

29. Reimagined Heroes in Transformative Literature: Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*¹

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Abstract

Since the beginning of time, stories are fundamentally designed to facilitate communication in both didactic and engaging ways, targeting individuals or groups effectively. This inherent purpose means that storytelling relies on the process of retelling information that has been internalized by the audience. As societies evolved and cultural frameworks emerged, storytelling became an essential mechanism for the preservation of cultural heritage. Written literature, as a continuum of the practice of storytelling, also plays a critical role in documenting the evolution, adaptation, and retelling of stories across different periods and styles. By examining these texts, scholars can trace the origins of new literary concepts, investigate the influence of written works on oral storytelling, and explore the impact of written texts on the broader literary landscape. The everlasting popularity of Homeric texts illustrates how *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* exemplify the evolution of narratives through successive retellings. These epic poems not only reflect the values esteemed in their historical context but also retain their relevance and influence over time due to their profound impact on literary traditions. This study analyzes *The Song of Achilles*, a retelling of the *Iliad* by Madeline Miller, and how it challenges specific aspects of the original story, influenced by contemporary social and cultural norms. The study focuses on how Miller reinterprets the portrayal of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship, the representation of gender and sexuality, as well as the narrative's treatment of heroism, fate, and the gods. By exploring these themes, the analysis examines how Miller's retelling offers a modern perspective on traditional concepts of love, loyalty, and identity in ancient Greek mythology.

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Keywords: Retelling, mythology, transformative literature, novel, Madeline Miller

Dönüştürücü Edebiyatta Yeniden Tasarlanan Kahramanlar: Madeline Miller'in *Aşil'in Şarkısı*⁴

Öz

Zamanın başlangıcından bu yana, hikayeler temel olarak hem didaktik hem de ilgi çekici yollarla iletişimi kolaylaştırmak, bireyleri veya grupları etkili bir şekilde hedef almak için tasarlandı. Bu doğal amaç, hikaye anlatımının izleyici tarafından içselleştirilmiş bilgilerin yeniden anlatılması sürecine dayandığı anlamına gelir. Toplumlar geliştikçe ve kültürel çerçeveler ortaya çıktıkça hikaye anlatımı, kültürel mirasın korunması için temel bir mekanizma haline geldi. Hikâye anlatımı pratiğinin bir devamı olan yazılı edebiyat, farklı dönem ve tarzlardaki hikâyelerin evrimini, uyarlanmasını ve yeniden anlatılmasını belgelemede de kritik bir rol oynar. Akademisyenler bu metinleri inceleyerek yeni edebi kavramların kökenlerinin izini sürebilir, yazılı eserlerin sözlü hikaye anlatımı üzerindeki etkisini araştırabilir ve yazılı metinlerin daha geniş edebiyat ortamı üzerindeki etkisini keşfedebilirler. Homeros metinlerinin sonsuz popüleritesi, *İlyada* ve *Odysseia*'nın birbirini izleyen yeniden anlatımlar yoluyla anlatıların evrimini nasıl örneklediğini göstermektedir. Bu destansı şiirler, yalnızca tarihsel bağlamlarında saygı duyulan değerleri yansıtmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda edebi gelenekler üzerindeki derin etkisi nedeniyle zaman içinde güncelliğini ve etkisini korur. Bu çalışma, *İlyada*'nın Madeline Miller tarafından yeniden anlatıldığı *Akhilleus'un Şarkısı*'nı ve orijinal hikayenin çağdaş sosyal ve kültürel normlardan etkilenen belirli yönlerine nasıl meydan okuduğunu analiz ediyor. Çalışma, Miller'in Aşil ve Patroclus'un ilişkisinin tasvirini, cinsiyet ve cinselliğin temsilini ve ayrıca anlatımın kahramanlık, kader ve tanrıları ele alış biçimini nasıl yeniden yorumladığına odaklanıyor. Analiz, bu temaları keşfederek Miller'in yeniden anlatımının antik Yunan mitolojisindeki geleneksel aşk, sadakat ve kimlik kavramlarına nasıl modern bir bakış açısı sunduğunu inceliyor.

Anahtar kelimeler: yeniden anlatım, mitoloji, dönüştürücü edebiyat, roman, Madeline Miller

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Hakem Değerlendirmesi: İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme

Introduction

Madeline Miller, a high school English teacher and a prominent novelist, published her first novel in 2012, which quickly became one of the most famous examples of queer romance and history genres in the 21st century. The rapid growth of her book's fanbase was only the periphery of her expanding success, as the book had won her the Orange Prize for Fiction the same year, among many other rewards and acknowledgments that followed. Moreover, Miller has also been awarded the Women's Prize for Fiction and nominated for several highly reputable awards such as the Stonewall Book Award in the same year. This book, which allowed her to become one of the most popular authors worldwide is titled *The Song of Achilles*, and has over a million and three hundred thousand reviews on Goodreads as of 2023, eleven years after its publication. As an educator who mainly teaches Greek, Latin, and Shakespeare, Miller's interpretation of the myth is influenced by her growing interest in Greek mythology and classical literature since her childhood, as he states in a Q&A published on her official website;

In some ways I feel like I've been researching this book my whole life. I have loved the ancient Greek myths since I was a child, and studied Latin and Greek throughout high school, college, and graduate school. My professors gave me an incredible and electrifying education in ancient history and literature, and all of it helped provide the foundation for the book—though at the time, of course, I had no idea that I would one day use it for fiction.

