Thersites

My incomparable friend Thersites was strolling across the asphodel fields the other day when he ran into his old chum Plutarch, and they fell to talking about ancient history. Thersites had often wondered, he told me, on what grounds Plutarch had selected the particular pairs of historical figures he did when he wrote his Parallel Lives, and confessed himself bewildered by some of the comparisons. How on earth could a jolly chap like Alcibiades be paired with a tremendous weed like Coriolanus? What rhyme (reason clearly did not come into it) linked an obvious crook like Crassus with that rather sporting old bean Nicias? Plutarch began waffling rather heavily at this point, squirting out great clouds of metaphorical ink like an octopus on the defensive, but under pressure admitted that history and dates bored him dotty and he much preferred 'people'. Thersites admitted that he too could never quite remember which came first, the Caudine women or the Sabine forks, but by golly he could certainly tell the difference between the two. A most congenial discussion then ensued in which a series of more contemporary Parallel Lives was proposed. Light stuff, Thersites assured me, but after the hard-hitting revelations of the last few issues, Omnibus' brilliantly beautiful and intelligent readership surely deserved a rest. It was a decision with which I could not fail, with a sigh of relief, to concur. Of the many examples Thersites offered, I picked this:

Achilles and Geoffrey Boycott

Boychilles remained an enigma to the end of his playing days. A loner, he had little time for anyone but himself and a few close friends e.g. Pat Roklas. He was never to be found sharing a sparkling krater with his team after a hard day in the field, even when they had slaughtered the opposition. He seemed to have an absolute disregard for what anyone said to him. Blessed as he was with swift feet, he would set off apparently at random on the most hopeless runs and even people with good shouts, like Menelaos, were helpless to prevent him charging off and landing everyone (except himself) in trouble. He argued constantly with his captain, and on one famous occasion actually left the field, stalked back to his pavilion (taking Pat with him) and refused to return. The cause of the dispute was never fully revealed – some say it was an argument over Boychilles' favourite old bat, which the skipper had confiscated – but even when a few senior players paid Boychilles a private visit and promised not merely to return the bat but also to throw in by way of compensation a few other bats too, several pairs of pads, some gloves and other rather natty gear besides, he was adamant. He made all the runs, he argued: but who got the glory when the team won? They could stuff their team. His playing days were over. He would resign.

Next day the team was in terrible trouble. Using the wind to fine effect from the Trojan end, Hector had wrought absolute devastation with a tremendous spell of fast bowling, and with
the team at 16 for 6, Boychilles gave in to Pat’s pleading, lent him his pads and helmet (but not his bat) and sent him out to stem the tide. It was not to be. A vicious bouncer from Hector removed Pat's helmet, piercing the face guard and chinstrap beneath. He fell, thunderously, and the bails clashed about him.

When the news reached Boychilles, he realised it was time to act. He went to Fiery Fred, who happened to be commentating on the game, and asked if he could borrow his gear. Fred agreed at once.

**Armour for Boychilles**

And now Boychilles put on the beautiful gear. In the intolerable fury that possessed him, he gnashed his teeth, his eyes blazed like fire and his heart was full of evil for Hector. First he strapped on his legs a pair of splendid pads, which were fitted with leather straps and silver buckles at the back. J. B. Hobbs had made them long ago, and they had not yet known an lbw. Next he slipped a thigh pad down his left trouser. Since it was Fiery Fred's, he had to adjust it. Next the finely shaped protector exquisitely wrought out of pink plastic by Lycian slave-girls, a marvel to look on, but some are made of sweet-sounding tin to ward off blows which are most painful to mortal men; then on his sturdy head he set the four-plated helmet, peaked, with a face-guard, and it flashed terribly. Next he took up the well-padded batting-gloves, fitting closely over his fingers, and fastened them with cunningly-wrought Velcro. Last, he took up the powerful bat, heavy, hollowed at the back, and made of fine-grained willow which a carpenter had trimmed true to the chalk-line. No-one but Boychilles could wield this, and he alone knew how to handle it. It had been cut from a willow by the banks of the whirling Enipeus and given to him by his father, to despatch many a wine-dark ball, whirring, to the boundary and bring grim devastation on the bowling averages of many.

So Boychilles put on his beautiful gear, and as he strode to the wicket, thus one of the spectators would say to another: 'Ah me, this day will see many a Trojan bowler put to the bat'. And Boychilles smiled at the omen. But these words were not pleasing to the heart of Hector, who added a yard or two to his run-up in consequence.

Then when bright Boychilles had taken guard and marked it true to middle-and-leg, Hector of the fiery bouncer began his run-up.

**Hector and Boychilles**

Tell me, Muse, how many runs Boychilles scored that day, how many bright red balls sped to the boundary! Tell me for you know – the fielding and bowling changes, the consultations over the light and the breaks for drinks!
First high-bounding Hector unleashed a fierce bouncer. As when a star shoots across the sky during autumn, it rises higher and higher and men tremble, for it signifies the plague, so did Hector release his bouncer. As it pitched, swift-footed Boychilles took counsel with himself, pondering whether to duck under the smoking missile and allow it to thud into the well-gloved hands of the distant wicketkeeper, or whether to rock onto his huge back foot and despatch the glowing pill with a flashing hook to the square-leg boundary for six. And as he divided his shaggy heart this way and that, thus did it seem better to him to despatch it for six if the umpire would give him the glory and it fell not short.

Thus pondering he hooked and all the fielders ducked as the crimson sphere whistled over head to land way back up the stand somewhere or other. And grey-eyed Athena, in the form of a young stockbroker, said: 'Right easily could even a blind man tell that that was the biggest hit ever seen on this ground. For look! The leather ball has made a mark on the bench right up here in glorious row T'.

And Boychilles was pleased in his heart that Athena had said these things, and vaunting addressed late-inswinging Hector with winged words: 'You never thought I would come to the wicket after you had laid low my brave companion. Fool! Now the destruction of your bowling average is at hand'. Looking darkly at him, late-inswinging Hector said: 'I will accept my fate when the gods will it. Meanwhile, summon up all your skill and see if the next well-stitched ball does not bring black death and destruction upon your wicket.'

So saying, he doubled the length of his run and, polishing the sphere until it shone like the sun or blazing fire, and fitting it well into his grip, he launched himself towards the crease, and the ground trembled as he ran in. And all the gods looked on.

The rest is, of course, history. Boychilles absolutely murdered Hector who had to be virtually dragged off the field at the end of play, in such a bad state that his parents were forced to come round that evening and collect him. Such brilliant, but obstinate, behaviour was typical of the man. But say what you like, Boychilles was a man to have with you, and not against you.

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Next issue! *Cicero and Neil Kinnock*: how Kinnero, a young man from a part of the world no-one had ever heard of and with no experience of anything, rose to a position of power, took on the brutal revolutionary Thatchiline and enchanted the hideous, belching masses with his much-loved tricola with *anaphora, homoioteleuton and parasisos*!

*Ovid and Jeffrey Archer*: how Archid, one of the most creative and fluent writers of his day, famed for his stories in which synthetic creeps are transformed into mythical heroes
overnight with the help of large cheques and influential friends, fell foul of government because of his exotic lifestyle and spent the rest of his life in exile! Including extracts from *Epistula ex Ponto*.

Also showing: Cyclops and Kenneth Baker, Clodius and Ian Botham, Verres and the Arts Council, Cloaca Maxima and Rupert Murdoch – and hundreds more!