

The Echo of Songs: Understanding the Myth Function of Homer's *Iliad* and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*

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Abstract

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller is a modern retelling of the two famous characters, Achilles and Patroclus, from the still-echoing Song of Ilium, i.e., *The Iliad*. The novel recounts, and more importantly, builds the lives of the two before the Trojan War. Miller's portrayal of the two echoes Plato's *Symposium*, where he dubbed them ideal lovers during Phaedrus' speech. Despite Homer never labelling them as such, Achilles and Patroclus constantly find themselves in queer narratives. *The Song of Achilles* comes next in line in a series of queer retellings, passing through the lenses of ancient and contemporary writers. Miller continues that discourse while also adding more depth to the female characters that were left untouched by Homer. Such retellings shroud the already untrustworthy nature of their myth in more layers. This paper aims to understand those layers comprising the triad of form, meaning, and symbol of the original myth with the help of Roland Barthes' theories from his *Mythologies*. The original myth being the form, the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus being the meaning, and their queer representation being the symbol.

Keywords: Queer retellings, mythology, myth function, *The Iliad*, *The Song of Achilles*, *Symposium*.

Introduction

Myths have always been a part of the human experience, irrespective of a proper definition or even beliefs. A general understanding of myth will leave us with the claim that myths explain the existence of all there is and all there will be. It is in no way scientific or logical; rather, it is deeply rooted in tradition and is given credence by people believing in it (Cavendish 1980). People believe myths set a framework for human existence, dictating at every step the right way to live (Eliade 1963). The right values to abide by or the right way to perform a ritual are all a product of myths. Although rituals were not the origin of all myths, they were performed

alongside a recitation of the myths (Dalziel 1967). These recitations were then modified repeatedly by the orators at every ceremony (Manton 1967). These constant revisions would then dictate the way rituals were performed and also provide a newer set of values. For example, the ancient Greeks would eat the sacrificed meat among worshippers and burn the inedible parts like bones and internal organs as an offering to the Gods, after the myth of Prometheus tricking Zeus out of his offerings (Cavendish).

As an exemplary model for humanity, the changes in myths mean changes in cultural values. A myth is a living, breathing entity that never ceases to evolve. Each evolution comes with a different set of cultural beliefs. Eventually, the myth is no longer tied to a ritual but to a society in a constant state of flux. As Wimsatt declared, "The poem belongs to the public." As such, the myth belongs to the society and is no longer in the jurisdiction of the orator.

This cultural meaning of myths is not restricted to being philologically sound as long as it contributes to the overall unity of the text. Myth, in essence, becomes a connotation (Barthes 1957). Barthes calls myth a type of speech that has layers of Semiological significance. He considers the first layer of meaning as 'denotative' while the second layer as 'connotative'. The first layer, or the first order of significance, is the literal meaning of words from the text of a myth, and the second order of significance is the cultural meaning assigned to the myth.

The second order of significance is the product of the culture. The culture decides the reception of myth and its subsequent myth function at any given time. The earlier example of Zeus being cheated out of his offering by Prometheus was interpreted by Hesiod as Zeus willingly letting Prometheus trick him, so he could use it as an excuse to forbid humans from using fire (Kirk 1973). However, this version is not widely accepted, and it is generally believed that Prometheus actually tricked Zeus. Interpretation of myths is highly subjective, and one must understand the cultural context behind them. Knowing something is subjective is as important as understanding why it is subjective.

This paper will discuss the cultural context behind interpretations by analysing the myth-function of Achilles and Patroclus, the two most famous characters from *The Iliad*. These two characters have served as a source of inspiration for various authors from antiquity to modernity. Their myth has been echoed throughout history from one poet to the next, which gives us a remarkable insight into myth functions. This paper will first discuss the myth function of *The Iliad* by Homer, then *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, shedding light

on how the myth functions of both these works act according to Barthes' second order of significance and were influenced by their respective times.

The Iliad: The Song of Ilium Begins

The word Iliad literally translates to "poem of Ilium" (Merriam-Webster). Ilium, or Ilium, is another name for Troy, the impenetrable city that hosted the ten-year-long war between the Greeks and the Trojans in Homer's epic *The Iliad*. All Homeric works were based on oral tradition, and poets would sing or recite the epics during ceremonies (Lattimore 37). Hence, *The Iliad* is also called The Song of Ilium. This song has been echoing since its creation, with every poet or rhapsode adding their own flair to the epic (Eliade 1963).