In her essay "Making Connections with Historical Fiction," Nawrot explains the importance of using historical fiction, claiming that it "depicts life beyond the context of students' own lives and time" (344). Miller's interest in penning a rewriting of the classical works which she has been teaching may have derived from the same idea that fiction can be used to increase the comprehension and relatability of certain topics, not limited to but focusing on history and cultural studies. Nawrot further explains this suggestion in the same article as quoted below:

Student readers can be helped to make connections between the past and the present, to follow issues over time to see their development, and to begin to see their world in context and to understand that the past has helped shape the present. That knowledge can lead students to understand that decisions made in the present will determine the future. (344)

In this context, the importance of providing relatable content from which students can derive more meaning becomes more apparent, and bears the question of whether certain fictional works that are already being used as primary materials in class can have the expected effect on student readers of the modern world. As Groce and Groce (2005) remind us in their article "Authenticating Historical Fiction: Rationale and Process," most textbook publishers face criticism because "[t]here will routinely be criticism of how material is presented or of information that has been omitted for various reasons" (101) in especially grade-appropriate versions of history books. Considering the difficulty younger generations may feel in finding stories that originated thousands of years ago as relatable in content as the contemporary ones, Miller's initiative on rewriting the canon is not only greatly appreciated by the modern readers who find historical fiction interesting, but also necessary. The changes implemented by Miller transforms the epic poem on revenge, war and the mortality of man into a novel about sacrifices, loyalty and the immortality of love, while keeping it mythologically accurate and informative that is also age-appropriate for the general audience. Compared to Homer's *The Iliad*, the use of mythical allusions is done more openly, where the narrator, Patroclus, explains the stories to which there are references. Therefore, the readers who do not have the necessary mythological background to understand the works Miller is retelling can enjoy the novel just as well, which puts the novel in popular fiction as well. This paper explores would be Miller's retelling of Homer's the Iliad differ from the original story, focusing on

the change in protagonist and the representation of characters.

Reimagined Heroes in Transformative Literature: Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*

“Name one hero who was happy”

(Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 98)

Homer's opening lines for *The Iliad* summarize a focal point in Achilles' characterization that ultimately brings destruction and glory upon him. He is one of the central characters in a story larger than his own, which is already different from the path Miller decided to take with her own retelling of Achilles and his eventual downfall and uprising. Miller centralizes a character who was not explored much in Homer's poem, and turns Achilles' life into the story itself starting from the first time Patroclus sees him. In order to achieve this, Miller reimagines the epic poem as a tragic love story; forbidden, doomed, and socially looked down upon. Her retelling contains many reshaped and reimagined details in the original story, which are mixed with her own interpretations of other classical texts regarding the characters and events of the story of the Trojan War.

Amongst the changes she inserts into her retelling of the story, one of the major alterations that differ *The Song of Achilles* from *The Iliad* is rewinding the plot beyond the events of the epic poem, as she chooses Patroclus as the narrator to serve the purpose of telling a story of forbidden love befitting of the expectations and social norms of the twenty-first century. In order to add more layers of romance and increase the level of empathy within her readers, Miller puts the story into motion starting from the background of Patroclus, and focuses the first half of the book on how he came to be the beloved companion of *Aristos Achaion*⁵. From the first page of the book, it is evident to the reader that despite having a title that reads *The Song of Achilles*, it is in fact a song “for” Achilles, narrated by a character with whom the readers are supposed to sympathize more. This approach becomes clear in the following lines, where Patroclus starts off the novel by describing his familial traumas, and informs the readers of the toxic traits of his parents; “[w]hen I was delivered, a boy, he plucked me from her arms, and handed me to a nurse. In pity, the midwife gave my mother a pillow to hold instead of me. My mother hugged it. She did not seem to notice a change had been made” (p.1). A reader who is well informed on familial traumas, distant parental figures and the negative effects of being raised in abusive environments on individuals is bound to find themselves in a position of sympathy towards the narrator, who, unlike Achilles, is not born into greatness.

The reader may also be aware of the prophecies surrounding Achilles' name and the glory promised to him before reading the novel, just as the audience in the Hellenistic Period were most likely well-versed in the tales regarding the hero. Instead of starting the story with Achilles, Miller offers a fresh look into the story by first focusing on the background of Patroclus, which will be beneficial in understanding his point of view regarding how he views certain actions of Achilles in later chapters. This way, the readers can quickly adjust to the setting of the story as well, since the audience of TSOA welcomes the audience who might be uneducated in mythology unlike Homer's audience at the time. Before seeing Achilles at his worst as portrayed in *The Iliad*, the audience is first introduced to an innocent version of him, which should help the readers connect with him more as well, since the society of the modern era does not value the traits of heroes, which were upheld by the Hellenistic people. Rather than earning eternal glory in exchange for a good, long, and ordinary life, a traumatic childhood in a loveless family is more

⁵This term is used in *The Song of Achilles* many times to refer to Achilles. It stands for “the best of Greeks,” and should not be confused with “the best of Argives,” which is a title attributed to Patroclus in the novel.

relatable to the youth in this era. Considering the age group of the young adults and the life choices they have to deal with in this period of their lives, Patroclus' description of himself being viewed as a "disappointment: small, slight" (1) must help create a bond between the readers and the narrator that relies on the fear of failure or the trauma of a dysfunctional family.

It is immediately after this pitiful description of Patroclus and his family that the readers are given the sight of Achilles, who seems to be shining with his "hair lit like honey in the sun, and within it, glints of gold — the circlet of a prince" (2). It is important to note that Achilles, despite being the main character to whom this whole story is dedicated, first appears as the foil of Patroclus, who is skilled in a way that Patroclus isn't, and can make his loving father proud in a way Patroclus cannot. His father, Menoetius, points at Achilles and tells his son that "[t]hat is what a son should be," immediately creating an intangible and yet intuitive rivalry in Patroclus' head. Although Patroclus never acts on this, he is seen comparing himself to Achilles on many occasions before they become good friends.

