loquendo*' (29 f.).¹⁴ From this point onwards, Achelous will have very little control over the events and, as we shall see, the impression he conveys is that of a city boy who has never had to get into a real street-fight.¹⁵

Achelous' speech also shows several allusions to Drances' venomous attack against Turnus at *Aen.* 11.336 ff. Drances is said to be eloquent but cold in battle (338 f.: *lingua melior, sed frigida bello dextera*):¹⁶ his main aim is to undermine Turnus' valour and deeds (347–51) and he sides with Aeneas, the *egregius gener* (355), purely in order to damage the Rutulian prince. While he displays the same Thersitean qualities of Drances' speech, Achelous employs the *externus gener* theme in a hostile way.¹⁷ At the same time, a

¹³ Cf. *Aen.* 5.380 ff.: here Dares thinks that his display of speed and skill in shadow-boxing has been more than enough to scare any possible opponent away, and he thinks that he will have no need to fight in order to get the bullock.

¹⁴ Cf. Achilles' scowling in *Il.* 22.260 (ὑπόδρα ἰδών): the Greek hero does not like the conditions that Hector is setting for their upcoming confrontation, and cuts the conversation short.

¹⁵ Cf. the verbal duel between Odysseus and Aias at *Met.* 13.1–381, where an actual fight would have similarly reversed the outcome of the contest.

¹⁶ Cf. also *Met.* 13.9 ff.

¹⁷ On Achelous' sophisms, see W. S. Anderson, *Metamorphoses. Books 6–10* (Norman, OK, 1972), 419: 'the god talks like a politician'; in a similar way, Odysseus reinterprets Aias' deeds at *Met.* 13.275–9. In the *Aeneid*, the qualification of *externus gener* is necessary in order to satisfy the oracle of Faunus (*Aen.* 7.96–101): at *Met.* 9.19, the same concept is exploited by Achelous in the opposite way.

characteristic of Drances – his uncertain paternal origin – is one of Achelous' main weapons to undermine Hercules' claims of superiority.¹⁸

But this is not all: if we shift back to the epic boxing examples, it is possible at this point to see a further variation on both Apollonius and Theocritus. In Theocr. *Idyll.* 22.54–84, the taunting between Polydeukes and Amykos is expanded to a twenty-two-line stichomythia, while Apollonius' Polydeukes refuses, with a slight smile, to reply to his opponent's provocations. Hercules' reaction is different from either: he gets enraged by his rival's wits, and he cuts the verbal struggle short. While his reaction is the opposite of the Apollonian Polydeukes, the outcome is identical: the boasting duel between Hercules and Achelous does not have a chance to develop at all.

After Achelous' transformation into a snake, it is now Hercules' turn to indulge in taunting (in spite of his previous behaviour at 29 f.):

*'cunarum labor est angues superare mearum,'
dixit 'et ut uincas alios, Acheloe, dracones,
pars quota Lernaee serpens eris unus echidnae?
uulneribus fecunda suis erat illa, nec ullum
de comitum numero caput est impune recisum,
quin gemino ceruix herede ualentior esset.
hanc ego ramosam natis e caede colubris
crescentemque malo domui, domitamque reclusi.
quid fore te credis, falsum qui uersus in anguem
arma aliena moues, quem forma precaria celat?'* (Met. 9.67–76)

'It was the task of my cradle to prevail over snakes; and though you should outdo all other serpents, Achelous, how small a part of the Lernaean hydra would you, a single snake, be? For it throve on its own wounds, nor was any one of its heads cut off without its neck being the stronger by two offspring. This creature, branching out with serpents born from death and augmented by its own harm, I mastered and, having mastered, slit up. And what do you think will become of you who, turned into a fake serpent, make use of arms belonging to others, who are masked in a shape that can be withdrawn?'

The transformation into a snake only results in Hercules' scorn. The hero, who at one point (50–1) seemed to be struggling in order to gain the upper hand against Achelous' human form, now explains why defeating his serpent form is a trivial matter to him: after crushing the

¹⁸ Cf. Eur. *Hel.* 151–4, Catul. 68.112, Prop. 4.9.1.

hydra, a single snake – even the mightiest of all – is no special task. This passage underlines a change in Hercules' attitude: if at lines 29 f. he refused the verbal struggle, now he seems to take pleasure in boasting and using his rhetorical skills to add scorn to Achelous' upcoming defeat.¹⁹

Hercules' reasoning starts by admitting the relative strength of his opponent's snake form: *ut uincas alios...dracones* (68). He then metaphorically presents the snake-Achelous as an offspring of the Lernaean Hydra: *pars quota Lernaeae serpens eris unus echidna?* (69). Hercules proceeds to explain how snakes posed no problems to him even when he was just a child. Moreover, the proof of the fact that this superiority has not changed is given by his victory over the Lernaean Hydra.

