

The Lapithocentaumachy in Tim Slover's *Christmas Chronicles*

Tim Slover's *Christmas Chronicles*¹ uses the myth of the Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs to enlarge the character of Anna, Klaus the carpenter's zesty bride. Among other characterizing strokes, Slover uses mythological shorthand to render Anna as a character of passionate action. The novel's first-person narrator defines what Anna brings to her new marriage in terms of her perspective on the binary oppositions inherent between mythological opponents Lapiths and Centaurs. Anna's actions touch upon an overt usage of the myth, which allows the reader to see her more clearly as a character of decision.

Newlywed Klaus and Anna are lolling of an evening snug in their bed. "Anna was embroidering a scene of the bloody and drunken battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths onto a coverlet she had just stitched, and Klaus was polishing off the last of her rabbit stew with sugared almonds." (*Chronicles*, 61) However blissful their circumstances, Klaus is unhappy. His abiding discontent needs to be shared, and he finally tells his bride all about his arch enemy Rolf Eckhof. Without their knowing, Eckhof's existence had caused an unsettling effect on their world. Thus, in her embroidery, Anna "had just come to the part of the battle where a Centaur was smashing a well-aimed hoof into the eye of a Lapith, all purple and red and black threads, and it was hard to leave off there, but she did." (*Chronicles*, 62) With the explication of his nemesis Klaus introduces discord into Anna's world. Later in the novel Eckhof will devise her death; but the loving union of Klaus and Anna, opposites equaling more together, will abide beyond mortality.

"Lapithocentaumachy" is a sesquipedalian term given to the brawl that ensued when the wedding feast of Pirithous and Hippodamia turned ugly. In short: "The Centaur guests at the wedding feast grabbed the bride, and the groom had to lead family and friends to the rescue," and ever since, says Antinous to Odysseus, "there has been conflict between centaurs and men." (*Odyssey* 21.303) Pirithous saw his wedding day descend into unimaginable social chaos. For, centaurs are essentially civilization's fringe-dwellers, ever capable of ascending toward upmost civility or plunging toward appalling bestiality. Like individual Jekylls-and-Hydes, centaurs' misbehavior "strikes at the most basic rules of human society, the rules of marriage."² But there is potential for good. For instance, a Pholus or a Chiron or, neo-classically, C.S. Lewis' Mr. Apollinax stands ever ready as pedagogue for rearing the next generation's greatest hero; at their worst, Nessus rapes Heracles' bride, and his kin bludgeon the Lapith Caeneus with uprooted fir-trunks and boulders. Spurred by a little wine centaurs revert to nothing less than unbridled roughhousing such as they let loose at Pirithous' wedding feast.

In Slover's novel Klaus dealt before his marriage with growing turmoil caused by Rolf Eckhof's dastardly opposition, and he learns empirically how to counter his adversary's incremental assaults on the good will of Christmas. Now, days before their newlywed Christmas, Klaus is stumped as to countering Eckhof's evil. "I cannot think of a way!" Nor could Anna, at first. But then her eye lighted on the

¹ Tim Slover, *The Christmas Chronicles: the legend of Santa Claus (a novel)* (New York: Bantam 2010).

² M. Beard and J. Henderson, *Classics: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 84. For deeper treatment, see R. Osborne, "Framing the Centaur: reading fifth-century architectural sculpture," in *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture* (Cambridge UP, 1994), 52 – 84.

scattered skeins of thread [the elements of the Lapithocentauro-machy], and she clapped her clever hands together because suddenly she knew the answer.” (*Chronicles*, 63) That answer: Anna was to join forces with Klaus’s abundant good will against Rolf Eckhof, the embodiment of cosmic darkness.

Along such lines, the Greeks thought productively with the centaur myth.³ Archaic and Classical Greek artists frequently depicted Lapiths mixing it up with Centaurs. The metopes from the Parthenon are best known now; but the François vase, the west pediment of the Zeus Temple at Olympia, the frieze at Bassae’s Apollo Soterios Temple, Micon’s picture in the Athenian Theseum, and numerous vases famously manifest the theme.⁴ Centaurs were “good to think with,” especially because they exist largely as binary opposites to mankind, creatures who might become humane or the beasts we might become. The Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs became the battleground for the opposite natures of centaurs and men.

The most colorful of written Lapithocentauro-machies is Ovid’s (*Metamorphoses* 12.210-535) — key for Ovid’s programme is telling a love-story within the greater epic framework. This narrative foregrounds gruesome violence, ala Homeric *aristeiai*, such that Ovid apparently rivals Homer himself in narrative skill. All told, though, Ovid claims himself ever unequal to epic and manifests always propensity toward love stories, his real knack. Thus, amid the hugger-mugger at Pirithous’ wedding Ovid cherishes most dearly the parting of the centaress Hylonome and her slaughtered mate Cyllarus (*Met.* 12.393-428), a tender scene that warrants Ovid’s most careful anti-epic attention. Since even centaurs can love, and love *truly*, true love can humanize or, better, divinize mortal creatures.

In front of this rich mythological background Slover turns Anna toward the Lapithocentauro-machy. But to what end? The classical bipolarity of nature versus culture is reengendered in Slovers’ pitting the archly evil Eckhof against the noble Klaus. Inasmuch as that rivalry had achieved new darkness, Christmas is now fortified by Klaus’ nuptials, Klaus thrives against Eckhof for many years. His bride, herself achieving new intuition by virtue of their nuptials, comprehends the power of the adversary, an epic opposition of unending dimensions, and she manifests that awareness unwittingly in her handiwork.⁵ On a more tender level, though, Slover’s application of the Lapithocentauro-machy infuses Ovidian overtones into the tale, suggesting through the myth that truest love is engendered when opposites join in marriage. When one takes time and looks beyond the melee of conflicting worlds, the tenderness of Hylonome and Cyllarus remains.

³ Beard and Henderson, 85.

⁴ Accessible Classical sources provided by J. Davidson Reid, *Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990’s* (Oxford 1994) include Hom. *Od.* 21.295-304, Pindar *Oly.* 1.70 and 9.10, Apollod. *Biblio.* Epit. 1.21-22, and Plut. *Theseus*. See M. Gisler-Huwiler, *LIMC* 7.1 (1994), 232-42 with plates.

⁵ In an email of 26 December 2010, I ask the author whether he is dealing consciously with P. di Cosimo’s National Gallery painting or more generally with the theme as found in such as places as the Elgin metopes from the Parthenon. The author demures and claims that passing familiarity with the myth simply brought the tale to mind, that there was no particularly conscious thematic aim in the application of the myth.