One of these is when Menoetius tells Patroclus to put himself as one of the suitors of Helen despite being at the age of nine. This shocking demand of his father works in two ways for Miller: It allows the readers to learn the background of the Trojan War, where the story is ought to pick up and take a much serious and darker turn, and educates them by using mythical allusions, albeit not so discreetly as Homer does in *The Iliad*. In the Hesiodic text *Catalogue of Women*, also known as *Ehoiai*, the event of selecting Helen's suitors is described. Although there are three different versions of the list of suitors that survived until today, Patroclus' name appears in two of them as one of the young hopefuls who wish to be married to Helen. At this gathering, Miller takes this bit of information about a myth that included Patroclus, and alters it in a way that further details the characteristics of Patroclus from an early age while simplifying the justification of Patroclus and Achilles' sailing to Troy in later chapters.

Miller's study of myths about Patroclus' life extends to the later chapters as well, as she goes on to refer to various other myths not included in *The Iliad* about the native land of Patroclus, and how he became the "beloved companion" of Achilles. Miller uses these myths to lay out the fundamentals of her characterization of Patroclus, and further establish his perspective as what may be called feminist, or disdainful of the patriarchal structure of the society at the least. On page 17, Patroclus recalls the memory of how he became an exile by killing the son of a nobleman, which Miller paints as accidental, and comments on the punishment by narrating "[t]he boy's family demanded immediate exile or death. They were powerful, and this was their eldest son. They might permit a king to burn their fields, or rape their daughters, as long as payment was made. But you did not touch a man's sons" (17). This remark demonstrates the distaste Miller's Patroclus cultivates towards the position of women in their society. The signs of silent revulsion show themselves starting from the first page, where Patroclus the narrator starts his story from even before his earliest memories by going back to the marriage of his parents. He retells what he knows about their wedding day, and the day he was born, before describing himself from the perspective of his father, Menoetius. He remembers the way his mother had been treated by Menoetius, which sets the story off, followed by an immediate contrast made clear by his father, between Patroclus himself and Achilles, who is loved by his father. The interaction between Peleus and Achilles after a track and field contest is recalled by Patroclus as below:

[Achilles] wins. I stare as my father lifts the garland from my lap and crowns him; the leaves seem almost black against the brightness of his hair. His father, Peleus, comes to claim him, smiling and proud. Peleus' kingdom is smaller than ours, but his wife is rumoured to be a goddess, and his people love him. My own father watches with envy. His wife is stupid and his son too slow to race in even the youngest group. He turns to me. "This is what a son should be." My hands feel empty without the garland. I watch King Peleus embrace his son. I see the boy toss the garland in the air, and catch it

again. He is laughing and his face is bright with victory. (3)

The words the narrator chooses do not carry an active show of contempt or disdain towards the toxic patriarchal expectations and treatment in his household and seem to simply record what has come to pass or still is. However, the clear comparison between the two boys of the same societal position is based on their fulfillment of machismo, which is in direct correlation with their treatment by their respective male parents. Patroclus' fragility is perceived as a failure in continuation of his father's authority and power driven by his manhood, more than his title. This take on Patroclus' character makes him ideal for the tone Miller wants to set in this retelling of *The Iliad*. Drawn as a direct foil of Achilles from the very beginning, Patroclus' point of view in this retelling serves as a fresh set of eyes that brings an understanding to certain questions a modern reader might have such as their concerns regarding heroic values, or women's place in the society. Bernard Knox's analogy between Achilles and Sophoclean characters in drama further describes the nature of Achilles as the tragic hero, and may serve as a display of the need for a different narrator in a work which aims for change in tone and message:

Homer's Achilles is clearly the model for the tragic hero of the Sophoclean stage; his stubbornness, passionate devotion to an ideal image of self is the same force that drives Antigone, Oedipus, Ajax and Philoctetes to the fulfillment of their destinies. Homer's Achilles is also, for archaic Greek society, the essence of the aristocratic ideal, the paragon of male beauty, courage and patrician manners. (Knox 63)

Despite his unique traits, Achilles' description and overall known traits are in alignment with the expectations from a traditional Greek hero, which makes his perspective an unlikely choice for a narration that diverges from its original tone, and even focus. Owing to the choice of being retold not by Achilles but Patroclus, a mortal companion whose heroic qualities are overshadowed by other sets of skills, this epic story of war and the rage it brings within is turned into a prosaic ode to love. Instead of the conditional love the modern readers can detect between Briseis and Achilles, both of whom have very high expectations of the status the other may bring into their lives, the narrator presents the readers with a type of love that exceeds all expectations. In *The Iliad*, Achilles' interest in Briseis derives from her status as a prize of war, at which Achilles is destined to excel and reach eternal glory. In Book 9, Achilles talks about Briseis as his bride, but this is only in correlation to his honor. He first explains how he "achieved" his right to war prizes, and talks of Briseis not as a person dear to his heart in a romantic sense but like a valued prize he has been awarded:

But I say that I have stormed from my ships twelve cities
Of men, and by land eleven more through the generous Troad.
From all these we took forth treasures, goodly and numerous,
and we would bring them back, and give them to Agamemnon,
Atreus' son; while he, waiting back beside the swift ships,
Would take them, and distribute them little by little, and keep many.
All the other prizes of honour he gave the great men and the princes
Are held fast by them, but from me alone of all the Achaians
He has taken and keeps the bride of my heart. Let him lie beside her
and be happy. Yet why must the Argives fight with the Trojans? (328-35)

In this excerpt, Achilles explains to Odysseus in great detail his grievances against Agamemnon, who has wronged him by taking his concubine. Looking at the use of the word "bride," one might be inclined to think that Achilles was in love with Briseis, and thought of her more as a companion than a war prize.