The final touch of this mocking speech is provided by Hercules' words about Achelous' shape-shifting skills. At *Met.* 8.728, the river god seems to imply (*ius est*) that even Proteus' powers were not his own but something that had been given to him (the whole discourse is centred on the gods' intervention in such matters, especially at *Met.* 8.728). It is not clear if the shape-shifting powers of lesser deities such as Proteus and Achelous depend on the gods, but Hercules seems to convey this interpretation with his words at lines 75 f. If this is the case, lines 75 f. find a logical explanation in this respect: Hercules is stating how Achelous' transformation did not change the substance of his inferiority in any way (*falsus qui uersus in anguem*).²⁰ Moreover, the river god's skills (which, in any case, were not enough to even things up against Hercules) are not to be considered an inherent quality of Achelous, but an external aid provided by the gods (*qui...arma aliena moues, quem forma precaria celat*). Hercules manages to pay back Achelous by undermining the god's only qualities (*falsus, aliena, precaria*), not unlike Achelous' taunts in lines 23–6 (*falsus, fictum*) at the expense of Hercules' claims of divine descent.

It is possible to see here Ovid's intentional mockery of a Homeric confrontation between a man and a god. But in this case the roles are reversed: it is Hercules, technically not yet a god, who warns Achelous of his folly for coming against him, the Hydra-slayer, in a snake form. After being indirectly denigrated through his own words and through his own fighting behaviour, it is time for Achelous to be ridiculed by

¹⁹ Which is beginning to show grotesque overtones: at line 81, it is not the man who tries to wrench his fingers from the snake's jaws but the other way around. Cf. *Aen.* 8.260 f., when Cacus is in Hercules' grip.

²⁰ A possible reply to *falsus* (24).

his opponent in a direct way, and just when the river god appeared to have drawn his trump card by switching to his shape-shifting abilities.

Great-grandfather versus great-grandfather

The parodic intention is not limited to the struggle itself: some similarities to the *Iliad* also emerge. The comparisons about the relative superiority in fighting and the whole structure of the boasting and counter-boasting in *Met.* 9.16–76 closely recall the encounter between Achilles and Asteropaios at *Il.* 21.186 ff.

Several elements of the Iliadic passage find some correspondence in *Met.* 9.1–97: the Homeric episode is the earliest example we have of a river-man fight and it contains the only reference to Acheloios in either of the Homeric poems.²¹ A full account of the Herakles–Acheloios story is found at *schol. in Il.* 21.194:²² Herakles encounters Meleagros' shade, who tells him to marry his sister Deianeira. At Oineus' house, Herakles encounters Acheloios as rival suitor and defeats him in his bull shape, wrenching off one of his horns.²³

Iliad 21 begins with Achilles' massacre of the routed Trojans, and with Asteropaios being the only Trojan able to put up a fight. When Achilles is about to confront him, he quite arrogantly asks Asteropaios to reveal his identity, as if to prove that he might have any chance against him. Asteropaios' response to Achilles' request (*Il.* 21.153–9) is fairly short by Homeric standards.²⁴ He briefly lists his ancestry (he is the grandchild of the river Axios), and concludes his speech with a sharp *νῦν αὖτε μαχώμεθα φαίδιμ' Ἀχιλλεῦ* ('but now let's fight, Achilles'), similar in tone, if not in actual words, to Hercules' retort to Achelous (29 f.).²⁵ Achilles makes no reply, but the fight occurs, and then the Greek hero proceeds to vaunt over his opponent's dead body:

²¹ Another river of this name in Lydia occurs at *Il.* 24.614–17. On the transmission of line 195, see G. B. D'Alessio, 'Textual Fluctuation and Cosmic Streams: Ocean and Acheloios', *JHS* 124 (2004), 16–20.

²² See H. Erbse, *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem (Scholia Vetera)*, vol. 5 (Berlin, 1977), 165.

²³ The *scholium* also reports how some say that Acheloios exchanged Amaltheia's horn for his own. Acheloios is referred to as the greatest of all rivers in Greece, which matches *κρείων* 'Aχελώϊος' at *Il.* 21.194; cf. also *dominum...aquarum* (17 f.) and *ut uincas alios...dracones* (68).

²⁴ Cf. *Il.* 20.199–258. For other extensively described lineages, see *Il.* 6.119 ff. and 14.110 ff. On the disdain for lengthy verbal exchanges in Homeric duels, see P. Kyriakou, 'Warrior Vaunts in the *Iliad*', *Rheinisches Museum* 14 (2001), 252 and especially 271–2 about Achilles' vaunting, which precipitates Skamandros' attack.

²⁵ Asteropaios seems to be quite confident of his own strength. Thanks to the *μένος*, which was granted to him by Skamandros (*Il.* 21.145 f.), his self-confidence does not appear to be unjustified: he even manages to lightly wound Achilles before being defeated.

