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# **Achilles' Destiny: A Metaphor of Social Impositions in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles***

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## **Abstract**

Throughout history, Greek mythology and heroic stories have occupied a prominent place in art and literature. Today, it is becoming increasingly popular to retell these stories from a contemporary perspective, influenced by a modern understanding and taking into consideration feminist and queer values. By making use of Patroclus as a narrator, a marginal figure in Homeric literature, Madeline Miller presents a new perspective on Achilles' character in *The Song of Achilles*, especially remarking his and Patroclus' homoerotic relationship –which has been traditionally omitted–, his loving and affectionate traits, and his character development throughout the Trojan War.

The goal of this TFG is to analyse Miller's portrayal of Achilles from a gender studies perspective, arguing that he develops a very feminine side during his childhood but ends up being corrupted with the toxic masculinity behaviour imposed on him during the war. My objective is to prove that the author has left behind any fateful understanding of Achilles' destiny and has rather represented it as a social imposition based on gender norms that corrupt his inner nature. Hence, although Achilles has the power to choose going to the war or not in the novel, he is convinced to go by the rest of the men under the argument that he will lose any chance of greatness if he refuses to fight. It is the ideal masculine expression in antiquity what endorses him to join the battle, because refusing to adapt to these gendered standards would undervalue his condition as prince of Phthia.

**Keywords:** *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller, Achilles, Patroclus, gender roles, destiny, femininity, masculinity





## 0. Introduction

Throughout history, mythology has always been a main source for literary topics. Myths have been retold and reinterpreted endlessly, reflecting in these new visions the conventions of each society. The story of Achilles and Patroclus is an example of this. It has been reconsidered multiple times, traditionally from a heteronormative point of view – a great recent example is *Troy* (2004), in which Petersen portrays a very heroic and typically masculine Achilles and where the figure of Patroclus is relegated to a less heroic companion, who does not stand out in the battlefield at all<sup>1</sup>. Previous representations of Achilles such as *The Fury of Achilles* (1962) sustain a similar portrayal. In this case, Girolami portrays the hero as an extremely aggressive individual – so much that the film cover claims, “the immortal killing machine unleashed.” However, ever since the rise of the LGBTQ+ movement in the 60s and its consequent influence on society’s standards, along with the development of queer and gender studies, some contemporary authors have reconceived the hero in a completely new perspective. Madeline Miller is one of these authors: in *The Song of Achilles* (2011), she has given voice to Patroclus, Achilles’ *therapon* and *philtatos*, the most beloved comrade, who unveils the hero’s most sensible traits, presenting him not only as the *aristos achaion*, the best of the Greeks, but as an affectionate lover as well.

Miller’s novel is a retelling of Homer’s *Iliad*, but it does not just focus on the war but on Achilles’ life before the conflict and his relationship with Patroclus as well. Although Patroclus is a traditionally marginal character, his relationship with Achilles is

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<sup>1</sup> Madeline Miller insists thoroughly in this trait in *The Song of Achilles* – Patroclus constantly minimizes his fighting skills. However, in the *Iliad*, although he is brave enough to fight in the battlefield dressed as Achilles, he is a much better horse rider than a soldier. Achilles refers to him as “Patroclus, prince and master horseman” in *Iliad*, XVI. 151. Furthermore, many authors including Miller have pointed out Patroclus’ medical abilities: Homer, in the *Iliad*, emphasises Patroclus’ ability to cure Eurypylus’ thigh in *Iliad*, XI, 1008-15.

extremely passionate, fact proven by his death being the greatest pain in Achilles' life. The author explores this relationship throughout Patroclus' point of view, as he becomes the narrator of the novel and is capable of unveiling Achilles' most vulnerable and sensible traits. Through this resourceful change of perspective, Miller can deepen into Achilles and Patroclus' homoerotic relationship. The novel begins when they are children and meet at Peleus' palace, and narrates their instruction under Chiron's tutelage, Achilles' recruitment for the war, his attempt to avoid the conflict hiding in Skyros, and finally their arrival at Troy, where Patroclus dies.