Although it is undeniable that Achilles seems to hold feelings for her, it can be argued that her value in Achilles' eyes comes from her being a trophy worthy of his achievements in war, therefore reflecting his whole existence. Keeping in mind that Achilles sailed off to the war knowing that he is going to die if he fights, it is safe to deduce that Achilles' love was not for Briseis as a person but what she stood for as a captured queen, in a war where a thousand ships sailed to make another queen, Helen, return home. Briseis may not be as worthy of pursuit as Helen in terms of her qualities and status, but she is a royal prize taken from the sacked city of Lyrnessus, which begs the comparison between the cause for which Agamemnon summoned Achilles, and Achilles' reason behind pulling from the war. How can Achilles be expected to fight against Troy in order to recollect a married woman who seems to stay by her own will, when his woman is taken by force? Achilles continues his monologue by asking the same question, describing to Odysseus the unfairness of the situation in which Agamemnon has left him:

And why was it the son of Atreus assembled and led here
these people? Was it not for the sake of lovely-haired Helen?
Are the sons of Atreus alone among mortal men the ones
who love their wives? Since any who is a good man, and careful,
Loves her who is his own and cares for her, even as I now
loved this one from my heart, though it was my spear that won her.
Now that he has deceived me and taken from my hands my prize of honor,
let him try me no more. I know him well. He will not persuade me. (338-45)

Achilles' reason to pull from the war is based on the hypocrisy of Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, which he claims to have ripped him off his pride and honor. Despite telling Odysseus that he loved Briseis from his heart, the rest of his reasoning behind his affection towards Briseis can be interpreted as dutifulness, due to the link Achilles draws between his relationship with Briseis and Menelaus' marriage to Helen. Rather than love, it is the reclamation of Menelaus' honor, which will be proclaimed with the return of Helen, aside from the riches of Troy that will be shared amongst the kings and princes. It is not a far-fetched assumption that Achilles' true feelings toward Briseis, since women's worth were measured by what they can give to men, which regrettably still holds true to different extents in most parts of the world. Johanna Bond, the current dean of Rutgers Law School, explains the concept of honor by likening it to a currency that is used among men in patriarchy in her article entitled "Honor as Property" published in the 23rd volume of *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* in 2012:

Throughout the world, honor operates as a form of social currency. It is a highly valued and zealously protected asset. Although not alienable, honor functions informally as a form of property. Honor exists in some form within most communities and often operates to constrain women's behavior. Although a common misperception links honor primarily with cultures in the Middle East, honor functions in similarly gendered ways around the world. (202)

Briseis' status as a queen who was captured as a war prize and gifted to Achilles, the best of the Greeks, as a trophy that should be worthy of all of his achievements and reflect his hard earned glory is the origin of Achilles' love in *The Iliad*. His willingness to trade his life for an unknown amount of fame that will be bestowed upon him verifies his commitment to the heroic ideals. In order to obtain and preserve these goals, he must keep his honor intact, which leads to the conundrum caused by Agamemnon. Women are seen as the personification of men's honor in *The Iliad*, whom men love by extension to how well their values are kept up by these properties. Therefore, the motives behind Achilles' love for Briseis should be analyzed in light of the societal expectations and gender roles at the time. It is perhaps one of the reasons behind Miller's choosing Patroclus as the narrator in *TSOA*, as Briseis is turned into a more

important figure around the camp of the Argives and is never seen as a romantic interest of Achilles. In fact, Briseis' reimagined friendship with Patroclus replaces the assumed dynamics she has with Achilles in *The Iliad* as the central relationship that affects the course of events in the story. Her declassing from a queen to an Anatolian farm girl in Miller's reimagination allows her to be freed from the title of a "trophy worthy of a hero," and demotes her to a less significant role in regards to representing Achilles' honor. This alteration gives way to scheming a new perspective on Achilles' behavior after Agamemnon takes his war prize, which Miller utilizes by once more centralizing the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles.

Freeing Briseis from the expectations of upholding Achilles' greatness does not come at the cost of depreciating her vitality in the story, however, as Miller finds the ground to give her more power by demoting her social status. Patroclus grows fond of Briseis when she assumes the role of the camp mother within the Argives, and even asks him "to teach her medicine, and promise[s] in return a knowledge of the area's herbs, indispensable to Machaon's dwindling supply" (252). In her new role as a simple farm girl, Briseis is rewritten as a woman whose existence serves more purpose than her original representation in the epic poem. By doing so, she is also reversed into a role that does not support Achilles' value, but one that challenges his worth in relation to Patroclus. Although their downfalls were caused by different reasons, Patroclus gave Briseis a lifeline that saved her from a life of misery, as Peleus, Achilles' father, saved Patroclus when he was exiled. Taking her as his war-prize is not an act of self-proving on Achilles' part anymore, but an act of mercy prompted by Patroclus. The intent of keeping her as a concubine is completely erased in the novel, as Patroclus makes it clear in Chapter Twenty-Four that Briseis has become a part of his family;

We were sitting close to each other, heads together as if in conspiracy. I could smell the fruit she had eaten, I could smell the rose oils she pressed for the other girls, still staining her fingers. She was so dear to me, I thought. I imagined her as a girl, scraped with tree-climbing, skinny limbs flying as she ran. I wished I had known her then, that she had been with me at my father's house, had skipped stones with my mother. (253)

In the novel, Briseis is never seen as a prize, nor a reward for Achilles' display of courage in battle. The passage above presents how the first impressions between Briseis, a war captive, and Patroclus, the right-hand man of the most feared Greek soldier, have developed into more established and cherished levels of trust. In fact, for Patroclus, it has taken the form of familial love, which fits the lifestyle Miller illustrates for the Myrmidon camp. The existence of the women in the camp is not associated with the symbol of military and physical success, which were two of the most conspicuous and coveted traits traditionally attributed to masculinity and maleness. According to Scott Rubarth's description in "Competing Constructions of Masculinity in Ancient Greece," (2014) masculinity and masculine values in ancient Greece were regarded as follows;