κείσ' οὕτως· χαλεπὸν τοι ἐπισθενέος Κρονίωνος
 παισὶν ἐπιζέμεναι ποταμοῖό περ ἐκγεγαῶτι.
 φῆσθα σὺ μὲν ποταμοῦ γένος ἔμμεναι εὐρὺν ῥέοντος,
 αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γενεὴν μεγάλου Διὸς εὖχομαι εἶναι.
 τίκτέ μ' ἀνὴρ πολλοῖσιν ἀνάσσω· Μυρμιδόνεσσι
 Πηλεὺς Αἰακίδης· ὁ δ' ἄρ' Αἰακὸς ἐκ Διὸς ἦεν.
 τὼ κρείσσω μὲν Ζεὺς ποταμῶν ἀλιμυρήντων,
 κρείσσω αὖτε Διὸς γενεῇ ποταμοῖο τέτυκται.
 καὶ γὰρ σοὶ ποταμός γε πάρα μέγας, εἰ δύναταί τι
 χραισμεῖν· ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔστι Διὶ Κρονίῳ μάχεσθαι,
 τῷ οὐδὲ κρείων' Ἀχελώϊος ἰσοφαρίζει,
 οὐδὲ βαθυρρεῖταιο μέγα σθένος Ὠκεανοῖο,
 ἐξ οὗ περ πάντες ποταμοὶ καὶ πᾶσα θάλασσα
 καὶ πᾶσαι κρήναι καὶ φρεῖατα μακρὰ νάουσιν·
 ἀλλὰ καὶ ὃς δεῖδοικε Διὸς μέγαλοιο κεραυνὸν
 δεινὴν τε βροντὴν, ὅτ' ἀπ' οὐρανόθεν σμαραγγίῃ. (Il. 21.184–99)

'Lie as you are! Hard it is to contend with the children of the mighty son of Kronos, even for one begotten of a river. You say that your birth is from the wide-flowing river, but I claim to be of the lineage of great Zeus. The man who begot me is lord among the many Myrmidons, Peleus, son of Aiakos; and Aiakos was begotten of Zeus. Therefore as Zeus is mightier than seawater-reaching rivers, so mightier too is the offspring of Zeus than the offspring of a river. And beside you is a great river, if he is strong enough to be of any help to you; but it is not possible to fight with Zeus, the son of Kronos. With him does not even lord Acheloios vie, nor the great might of deep-flowing Ocean, though from him all rivers flow and the entire sea, and all the springs and deep wells; but even he fears the lightning of great Zeus, and his dread thunder, when it crashes from the sky.'²⁶

The choice made by Achilles is peculiar since, instead of stressing his direct divine ancestry through his mother, he prefers to trace back his descent to Zeus.²⁷ He thus describes a perfect counterpart to Asteropaios' genealogy:

Zeus → Aiakos → Peleus → Achilles

Okeanos → Axios → Pelegon → Asteropaios

This allows him to further press his superiority over Asteropaios, backing it up with the superiority of his ancestor compared to that of Asteropaios. The idea that an offspring of Zeus must be superior to a descendant of Okeanos is reiterated at Il. 21.184–5, 192–3, and 198–9, while Acheloios, here presented as the mightiest of all rivers, is

²⁶ Translation adapted from A.T. Murray's edition of Homer's *Iliad* in the Loeb Classical Library (vol. 2, 1925; revised by W.F. Wyatt, 1999)

²⁷ Cf. Aineias' reply to Achilles' mocking words at Il. 20.206–9.

included in the speech as a hypothetical reinforcement of the comparison (194).

Achilles' choice not to mention his mother's divine status is not, therefore, surprising: the indirect comparison of a minor sea goddess to Okeanos himself would leave some doubts over Achilles' claims of superiority. Linking his ancestry to Zeus is a safer option, if more indirect than mentioning his mother, Thetis. But Achilles' proud words should also be considered functional in what is going to happen next: he is about to confront Skamandros, an actual river god, and it has yet to be seen if Zeus's great-grandchild is strong enough to defeat an offspring of Okeanos, even though Zeus himself is clearly superior to Okeanos.²⁸ The outcome of the confrontation with Skamandros suggests that Achilles' divine blood from Zeus may be too watered down for him to contend with a river god (a child of Okeanos and Tethys). In fact, he will actually need the help of four main divinities in order to survive (*Il.* 21.284–382). First Athena and Poseidon give him strength sufficient to sustain Skamandros' assault; then, when the river Simoeis is called to help, Hera's intervention and Hephaistos' fire become decisive to save the hero.

At this point, the similar structure of the two episodes becomes easy to trace. Both passages have an arrogant enquiry about the opponent's lineage (Achilles at *Il.* 21.150 f., Achelous at *Met.* 9.23–6), a short reply with an encouragement to fight (Asteropaios at *Il.* 21.160, Hercules at *Met.* 9.29 f.), the fight itself, and then some boasting over the defeated opponent, which emphasizes the reasons why the fight was bound to have such an obvious outcome (Achilles at *Il.* 21.184–199, Hercules at *Met.* 9.67–76).