Although Miller retells Achilles and Patroclus' story from her cis-hetero-normative point of view, which can be construed as problematic<sup>2</sup>, she challenges our traditional perception of men being violent rooted in toxic masculinity by showcasing the tenderness in Achilles and Patroclus' relationship. Presenting their romance from Patroclus' point of view, a traditionally marginal character, allows the author to reveal Achilles' most sensitive and vulnerable traits, as well as putting them into contrast with his heroic nature. As Tony McKenna explains in "*The Song of Achilles*: How the Future Transforms the Past": "Miller is able to fully bring out the contradiction in Achilles between his almost invincible battle persona and his passivity and credulousness" (McKenna, 2015: 93). Many of the traits that Patroclus describes in Achilles are socially associated to a feminine behaviour, hence contradicting the traditionally masculine heroic character construction and what we nowadays consider "toxic masculinity."

Nevertheless, the concept of "toxic masculinity" should be used carefully, since its meaning is not completely defined – as Carol Harrington explains, it is usually used

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<sup>2</sup> Because *The Song of Achilles* tells the love story of Achilles and Patroclus, it is a media representation of a queer masculine relationship. However, Miller is not a queer man, which might be controversial since some might consider her to be appropriating from the popularization of the LGBTQ+ productions in media.

to label marginalized men that have grown with violent tendencies (Harrington, 2021: 346-7). Usually, it refers to individuals who cannot control their destructive behaviours and whose emotions are usually invalidated, especially those of sadness and love since they are traditionally assigned to a feminine expression. This notion is based on the gender dichotomy of women theoretically being more susceptible to their feelings, while men can repress them and behave in a more judicious manner. This notion was especially present in ancient societies such as the Greek, because women were thought to have an inferior soul, which led them to be ruled by men, as Aristotle argues in *Politics*:

The soul by nature contains a part that rules and a part that is ruled, and we say that each of them has a different virtue, that is to say, one belongs to the part that has reason and one to the nonrational part. It is clear, then, that the same holds in other cases as well, so that most instances of ruling and being ruled are natural. For free rules slaves, male rules female, and male rules child in different ways, because, while the parts of the soul are present in all these people, they are present in different ways. (Aristotle, 1998: 23)

However, when analysing masculinity in the context of gender studies, it should be addressed as “masculinities” rather than a single “masculinity,” since each individual has its own expression and definition of it, and each social and personal context imposes one or another definition of masculinity. *The Song of Achilles*, for instance, has a very different approach to this term and shows two contradictory contexts: Patroclus is the only character that has been raised within a cruel masculine context he does not fit in, while Achilles has grown up free of this oppression and is the one who undergoes the social pressure to fit this “toxic” masculine social standard.

On the other hand, Miller’s career endorses her to be faithful to the *Iliad*’s content in her retelling: she has a BA and MA from Brown University in Latin and Ancient Greek. Although Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship is barely hinted in Homer’s text, it was already considered in antiquity: Plato mentions Achilles and Patroclus in his

*Symposium* while talking about love, and there is evidence of a lost Aeschylus' tragedy which mentions multiple kisses between both boys (Sinha, 2017: 161). Hence, retelling the *Iliad* focusing on Patroclus' and Achilles' relationship cannot be considered anachronistic, because it was an interpretation already accepted by many authors in antiquity. This is a very important point, since many modern interpretations of the story have completely omitted any homoerotic romances in Achilles' portrayal; for instance, in *Troy* (2004), Petersen makes Achilles and Patroclus cousins, which completely disregards any homoerotic trait in their relationship. However, although some authors would not consider Achilles and Patroclus lovers, the dynamics of their relationship were commonly discussed among those who believed there was a romantic aspect in their relationship:

“Believe me, Socrates. You have only to look at humankind's love of honour and you will be surprised at your absurdity regarding the matters I have just mentioned, unless you think about it and reflect how strongly people are affected by the desire to become famous and ‘to lay up immortal glory for all time.’ For the sake of this they are prepared to run risks even more than for their children – spend their money, endure any kind of suffering, even die in the cause. Do you suppose,” she went on, “that Alcestis would have died to save Admetus, or Achilles would have sacrificed his life to avenge Patroclus, or your Athenian king Codrus would have perished before his time for the sake of his sons' succession, if they had not thought that the memory of their virtue, which indeed we still have of them, would be immortal?” (Plato, 2008: 46)