Greek conceptions of masculinity are intimately tied to the virtue of courage. The very word that we translate as courage, *andreia*, comes from the Greek word for a male adult, *anêr/andros* and can be translated as 'manliness.' Courage is usually used to specify the excellence of bravery and valor, especially on the battlefield. Hence this is an excellence or virtue not normally applied to women, except by analogy, since women were excluded from military training and activity in all Greek cities. Courage in battle was primarily seen as a male affair. (24)

In this regard, it should be noted once more that realistically, it is expected for the women captured in war to be associated with the masculine qualities of the soldier by whom they are won. In *TSOA*, the women are taken by Achilles with Patroclus' initiative not as prizes but rescues from other soldiers in the Greek camps. Miller's Patroclus willingly chooses not to learn how to fight, and remain as a mere

participant in the great events of battling against the city of Troy, in order to stay beside his lover, Achilles, as well as to fulfill his oath taken at the age of nine as a suitor of Helen. He continues to defy the expectations from a grown man, who is expected to take interest in proving his worth to reach the masculine ideals, some of which are pursued by Achilles in his pursuit of gaining eternal glory. Patroclus' approach to Briseis results in a camp life that resembles more of a community, with Briseis' help of assuring the other girls that they are now safe with the Myrmidons. Thus, Miller's reimagined version of Patroclus allows the modern reader to envisage possible, albeit romanticized, answers to questions that arose with the gradual loss of the knowledge, salvaged by history, on the daily lives of soldiers in ancient history.

The centralization of Patroclus as the key component in the development of the story begs for certain alterations in the plot that may not have any literary or historical foundation. While Miller's re-imagination of certain parts of the original story, such as the life of the war captives in the Greek camps or the motivations of certain characters, can be justified with either the lack of prominent information or the possibility of a different outlook, the instances of unsubstantiated manipulations to the story are not few in number to have a measurable effect on the overall harmony of the novel. One of the most prominent examples of such manipulations can be easily recognized in Patroclus' relationship with the women around Achilles, especially those who have romantic affinity with the hero in canonical works. To illustrate, Patroclus' familial and platonic emotions towards Briseis is not returned on the mutual grounds in the novel. The insertion of Briseis' romantic affection towards Patroclus stems from the obviously amicable relationship the two share in both the novel, and the epic poem. Notwithstanding, this nonmutual affection is an original addition that only serves to highlight the characteristic traits of Patroclus. In Chapter Twenty-Four, right after Patroclus' comments on how he perceives Briseis to be a part of his family, a pivotal deviation from the original story takes place:

Her lips touched mine. I was so surprised I did not move. Her mouth was soft and a little hesitant. Her eyes were sweetly closed. Of habit, of its own accord, my mouth parted. A moment passed like this, the ground beneath us, the breeze sifting flower scents. Then she drew back, eyes down, waiting for judgment. My pulse sounded in my ears, but it was not as Achilles made it sound. It was something more like surprise, and fear that I would hurt her. I put my hands to hers. She knew, then. She felt it in the way I took her hand, the way my gaze rested on her. (253)

Briseis' sudden display of affection allows the readers to witness a genuinely kind-hearted reaction from Patroclus, further solidifying his positive and heroic image. Patroclus himself does not need or want this attention, however it elevates his position as a man worthy of respect and love in the eyes of the reader. In *the Iliad*, Patroclus' courteousness is stated through Briseis again, only in post-mortem and in a lament that still focuses on his promise to marry her to Achilles after the war is over. This monumental change to the original relationship between the two allows Miller to explore Patroclus as a gem among the rocks, as well as a man whose weakest spot is a heroic trait. Unlike in traditional tragedies, where a hero has a critical flaw called hamartia that causes their downfall, Patroclus' demise stems from his kind-heartedness: a value that is universally accepted as an exemplary trait of goodness, and a quality that most heroes share in modern mainstream media. The rest of the conversation between Briseis and Patroclus after the incident further exemplifies the bending of the story and the fictionalization of the canon:

"I'm sorry," she whispered. I shook my head, but could not think of what more to say. Her shoulders crept up, like folded wings. "I know that you love him," she said, hesitating a little before each word. "I know. But I thought that—some men have wives and lovers both." Her face looked very small, and so sad that I could not be silent. "Briseis," I said. "If I ever wished to take a wife, it would be you." (253)

Comparably to the rewriting, Briseis expects Achilles to become her husband in Homer's *The Iliad*, bestowing upon her the highest honor an enslaved woman in the ancient Greek culture could possibly achieve. This expectation is revealed in Book 19, when Briseis mourns over Patroclus' body and claims that Patroclus promised that she would be married to Achilles in front of the Myrmidons once the war is over (333-356). In contrast to the redirected version of Briseis' romantic expectations in *TSOA*, Homer's Briseis seems to lack the selfless motivations her Anatolian farm-girl double possesses, due to the intensity of the feelings she carries for Achilles being less unconditional than the love she harbors for Patroclus in the rewriting. In loving Patroclus, Briseis does not gain the privileges she could obtain by marrying Achilles, for which she admits to have been waiting in *The Iliad*, hence her intentions in the novel come off as purer and driven by unpremeditated motivations than the original. On one hand, the overall deviation in Miller's illustration of Briseis from her original representation in *The Iliad* elevates her from a position where her worth is tied to her status as a captured queen, bound to carry the weight of her new owner. This move aligns Miller's novel with the feminist revisionist mythmaking movement, as many scholars such as Alicia Ostriker (1987) argue that giving no voice to female characters in the myths that culturally shape society is a crime against women, which needs to be changed by female writers (*Stealing the Language—The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, 211). On the other hand, the changes in Briseis' story and the shift of her interest from Achilles to Patroclus ultimately puts the latter in a much more favorable position, as it helps to illustrate Patroclus as a heroic man who saves lives, in contrast to his hero lover who gains the title by slaying people instead.