In both passages, the treatment of the opponent (and, in *Iliad* 21, of his ancestry as well) follows the same principle: the river Axios is far inferior to Okeanos, since all rivers flow from the latter (*Il.* 21.195 f.). Similarly, Hercules calls Achelous in his snake-form only a part of the Hydra (*pars ... Lernaee ... echidnae*, *Met.* 9.69), from the body of which countless snakes sprout.²⁹ Hercules' reasoning therefore carries a hint of Achilles' words: since he is stronger than the Hydra itself, he

²⁸ Furthermore, the formula used to introduce Skamandros at the opening of the book (*Il.* 21.1, and also *Il.* 14.434, 24.692), in which the river is described as *Χάνθου δινῆεντος, ὃν ἄθάνατος τέκετο Ζεὺς* ('eddyng Xanthos, whom immortal Zeus begot'), reinforces the impression that Achilles' reasoning is flawed in more than one way. Not only is Skamandros a god, but his descent from Zeus is much closer than that of Achilles. For an indirect comparison between Zeus and Okeanos, see also *Il.* 14.244–6.

²⁹ *Ramosa* effectively describes the reiterated bifurcations of each of the Hydra's necks, which resulted from each severing of one of its heads.

is also superior to the mightiest snake, just as a three-generation descendant of Zeus is bound to be stronger than a three-generation descendant of Okeanos.³⁰

As has already been mentioned, *Il.* 21.184–99 sets a fundamental premise for the subsequent confrontation between Achilles and the river god Skamandros, by showing how the hero's descent from Zeus does not entail the superiority of which he seems so secure. Likewise, Hercules' boasting about his unquestionable superiority over the Lernaean Hydra (*Met.* 9.63–76) shows some flaws, since he avoids mentioning the fact that, in order to overcome the monster, he needed both Athena's counsel and the fire provided by Iolaos.³¹

On close inspection, Hercules' boasting is less substantial than he tries to make it. But any possible hint of either *hybris* or imminence of defeat for Hercules is immediately excluded. Without any external help, Hercules wins the struggle comprehensively and permanently maims his divine opponent, who is left in the very human condition of nursing his wounds and trying to see the positive side of the events. Such an ending thus gives more substance to the sad introduction at *Met.* 9.1–5 ff.: Achelous' attempt to soften the blow would fit an inferior human opponent much better than the *dominus aquarum*.

It should be clear how Ovid's parodic intent is not limited to Achelous as a character but is aimed at the epic world in general. Hercules himself shifts between contradictory roles: first he appears as a typical suitor who exalts his own merits (*Met.* 9.14–15); then as a practical, no-nonsense warrior (*Met.* 9.29–30); then again he indulges in arrogant boasting, claiming more merit than he should and ignoring that part of the Lernaean tale that might slightly spoil the dialectical foundations of his superiority over Achelous (*Met.* 9.67–76).

A misleading perspective

The whole episode is characterized by Achelous' role as epic narrator; and the main issue concerning the use of Achelous' perspective has been considered to be his possible unreliability as a witness, given his

³⁰ Ovid seems to pay attention to the same kind of issue at *Met.* 13.140 ff., where Odysseus makes it clear that his descent from Jupiter involves the same number of steps as Aias' ancestry.

³¹ Iolaos' and Athena's help is mentioned in Hes. *Th.* 313–18. See also Eur. *Ion* 192–9, where Iolaos is described with the torch in his hand; also Apollod. 2.5.2 and Diod. Sic. 4.11.

personal involvement in the facts.³² I hope to show how employing Achelous' perspective makes what he says not entirely unreliable but rather require an additional effort by the reader, in order to understand what has actually taken place. This suspicion is supported by Ovid's choice subtly to depict Achelous as an incompetent fighter: through this device, spotting the kind of technicalities present in both Apollonius' and Theocritus' accounts is made more challenging by the deforming filter of Achelous' ignorance of fighting issues.³³ The main hint of how misleading Achelous' perspective can be is found at *Met.* 37–8.³⁴

*et modo ceruicem, modo crura micantia captat,
aut captare putes, omnique a parte lacessit.*

And now he grasps at my nape, now at my flashing legs, or you would think he does, and attacks me from every side.

Line 38 seems to be modelled on Theocr. *Idyll.* 22.102–3:

*ἐτάρασσεν ἐτώσια χερσὶ προδεικνύς
πάντοθεν·*

...he attacked from every side, making feints with his hands...

While *omnique a parte lacessit* closely recalls *ἐτάρασσεν...πάντοθεν*, it is even more important to consider that *ἐτώσια χερσὶ προδεικνύς* is usually interpreted as a technical expression to indicate feints.³⁵ In this perspective, Achelous' *aut captare putes* might find a reasonable explanation: Hercules is mixing feints into his grappling attempts but

³² On this matter, see A. D. Nikolopoulos, *Ovidius Polytropos. Metanarrative in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Hildesheim, 2004), 94. See also E. Fantham, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 2004), 95: 'its appeal lies in Ovid's ability to give a professional account of a wrestling match' – Ovid genuinely does show more than competence in describing wrestling matches.

³³ Theocritus describes the same boxing fight between Polydeukes and Amykos in a much more extensive way than Apollonius does, and the boxing elements that we find within *Idyll.* 22 are more numerous and detailed. At the same time, in Theocritus' account the course of the fight is totally one-sided, and Polydeukes never leaves the reader any possible doubt about the final outcome.