The extant piece of *The Iliad* is part of the Epic Cycle of the Trojan War. Most literate Greeks from the Classical Period (5th-4th century BCE) believed that the Trojan War was part of their history and not merely a myth (Lattimore 12). Lattimore notes that some aspects of the story, such as minor details or underlying subtexts, were debated, but the skeleton of the epic was undisputed. The premise of *The Iliad* is the events of the tenth year of the Trojan War, beginning with the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon and ending with the death of Hector. The Greeks have already spent nine years on the outskirts of Troy, pillaging the surrounding areas, but have been unable to enter the city. The rest of the story of the Trojan War (the cause, the beginning, and the fall of Troy) is reconstructed through fragments of the extant pieces of the post-Homeric Epic Cycle.

While *The Iliad* doesn't recount in detail the events of the entirety of the war, it keeps itself preoccupied with Achilles. The story begins with Achilles' rage and ends with Hector's funeral, a testament to his belated mercy. He is the embodiment of the poem's central theme: *kleos*, which means glory, honour, or fame. Achilles, being a demigod born of human Peleus and the goddess Thetis, is motivated by his honour. Achilles rages against Agamemnon, his fellow soldiers, and even against fate itself, all for his glory.

Doing everything for *kleos* was one of the desirable qualities of a noble life during Homer's time. Achilles provides the foundation for the ideal virtue, as the ancient Greeks not only worshipped gods but also heroes. As Xenophanes proposes, "...from the beginning, everyone has learnt according to Homer". Homeric virtues consider the ideal man to be brave, skilled in battle, and of exceeding beauty (Erwin 2011). Achilles fits in this picture of the ideal Greek perfectly. With the epithet "swift-footed" and "lion-hearted" (Bowra 1972), he is considered

the greatest warrior in the Greek army, so much so that even his armour itself strikes fear in the Trojans without him actually wearing it (*The Iliad* Book 16). He is also known for his remarkable appearance with a tall and slender body, light-coloured hair, and a noble face (Strauss 2007).

However, for Achilles, this honour becomes his doom. After the death of Patroclus, he is overcome with grief, rage, and a gnawing sense of responsibility. Patroclus was his closest companion, and killing him is like killing his honour. Even in his grief, Thetis warned him again of the prophecy, "...your own death awaits you full soon after that of Hector" (*The Iliad* Book 18), yet Achilles chose to kill Hector to avenge Patroclus. He also dragged Hector's body behind his chariot, not letting him get a proper burial, which further tarnished his honourable image.

Achilles' grief blinded him so much that he let go of all his honour and unleashed a tide of bloodshed that even choked the river Scamander. He killed so many Trojans that he almost brought the fall of Troy before the prophesied time. However, *The Iliad* is not about the fall of Troy; it's about the fall of Achilles. "The tragedy is his, the result of his own choice" (Lattimore 48). Every step he took, in his arrogance and violence, led him closer to his own downfall.

The Iliad is essentially a book about valour and the glorifying of the brutal violence of war (Sellers 2001). It lays down the paradigm for the ideal Greek life, to die and kill for honour. Apollo describes Achilles as a violent barbarian (*The Iliad* Book 24 33-54) as he is the exemplary model for other Greeks. On the other hand, Patroclus, the reason for Achilles' suicidal rage, is suspiciously absent from the story. We only know of Patroclus through his intimate interactions with Achilles. Upon his death, Achilles wailed and tore his hair, tried to kill himself, and would not let anyone touch Patroclus' body, and yet we know practically nothing about him. This gap gave future scholars plenty of room to play, fleshing out his story from bits and pieces, shaping it however they wanted.