Nonetheless, the pedestal on which Patroclus is placed in order to create a new sense of heroism in this story is not the only revision in the representations of the masculinity in *The Iliad*. Patroclus is never defined by his title as a warrior in *The Iliad*, although his capabilities as a good soldier is mentioned when he fights in Achilles' place. Similarly, Achilles' combat skills and rage are more defining factors in his personality than his humane characteristics, such as his worries about his legacy and his affection towards the people around him. In *TSOA*, both characters go under a makeover where their less masculine qualities are highlighted and serve as their main personal traits. For instance, Achilles' feminine beauty and his apathy towards other people's emotions undergo a revision in this retelling, where they are re-presented as innocence and naivete. Similarly, Patroclus' kind and forgiving nature is brought forth in his reactions to the reimagined scenarios which are carefully added by Miller into the dynamics of Patroclus' relationship with others.

Achilles' transition from a warlord with an unmatched rage and strength to a demigod with good intentions, who wants to be the first hero to be famous and happy (98) but is fated to an early demise in exchange of eternal glory. Miller focuses on portraying Achilles as someone who wants to defy the calamitous fate of heroes, which is an important element in every tragedy in classical literature. In his article entitled "The Aristotelian Concept of the Tragic Hero," Charles H. Reeves reminds his readers the following:

[...] if the drama invoke fear in us, it must place before us the misfortune of man like ourselves. But remember that the ourselves here includes Aristotle himself, his colleagues and pupils, and the main body of the literate public of Athens. (183)

As understood from the excerpt, the suffering of the tragic hero is an essential part of the story according to the Aristotelian concept of how a good tragedy should be. While Miller's interpretation of Achilles' story does not take away from the pain from which the hero suffers, her portrayal of Achilles and his goals beg the question whether it is necessary to make the heroes suffer in order to glorify their legacy. In *TSOA*, the most redeeming qualities of Achilles are the ones which are unrelated to his strength and

his many victories in the battlefield. His sometimes child-like naivety, and his loyalty to Patroclus are deliberately called to attention in a way that frees the characters from the critics' expectations of their roles in the story. Achilles, as the hero, is described as a young man who would choose happiness over glory had he not been forced by his fate to take part in a war that should not concern him. Miller's interpretation gives the readers an out of the rigid portrayal of any tragic hero, where she relates to the innate hope of any reader for the characters in the story to have an ending where they live happily ever after. Miller's retelling ultimately reaches the same end as the canonical texts about Achilles' demise, although not before humanizing Achilles' appearance as a tragic hero. She may not be able to alter the ending; however, she makes sure to give him a happy beginning, where the readers witness his carefree days as the prince of Phthia.

Miller's rewriting of Achilles does not stop with his internal goal to live a happy life with Patroclus, and continues in his relationships with the other characters around him. In order to highlight his utmost loyalty to Patroclus, and keep his eyes on the goal re-imagined by Miller, the bestiality of Achilles' former representations is replaced with a form of gullibility born out of inexperience in the real world, where he is not adored and feared as the son of a king and a goddess. One of these alterations are made to his relationship with women, specifically to the way he treats the women around her. Not only is he described as a loyal lover to Patroclus who abstains from touching the captive women he earns as his war prize, but his only remaining physical relationship with a woman, who is the princess of Scyros, is also transformed into a fit of misunderstanding, blamed onto his mother, Thetis.

Deidameia is the mother of Achilles' child, Neoptolemus in Statius' *Achilleid*, where Achilles disguises himself as a woman in the island of Scyros to escape from having to fight in the war. As Craig M. Russell writes in his article entitled "The Most Unkindest Cut: Gender, Genre, and Castration in Statius' *Achilleid* and *Silvae*," despite arriving at Scyros as a child, "[a]t some point during his stay on Scyros, Achilles has certainly reached the biological state of adult sexual capacity, as his rape of Deidameia and fathering of Neoptolemus prove" (Russel 95). In *TSOA*, this savagery is completely changed into a ruse planned by Achilles' mother in order to have a grandchild, since Achilles is destined to die early. In the novel, Achilles is taken from Pythia by her mother out of his will and is forced to crossdress himself as a female. His unison with Deidameia is rewritten as a consensual sexual relationship of two people who were both manipulated by Thetis. Deidameia is promised to have Achilles as her husband, and Achilles was tricked into believing that Thetis would bring Patroclus onto the island if he slept with the girl, which Patroclus immediately understands to be a lie as Achilles tells him the story (126). When Patroclus asks Achilles if Thetis took her because of their relationship, to which Achilles responds with, "Deidameia was because of you, I think," (130) further proving his gullibility born out of inexperience despite his traits that exceed human capabilities.

Highlighting the femininity of Achilles also helps draw the attention from Achilles' raw power to a much more fragile side of his, which are explained in great detail through his relationship with Patroclus. In Chapter 12, Achilles is presented in women's clothes, dancing in disguise for the guest of Lycomedes, who happens to be Patroclus, and his identity is about to be revealed. Patroclus recognizes Achilles when he sees his eyes, and Achilles introduces Patroclus as follows:

'Who is this man, Pyrrha?'

'No one!' Deidameia had seized Achilles' arm, was tugging at it.

At the same time, Achilles answered coolly, 'My husband.'

'He is not! That's not true!' Deidameia's voice rose high, startling the birds roosting in the rafters.