³⁴ See J. B. Solodow, *The World of Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988), 68: such a distinction between what happened and what appeared to happen is said to be 'unmotivated and gratuitous...the narrator casts doubt over everything he reports'.

³⁵ See A. S. F. Gow, *Theocritus* (Cambridge, 1950), 396, and A. Sens, *Theocritus. Dioscuri (Idyll 22)* (Göttingen, 1977), 147. In any case, if we consider to what extent Polydeukes is superior to his opponent in every respect, taking *ἐτώσια* with a negative connotation ('ineffective') would spoil the whole emphasis on that superiority. For the use of *προδεικνυμι* to indicate feinting military manoeuvres, see Xen. *Eq. Mag.* 8.24, Plb. 2.66.2. Also see V.Fl. 4.289–91 for another example of Polydeukes' use of feints against Amykos.

Achelous is not able to recognize them for what they are. Therefore, what in Theocritus was a competent reference to a specific boxing technique here becomes a puzzling and apparently out-of-place remark on the narrator's perception.

Achelous' ignorance of feints is not an isolated hint since, from the very start, the river god does not seem to be fully in touch with the events. Ovid reinforces this characterization of Achelous by depicting him in a completely different way from the abusive monster that we find in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. In the Ovidian passage, the river god is well-spoken, witty, and gives his claims some reasonable support. On the other hand, he does not seem too eager to get his hands dirty, and it is Hercules who sets the course of the confrontation towards a fight, without showing the rescuer's role that he played in *Trachiniae*.³⁶ After manifestly losing the verbal struggle, the hero plunges straight into the fray, apparently without stripping off his garment and getting into a fighting stance. The urbane Achelous conveys a much more civilized impression and is dragged into the fight by an unexpected – at least to him – turn of events. Having to back up his words with facts was simply something that he could not foresee as part of a proper wooing contest.

As soon as the fight's preliminaries are described, Achelous seems more and more out of place. He actually has to rely on shame in order to rouse himself to fight (*puduit modo magna locutum cedere*, 31–2). Homeric echoes (present also at *Aen.* 5.387 ff.) can be found in the *topos* of the reluctant warrior shamed into fighting, usually with one of his comrades reminding him of the boastful words he has previously spoken.³⁷ In these circumstances, Achelous has to shame himself into battle but, given how Hercules rushes forward, it does not look like he would have had a choice in any case.³⁸

By taking Theocr. *Idyll.* 22.102 f. into account, we can safely assume that Ovid is rooting the whole fight in a well-dissimulated sporting context.³⁹ Three more elements of the Ovidian text allow for this view: the fighting stance assumed by Achelous (33 f.), the

³⁶ Soph. *Tr.* 18 ff.

³⁷ Cf. Paris at *Il.* 3.39 ff., Diomedes at *Il.* 4.399 f., Hector at *Il.* 5.472 ff. and 17.142 ff., the nine Achaean leaders at *Il.* 7.126 ff., the Achaeans at *Il.* 8.228 ff. (and 13.95), Aineias at *Il.* 20.83 ff., Iros at *Od.* 18.79–87. Cf. also *Il.* 17.91 ff. and 22.99 ff., where Menelaos and Hector shame themselves into fighting.

³⁸ Cf. *Il.* 22.105, although here Hector has good reasons for blaming himself because of a reckless decision (while Achelous' words were in no way aiming towards a violent resolution of his confrontation with Hercules).

³⁹ See M. B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* (New Haven, CT, 1987), 23–53 (on wrestling), 54–63 (on *pankration*), and 68–88 (on boxing).

sprinkling of sand before the fight (35 f.), and the three points at which Hercules scores a fall against him (53 f., 60 f., and 83 f.).

We will start from the description of the two fighters girding themselves, or being girded, as a *topos* of epic matches.⁴⁰ In the *Metamorphoses*' passage, Achelous takes his *uestis* away and assumes a peculiar fighting stance, holding his hands *uarae* away from his chest:⁴¹

*reieci uiridem de corpore uestem,
brachiaque opposui tenuique a pectore uaras
in statione manus et pugnae membra paraui.
Ille cauis hausto spargit me puluere palmis,
inque uicem fuluae tactu flauescit harenae;* (Met. 9.32–6)

I threw off my green garment, put up my arms, held my hands *uarae* from my breast in a defensive position and prepared my body for the fight. He caught up some dust on the hollow of his hands and sprinkled me with it and in turn he became yellow with the touch of the tawny sand.