The Song of Achilles: The Echo Continues

The Song of Achilles (2011) by Madeline Miller continues the legacy of retellings of *The Iliad*. Unlike the former epic, this novel puts Patroclus in the centre stage. If *The Iliad* was about the fall of Achilles, this book is about the fall of Patroclus. It traces his story from his childhood to his death, mapping his relationship with Achilles from their first encounter to

their parting. With Patroclus as the narrator, we see Achilles through his eyes. Miller builds on the narrative of the two being lovers from Plato's *Symposium* and fills in details about Patroclus' life that were otherwise missing from *The Iliad*.

Miller rewrites Patroclus, the warrior, into Patroclus, the healer. In *The Iliad*, Patroclus was the "bravest of the Myrmidons", a hero in his own right. However, in this novel, Patroclus lacks the talent and the will to fight. He is delicate, compassionate, and gets queasy at the sight of violence. While fighting, he cannot kill and has to be saved by Achilles, almost like a "damsel in distress". Miller's Patroclus is a sweet, fragile boy cast opposite the dazzling demigod warrior Achilles. Their dynamic is that of a stereotypical heterosexual relationship (Campion 2022) where one is overtly feminine and the other overtly masculine.

Setting the obvious gender roles aside, Patroclus is also an active agent in saving the slave women in the novel. Homer's Patroclus was kind but passive towards the Trojan women who were taken as war prizes. However, Miller's Patroclus asks Achilles to take in the women to save them from being used. Miller gives a voice to the slave women and highlights the misogynistic aspect of war, where women are collateral damage. Where Homer's time glorified war and considered women as prizes (Sellers 2001), *The Song of Achilles* tries to make amends by replacing the violence of the former epic with a humanized version of Achilles and Patroclus. The focus shifts from military courage and violence to tenderness, loyalty, and righteous bravery.

Although the novel portrays a humanized Achilles, it does not entirely rewrite his personality, as it does with Patroclus. No matter how the tale is spun, Achilles remains the skilled weapon that he is. Odysseus comments in the novel, "You can use a spear as a walking stick, but that will not change its nature" (195). Achilles had always been a ruthless killer; it was Patroclus who brought out the humanity in him. But when he died, he took that humanity with him. Achilles ends up as a merciless butcher in every version of the story. As he finally gets his revenge on Hector, he proclaims, "I will kill you and eat you raw" (328), shredding the last bit of humanity left in him.

In both versions, Patroclus was the mortal part of Achilles (Gonzalez 2017). He was the human half of the full demigod. As Patroclus muses, "He is half of my soul, as the poets say" (233), Miller alludes to the concept of soulmates from Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*. Aristophanes theorizes that the primal human beings used to have double limbs

and double faces and were male, female, and hermaphrodite, depending on the combination. Zeus, fearing that they were too powerful, sliced them in half. Since then, one half is forever in search of its other half (*Symposium* 191). Miller also takes the idea of Achilles and Patroclus being lovers from Plato. In Phaedrus' speech, Plato mentions Achilles sacrificing himself to avenge his lover Patroclus, claiming that Achilles was the *erômenos* (beloved) and Patroclus the *erastês* (lover) in their pederastic relationship (*Symposium* 178-180).

Miller builds on Plato's ideas and Homer's foundation while also acknowledging the need for tolerance of sexual identities in the 21st century. She presents a novel that reveres the classic while appealing to the modern reader. As a song of war and honour, *The Iliad* was relevant for Homer's time, but *The Song of Achilles* is meant for the current society concerned with empathy and compassion.

Conclusion

As discussed above, the myth function, or the interpretation behind myths, changed drastically from *The Iliad* to *The Song of Achilles*. The biggest difference can be seen in the personality of Patroclus. While Achilles remains largely unchanged, following the path of glory and violence, Patroclus settles into the role of a domesticated warrior. The Patroclus of Homer's time was a testament to Homeric strength and might not even look kindly upon the delicate Patroclus of the 21st century. However, neither of the two can be said to be the only acceptable version of him. Rather, it highlights the sensibilities of the times and what the audience demands from its author. Miller's Patroclus is simply the result of connotative meaning that has superseded the "original" myth, which was the first order of significance. In the 21st century, with the growing acceptance of femininity and queer culture, Achilles and Patroclus find a comfortable place to enjoy domestic bliss as much as they want. However, this also calls for further study into the tendency of the contemporary audience to prefer stereotypical heteronormative roles even in queer relationships.

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