(122)

Achilles is no more portrayed as a natural born soldier, as Miller first portrays him as a boy who had to be taught how to hate, and kill. He is no longer defined by his rage and selfishness, nor is his understanding of love is still tied to the value he might receive from the person in whom he is interested. Being in a sexual, let alone a romantic relationship with another man as an adult is not a concept that was accepted in the ancient Greek societies. According to Ruth Mazo Karras, even in Roman culture not all men were considered penetrable, while some adult men were considered 'less of a man' for their penetrability. ("Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities", 1261) Because of his relationship with Patroclus, Achilles faces a threat of losing the respect of other people, for which he seems to have any care throughout the novel. This is perhaps another reason as to why Patroclus is chosen as the narrator, since adoring Achilles with feelings other than rage such as unconditional love and loyalty destroys the ideal heroic and masculine image attributed to Achilles in *The Iliad* and other forms of adaptations, especially in contemporary media. After all, who could know Achilles' less scary, and loving side better than his beloved companion, Patroclus? The retelling focuses on filling the gaps left in *The Iliad* about how Patroclus gained this title, and what makes him worthy of such a position in Achilles' life that his death alone compared to many of their comrades can cause Achilles to return to war at the expense of his life.

The freeing of Achilles from the traditionally heroic and masculine expectations are unfortunately tied to his manipulation by her mother, who, as a victim of rape and losing her autonomy over her body due to the will of gods that are more powerful than him, forces her own ideals onto her son, and causes him to have coitus with a woman with dubious consent. As Patroclus recalls it, Achilles describes the two times he had lain with Deidameia to oblige his mother in a way that portrays his unwillingness to move forward with the act, stating he had feared hurting Deidameia who was as small as a child, wanted it to be over as quickly as possible, and missed Patroclus (139). Similarly, Patroclus' freeing of traditionally masculine expectations also come at the expense of sexual abuse. Deidameia is the first to take advantage of him, which starts off as bullying as quoted below:

She slapped me. Her hand was small, but carried surprising force. It turned my head to the side, roughly. The skin stung, and my lip throbbed sharply where she had caught it with a ring. I had not been struck like this since I was a child. Boys were not usually slapped, but a father might do it to show contempt. Mine had. (135)

The power Deidameia is abusing comes from her social status and counts as her birthright, allowing her to trample over Patroclus' male privilege due to his status as a common man. Since his princehood has been stripped away with his exile and denunciation by his father, the only remaining factor that ties him to his past is the oath he had taken as a prince to protect Helen. However, his silence against Deidameia's violence stems from not his loss of princely title but his familial traumas caused by the contempt he received from his father. The reason for his father's dislike towards him lies within the lack of physical traits traditionally attributed to manhood and masculinity in Patroclus' appearance. Having been outcast by his father due to his unsatisfactory appearance, Miller's Patroclus cannot face the verbal abuse by Deidameia in a manner conventionally fitting to not just a man but a person deserving of Achilles' affection. In the following lines, Deidameia's taunting increases as she seems to have come to the same conclusion:

She bared her teeth at me, as if daring me to strike her in return. When she saw I would not, her face twisted with triumph. 'Coward. As craven as you are ugly. And half-moron besides, I hear. I do not understand it! It makes no sense that he should—' (135)

Despite the reasons she lists expressly, Deidameia cannot deny the unbreakability of the bond between Patroclus and her love interest, videlicet the greatest warrior promised to her as her future husband by Thetis. As Patroclus puts it, Deidameia had no power to drive a wedge between them, even as the mother of Achilles' unborn child (137). Therefore, Miller's reinterpretation of Patroclus' relationship with Achilles frees Deidameia from her violation as well; however, this is not a mere act of mercy in light of feminist revisionist ideals on a female character who is canonically assaulted by a strong man. Not unlike Thetis, Deidameia's acts project the sufferings she faces in her canonical representations. To put it another way, while she is no longer a victim of a horrendous crime committed against her by Achilles in Statius' *Achilleid*, she becomes the perpetrator of a similar transgression of one's sexual and physical boundaries in *TSOA*. When Deidameia takes advantage of Patroclus, it is not a product of Patroclus being physically dominated by her, but of his innate urge to sacrifice himself to provide, and the fear of being a disappointment:

Almost, I fled. But I couldn't bear to see her face broken open with more sorrow, more disappointment — another boy who could not give her what she wanted. So I allowed her hands, fumbling a little, to draw me to the bed [...] I will not say I was not aroused. A slow climbing tension moved through me. It was a strange, drowsy feeling, so different from my sharp, sure detest for Achilles. She seemed hurt by this, my heavy-lidded response. More indifference. And so I let myself move, made sounds of pleasure [...] (140)

Patroclus' intentions to stay and let Deidameia lure him into a sexual act in which he has no interest prove that he is needlessly selfless, and is willing to fix Achilles' mistakes for him. Just as he sacrifices himself in order to save the Greek soldiers after Achilles stays indifferent to the huge losses the Greek side faces without him, Patroclus sacrifices his autonomy over his body in order to save Deidameia from her mental and emotional destruction caused by Achilles' indifference towards her. The traumatizing effects of this sacrifice is described later in the chapter as quoted below:

When I found Achilles, I pressed myself to him in relief at the joy between us, at being released from her sadness and hurt.

Later, I almost convinced myself it had not happened, that it had been a vivid dream, drawn from the descriptions and too much imagination. But that is not the truth. (141)

As much as this foreshadowing accentuates the depths of Patroclus' loyalty and love toward Achilles, which is constantly mentioned in the novel in various descriptive ways, it may not justify the alteration of Deidameia as the perpetrator, and Thetis as the perpetrator, of the same crime from which they suffered at the hands of men. The reinvented feminine power in the patriarchal settings of the classical texts might have been a more welcomed change, had it not been used to highlight the vulnerabilities of the two male protagonists. This exchange for the re-negotiation of these heroic figures is also apparent in the relationship between Briseis and Patroclus, as her re-directed affection towards Patroclus eventually leads her to force herself onto Patroclus (p.235). In the end, Patroclus is seen sacrificing yet another part of himself in order to save someone else's feelings, and perhaps to prevent earning anyone's dislike towards himself. In his interaction with Briseis in Chapter Twenty-Four, Patroclus is met with the question of whether he has wanted to be a parent, to which he responds as quoted below:

"Do you not ever want children?" she asked. The question surprised me. I still felt half a child myself, though most my age were parents, several times over. [...] And then I understood, too late, what she had really been asking me. I flushed, embarrassed at my thoughtlessness. And humbled, too. I opened my mouth to say something. To thank her, perhaps. (254)

Miller's interpretation of Patroclus' psyche as a man who is not meant to be a soldier, but is fated to be the best Myrmidon creates a duality between the expectations of a traditional hero and the re-negotiated

traits of a hero whom the modern reader would accept as a man of high esteem. This interaction comes right after Patroclus' deliberation with Achilles on who the fated Myrmidon in the Fates' prophecy might be (250), where Patroclus is also oblivious to the fact that it is him, for he is not the most skilled soldier but the most respected person from Pythia due to his medicinal skills that helped the injured soldiers in the Greek camps over the years. Despite not knowing that he is fated to die in two years' time, he is already prepared to end his life when Achilles dies as prophesized on page 177. However, Briseis' question causes Patroclus to realize that he will die without an heir, unlike Achilles, who already has a son under Thetis' care, which Patroclus ponders on extensively:

That night I could not stop thinking of it: Briseis' and my child. I saw stumbling legs, and dark hair and the mother's big eyes. I saw us by the fire, Briseis and I, and the baby, playing with some bit of wood I had carved. Yet there was an emptiness to the scene, an ache of absence. Where was Achilles? Dead? Or had he never existed? I could not live in such a life. But Briseis had not asked me to. She had offered me all of it, herself and the child and Achilles, too. (254)

Patroclus' contemplation of leaving an heir in this world is cut short after he discusses the topic with Achilles and senses his jealousy in his words, which immediately makes him backtrack on his thoughts. Seeing Achilles deal with such a foreign feeling as a prince who has never lost anything, Patroclus feels "cruel, suddenly, for bringing it up" (256). His fear of disappointing people continues in his interactions with Briseis, too, as he still sees "the softness in her eyes" when she looks at him, and tries his best to return it despite their feelings not being mutual (256). As evident in these examples, Patroclus is deliberately portrayed as a man who is eager to satisfy others at the expense of his own well-being, which can be counted as the opposite of what a good hero who is well versed in combat skills would even consider in a classical text.

Patroclus' idealization as a hero whose noble qualities are more aligned with the values of the modern-day society is encoded into his relationships with the women that were associated with Achilles in both Homer's poems and other classical works. *TSOA* simply aims to break the tradition of the emotional and sexual abuse towards women that were sadly not regarded as problematic in the classical era as they are today. Nevertheless, despite the appealing rationale behind these changes, the execution of the alterations to the representation of masculine power in the original stories come at the expense of almost vilifying the female characters canonically tied to Achilles. Deidemeia, the mother of Achilles' child in *TSOA* as well as certain classical texts, holds Patroclus as responsible for Achilles' indifference towards her after Patroclus arrives at the island of Scyros.

Conclusion

As much as the story of Achilles in *The Iliad* is unique in its retelling of the Trojan War and the interactions between the characters, it is not the only retelling that has survived from the classical era. While Homer focuses on Achilles' wrath, and recites the poem around the theme of rage and pride, other accounts focus on different aspects of Achilles' life and personality, such as his relationship with Patroclus in Aeschylus' *Myrmidons* in the Hellenistic era, or his earlier life before arriving to Troy as described by Statius in *The Achilleid* during the Roman Era. Aside from literary works, Achilles became the topic of philosophical texts as well, with *Symposium* by Plato being one of the most well-known works from this period. Needless to reiterate, every prominent philosopher, tragedian or poet had their unique perspective on the myths that they pondered and worked on, and brought out their own interpretation of these tales that are already well known to the public in illo tempore. The trend of retelling these stories in contemporary literature is therefore not in a misalignment with the tradition that was followed by the artists and scholars in antiquity. Madeline Miller's prose on Achilles' life from

the perspective of Patroclus follows the same tradition by adding her inference of the myths surrounding Achilles' life and overall personality.

Miller's approach to Achilleis' story is heavily influenced by the "canonical" works, but uses a fresh perspective to create a new song dedicated to the greatest Greek hero. Although it is not an ode, the language is very illustrative and stunning, detailed with metaphors and similes in an almost Virgilian manner. Thus even in its prose form, it reads like an epic told in the first-person narrative. It may not be performed as one, but it is a song of Achilles that is sung by Patroclus, in life and death. Since Patroclus and Achilles are originally childhood friends, the chosen narrator of the song is one of the most suitable characters aside from Thetis who can talk about Achilles from a personal perspective and has enough knowledge about him in combat as well. With 256 out of 352 pages, approximately seventy percent of the novel is dedicated to Achilles as a civilian in the way that Patroclus viewed him since their first encounter before he became a warrior and was considered a weapon in the Trojan War. This allows Miller to explore Achilles as a dynamic character much like Homer, but she chooses to focus more on his multidimensionality by starting from his past as Statius did.

In the Q&A on her website, Miller states that it was important for her to "stay faithful to the events of Homer's narrative," while still exploring the parts that were not explained in detail. In the same interview she claims "Although Homer tells us what his characters do, he doesn't tell us much of why they do it. Who was Achilles? And why did he love Patroclus so much?" In this sense, writing this novel was a way for her to find an answer to the questions she had upon reading Homer's works. She was able to make the obscurities more explicit, both in content and characterization, while staying as true to the format and context as possible. Exploring Achilles and Patroclus' relationship also benefits her writing since Miller's aim is to explore Achilles as a more rounded character and put him in a brighter light. Her portrayal of Achilles doesn't only detail Homer's descriptions but also puts certain scholars' ideas on him and his virtues into question, such as Plato's, who believed Achilles to be a commendable character. Patroclus who knows him as a friend, a lover, and a comrade is therefore the perfect choice for a narrator.

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