The adjective *uarus* in its plural form was used before Ovid only by Lucilius (*Sat.* 22.583, *uaris cruribus*) and by Varro (*De Re Rustica*, 2.9.4.4), when he states that dogs' legs should be bent inwards, rather than outwards (*potius uaris quam uatiis*). Comparing this to the other three occurrences that we find in Ovid, which all refer to horns (*cornua uara*, at *Am.* 1.3.24, *Met.* 2.855, and *Met.* 12.382), we can reasonably assume that the position described here means 'with elbows outwards and hands inwards'.⁴²

Such a position finds no correspondence with the typical fighting stances of boxing (left arm extended, right cocked above or below the shoulder); *pankration* (left guard, with both arms high in order to

⁴⁰ See *Il.* 23.685 and 710, *Od.* 18.66–9 and 76, *Apoll. Rh. Arg.* 2.30–4, *Aen.* 5.421–3.

⁴¹ *In statione* (34) is a defensive stance, but is also the opposite of Hercules' mobility.

⁴² See Bömer (n. 2), 285: '*uarae* sind die manus, wenn sie (mit der Armen) nach auswärts gestreckt sind wie die bekannten *cornua* der italienischen Rinder'. Bömer also points to *Apoll. Rh. Arg.* 2.68 f., but in this case Apollonius is describing a boxing stance ('they held up their heavy hands in front of their face' applies well to the typical asymmetrical boxing guard that we find in vase-painting), while Ovid has *brachiaque opposui, tenuique a pectore uaras in statione manus*. Both *statio* and *προδῆκνυμι* have military connotations, one as a waiting position, the other as harassing manoeuvres. Note that, while a static defensive position has some sense in boxing, it is useless in preventing the opponent's grab in wrestling. Statius (*Theb.* 6.830–52) makes a precise reference to the Ovidian confrontation by assigning Achelous to Tydeus as a teacher: while Tydeus has learned his technique directly from Achelous, Agylleus has not inherited his father Hercules' strength. Statius does not seem to consider Achelous' fighting skills anything less than praiseworthy, which might explain the reason why he describes Tydeus and Agylleus with *brachia late uara* as in a proper wrestling pose. For the influence of *Met.* 9 over Statius see H. Lovatt, *Statius and Epic Games* (Cambridge, 2005), 197–207. It is difficult to understand whether Martial is referring to a proper wrestling stance at 7.32.9.

protect the face, hands almost closed in order to switch from grappling to striking); or wrestling (arms extended forwards, hands open, in order to grab or prevent the opponent grabbing).⁴³ Achelous' fighting stance appears to be clumsy and ineffective, and it is possible that Ovid already intends in this passage to depict Achelous as someone who has no clue how to fight properly.⁴⁴

This impression of ineffectiveness is reinforced by what happens next: Hercules sprinkles his opponent with sand, a common practice for wrestling and *pankration* fighters in order to obtain a firmer grip and regularly used by opponents before opening hostilities.⁴⁵ As with the use of *uarae* for describing Achelous' fighting stance and the description of Hercules' feints, Ovid is careful to preserve the ambiguity of the passage. In fact, *inque uicem* does not necessarily refer to Achelous' and Hercules' act of throwing sand onto each other, but simply to the fact that they both become, in turn, yellow with sand, without elucidating whether Achelous returns the compliment or whether Hercules does all the work.⁴⁶ This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the structure of the passage: lines 32–4 describe Achelous' rather lengthy (and possibly clumsy) preparations, while lines 35 f. show Hercules, who, as a true professional, takes care of the bare essentials. If we pair up this passage with the other hints at Achelous' minimal fighting prowess, we are left with the impression

⁴³ For the technical aspects of the typical stances, see Poliakoff (n. 38), 34–35 (wrestling), 57 (*pankration*), and 83–5 (boxing). Anderson (n. 17), 420 takes *uaras* as 'away from his chest at different heights (not together), ready to grab Hercules suddenly with either hand as the opportunity arose'. Such a stance would make perfect sense as a proper wrestling pose, as we can see from the vases, but it does not match the way *uarus* in its plural form is used in other occurrences. For depictions of the typical guard stances, see R. Wünsche and F. Knauf, *Lockender Lorbeer. Sport und Spiel in der Antike* (Munich, 2004), 98, plate 12.2 (wrestling), 164, pl. 18.9 (boxing), 176, pl. 19.4a–b (*pankration*); W. Decker et J.-P. Thuillier, *Le Sport dans l'Antiquité* (Paris, 2004), 223, pl. 33 (*pankration*); Poliakoff (n. 38), 35, ill. 19 (wrestling).

⁴⁴ In modern terms, what he does would be taking his jacket off, sticking his chest out, and raising his balled fists. It is also unusual that only Achelous is described as girding himself, while, had Hercules done the same, he would have made quite an impression, as at *Od.* 18.66–70. But all this is part of representing an extremely practical and experienced Hercules, who scorns boasting and amateurish acts and goes straight for the throat. It is also significant that Achelous does not even need to see his opponent showing his impressive body in order to get scared, as Iros in *Od.* 18.75–77, or Dares at the sight of Eryx's *caesti* (*Aen.* 5.400 ff.).

⁴⁵ The numerous references to *harena* through the Ovidian text contribute in conveying wrestling connotations to the fight. Besides, with his use of sand, Hercules is almost foreseeing the inherent 'wetness' of the river Achelous (see 55 f.). Cf. Stat. *Theb.* 6.847 ff., where the wrestlers pour both oil and sand on themselves; also Luc. 4.6, where Hercules drenches himself with oil, while Antaeus pours hot sand over his limbs (in order to have additional contact with his mother, Earth).

⁴⁶ There might be an intentional, if subtle, contrast between *spargit* (sprinkling sand from a distance) and *tactu* (rubbing sand by hand contact), which would fit Hercules taking care of the essential preparations for both of them.

that Hercules, after sprinkling sand on Achelous, has to do the same for himself as well, simply because the river god has no idea what the preparations for a real wrestling match are.

After the initial stalemate at 37 ff., things start to go wrong for Achelous: Hercules manages to break free from his opponent's grab, shoves him on the ground, and applies a 'pinning' move (51–61). Achelous now needs every bit of help in order to survive just a bit longer, and he makes use of his providentially abundant sweat in order to break free.⁴⁷ But it is to no avail: the hero applies a nape-grab to him and forces him onto the ground once more.⁴⁸

The last part of the fight appears to leave aside the man-god issues and to revert to the sporting contest that was hinted at during the beginning of the confrontation (32–8). Achelous' third shape poses even fewer problems to his opponent than the previous ones. With another surprising display of finesse, Hercules avoids the bull's rush, follows it through by clinging to its neck, and then uses his opponent's momentum to slam it, horns first, into the sand.⁴⁹ This is an impressive feat, in our eyes more similar to a tauromachy feat than a typically Herculean fighting technique:⁵⁰

*induit ille toris a laeua parte lacertos,
 admissumque trahens sequitur, depressaque dura
 cornua figit humo, meque alta sternit harena.
 nec satis hoc fuerat: rigidum fera dextera cornu
 dum tenet, infregit, truncaque a fronte reuellit.*
(Met. 9.82–6)

He threw his arms around my dorsal ridge from the left side, followed my momentum, dragging upon me after letting me through, and, having forced down my hard horns, thrust them into the earth and laid me low in the deep dust. Nor was this enough: holding my tough horn in his cruel right hand, he broke it off and tore it from my mutilated forehead.

⁴⁷ Appropriate for both a fighter and a river god.

⁴⁸ It could be important to note, as we will see later, that first, choke-holds were legal in wrestling and second, dropping to one's knee did not represent a fall: for both matters see Poliakoff (n. 38), 25. The intention of depicting Achelous' second fall might be the reason why Ovid describes the river god not only dropping to his knee because of the nape-grab but also hitting the sand with his face, apparently without any further technique being employed by Hercules.

⁴⁹ Consistent with Apoll. Rh. *Arg.* 2.92–3, Theocr. *Idyll.* 22.123, and *Aen.* 5.445: in all these cases, a successful dodge underlies the final outcome, one way or another. The image of the bull-Achelous being slammed into the sand is possibly an ironic recalling of *Aen.* 12.104–6.

⁵⁰ Cf. Theocritus' account of the end of the struggle between Heracles and the Nemean Lion (*Idyll.* 25.262–71), or Evander's tale of Hercules and Cacus at *Aen.* 8.256–61: the final phases of both these fights are much more brutal (and display far less fighting finesse) than *Met.* 9.82–6, where Achelous loses a horn instead of his life. Cf. also the way Jason brings the two bulls down on their knees at Apoll. Rh. *Arg.* 3.1306–9.

The fight between Hercules and Achelous seems to be divided into three rounds (with the river god in his human, snake, and bull forms), with Achelous suffering a fall in each one of them at 54, 61, and 83–4.⁵¹ The fight ends with Achelous' third fall, since the wrenching of the horn is described as part of Achelous' knocking down (85–6: *rigidum fera dextera cornu dum tenet, infregit*).⁵² It can be helpful to notice that, in wrestling-related metaphors, the *topos* of the third fall as a symbol of definitive defeat is not an uncommon one in ancient literature: its most conspicuous use is found in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.⁵³

As an amateur fighter without any real experience in the arena, Achelous appears to behave as if within a standard wrestling match, and he really seems to think that his third fall has put an end to the contest.⁵⁴ The wrenching off of his horn comes to him as unexpectedly as the way in which he was dragged into the fight at 27–32. Only at the very end of the fight does it dawn on him that Hercules was not after a sport victory. With such a perspective, Achelous' *nec satis hoc fuerat* at line 85 acquires an additional meaning since, with this parenthesis, he artificially inserts a gap into what is actually a continuous action. In fact, Hercules slams the bull on the sand headfirst and, retaining his grip on the horns, wrenches one of them off. But to Achelous the mutilation appears as an outrageous extra-time action, both unnecessary for the outcome of the fight and inappropriate to a wrestling context.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Or almost so: the fall at line 61 might have been slightly anticipated in the structure simply because scoring a fall against a snake, which is supposed to be already quite close to the ground, would make little sense. But it can also be that Hercules keeps him 'pinned' in a snake form as well, defeating thus the snake-form.

⁵² Apparently, completely stretching the opponent prone was considered a fall in wrestling: see Poliakoff (n. 38), 24. See also H. Lovatt (n. 41), 214 about how the fights at *Il.* 23.710–38 and Lucan *BC.* 4.617–53 can be considered as consisting of three bouts.

⁵³ See specifically M. B. Poliakoff, 'The Third Fall in the *Oresteia*', *AJPh* 101 (1980), 251–9. The association of the metaphor with the image of cosmic struggle in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is particularly striking. At *Ag.* 167–75, Zeus is called *πριακτῆρος* in relation to his definitive victory over Cronos. At *Eum.* 589 f., Orestes refuses to admit defeat in front of the Chorus of the Erinyes since, as he says, they have scored only one of the three falls (*τριῶν παλαισμάτων*) that they need in order to sentence him. In a similar fashion, Electra defines Ate as *οὐκ ἀτρίακτος* ('that cannot be decisively defeated') at *Ch.* 339. On the importance of the epic quality of Aeschylus' trilogy, see P. Hardie, 'The *Aeneid* and the *Oresteia*', *PVS* 20 (1991), 33.

⁵⁴ Such astonishment over a relatively small thing would be even more significant to a Roman audience, used to gladiatorial fights and boxing with *caesti*.

⁵⁵ It might be interesting to consider Herakles' fight against Eryx in both Diodorus Siculus' and Apollodorus' accounts. Diodorus (4.23.2) describes the wrestling match as a sporting event with a bet involved, with Eryx behaving as a real sportsman in accepting Herakles' conditions; at Apollod. 2.5.10, we find that Eryx named as a condition for the restitution of the bull he had

Conclusions

The whole episode thus acquires a mocking tone at Achelous' expense in several ways. The river god is first represented as a soft and over-civilized opponent, without either sufficient power or sufficient skill to stand up to Hercules. As the fight goes on, the roles usually found in the typical man–god confrontation are reworked at his expense. As a final blow, the last verses of the episode recalls the ending of the eighth book, giving the definitive explanation of his missing horn. But if, at the beginning of book nine, such a mutilation seems to draw pity from the audience, in light of Achelous' own narration it acquires a deeper ironic effect for the reader and becomes the well-deserved punishment for an amateurish wrestler who was unwise enough to go hand to hand against the patron of *pankration*.⁵⁶

Tragic overtones therefore assume a framing function for the epic references embedded into Achelous' first-person narrative. The comparison with *Tr.* 6–25 shows a complete overturning of Achelous' original connotation and approach to the context of rival suitors. Achelous unwittingly presents his initial helplessness as some kind of heroic resistance, similar to that of Latinus at *Aen.* 7.586–90, but the implications of such a reference undermine the plausibility of Achelous' only moment of glory in the entire fight (42–51). The reworking of *Arg.* 2.68–89 radically alters the emphasis on different fighting skills employed by both Apollonius and Virgil. The use of *Il.* 21.153–99 as a model parodies both the Homeric boasting and the Homeric theme of man–god confrontation, while directly ridiculing the river god through Hercules' speech. The technicalities disguised by Achelous' incompetent perspective further reinforce his inappropriate presence within a fighting context. The possible allusion to the metaphor of the third fall gives to Achelous' increasingly grotesque performance a definitively un-heroic aura.

Ovid inserts into a context interwoven with tragic and epic connotations a character-narrator who gets dragged into a fight without

stolen that Herakles would have to beat him in a wrestling match. After which Herakles *τρίς περιγενόμενος κατὰ τὴν πάλιν ἀπέκτεινε* ('killed him having beaten him thrice in the wrestling'), a possible allusion to the fact that Herakles had extended his use of violence past the end of the contest represented by the third fall. For examples of Hercules' unnecessary violence, cf. *Od.* 21.26–30; *Soph. Tr.* 270 ff.; *Apoll. Rh. Arg.* 1.1211 ff., 4.1433.

⁵⁶ Cf. Bacchyl. 13.46–57; also see S. G. Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (New Haven, CT, 2004), 58.

expecting it at all, has no idea what a real fight is, and gets ridiculed by his opponent. But in spite of all this, Achelous seems genuinely convinced that his inglorious defeat can be considered on the same level as a real epic duel.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ The concept of heroic defeat expressed by Achelous at *Met.* 9.5–7 (*nec tam turpe fuit uinci, quam contendisse decorum est, magnaue dat nobis tantus solacia uictor*, ‘nor was it so much a shame to be defeated, as it was an honour to have fought’) is an obvious reference to Aeneas’ words over Lausus’ dead body at *Aen.* 10.829. Even here, Achelous’ epic register becomes involuntarily charged with grotesque undertones: the inglorious loss of a horn can scarcely be compared to Lausus’ heroic sacrifice in order to save his own father. Besides, while Lausus’ posthumous glory is validated by Aeneas himself, Hercules has only mocking words for the struggling Achelous: since his opponent will not give him the honour of the arms, the river god has to provide himself with some glory through his own words.