Although in the context of the novel homosexual relationships between boys are not unusual, they become suspicious once both become adults. Homosexuality was not completely condemned in antiquity, as Miller points out in *Song of Achilles*, the moment when the Greek arrive at Troy and the soldiers are assigned tents to sleep in:

‘Excellent. One tent's enough, I hope? I've heard that you prefer to share. Rooms and bedrolls both, they say.’  
Heat and shock rushed through my face. Beside me, I heard Achilles' breath stop.  
‘Come now, there's no need for shame – it's a common enough thing among boys.’  
He scratched his jaw, contemplated. ‘Though you're not really boys any longer. How old are you?’ (Miller, 2011: 165)

It was normal for young boys to maintain relationships, as Bryne Fone explains: “Homosexuality was, in Dorian Greece, and to a lesser extent in Attic Greece, legal, sanctioned, praised; it was invested with a religious and ethical significance, central to the maintenance of the state and the development of manly virtue” (Fone, 1980; cited in Sinha, 2017: 160). However, there were specific roles attributed to either partners: *erastes* and *eromenos*, terms traditionally used in ancient Greece to describe homosexual relationships, as one represents the older, wiser, and honourable partner, while the other is the younger, more delicate, beautiful, beardless, and almost feminine one (Sinha, 2016: 161). This power dynamic was very common, and even expected in any homoerotic relationship. Plato discusses it regarding Patroclus’ and Achilles’ relationship: on the one hand, Achilles was the most beautiful, but he was at the same time the most powerful, so he would act both as the *erastes* or the *eromenos*:

[...] he [Achilles] nevertheless dared to make the choice of standing up for his love Patroclus and avenging him; thus he also died, and died for his sake. (Aeschylus actually talks nonsense when he asserts that it was Achilles who was the lover of Patroclus: Achilles was not only more beautiful than Patroclus but also more beautiful than all the rest of the heroes, and still beardless; and according to Homer he was much younger). (Plato, 2008: 10)

A similar portrayal is seen in Sosias’ vase, dated from the sixth century BCE. In this ceramic, Patroclus is presented as the *erastes* and Achilles as the *eromenos*, considering physical traits such as the beard. However, Achilles acts paternally towards Patroclus, as he is curing his wounds. These terms are closely related to the binary discrimination between feminine and masculine, which will be discussed further in this dissertation. However, Miller’s retelling is severely influenced by modern conventions – she stays away from these pederastic behaviours and prefers to portray Achilles and Patroclus as equals. This matter will be explored further in the dissertation, in a chapter focused on defining the notions of gender and gender roles, in order to analyse *The Song of Achilles*.

## 0.1. Methodology and research question

Having briefly considered the context in which Patroclus and Achilles' relationship has been portrayed in media, and how masculine and feminine traits are considered regarding the dynamics of their relationship, in this dissertation I intend to analyse Madeline Miller's retelling contemplating the way Achilles' destiny is used to develop *The Song of Achilles*' plot, and how his personality consequently changes influenced by it. Rather than considering his destiny an undeniable fate, I argue that Miller has represented it as a social imposition: since Achilles is the prince of Phthia, he is expected and mostly forced to participate in the war of Troy (Jiménez, 2020: 34). Although the prophecy is regularly mentioned throughout the novel, what really convinces Achilles to participate in the war is the promise of greatness, constantly reminded to him by the rest of the Greek men. What is especially interesting by this way of reinterpreting destiny and Achilles' behaviour is how it can be examined as a parallel to the gender dichotomy: he is forced to abandon his "feminine" traits in order to become a much more "masculine" individual. As Miller explains in an interview with Tom Ranzweiler, this faith acts as a "poison" that corrupts his inner nature and pushes him into a "toxic" masculine behaviour ("Was Achilles Gay?" 20:55-21:18).

In order to support this hypothesis, I intend to analyse *The Song of Achilles* focusing on Patroclus' description of Achilles, and how the latter progressively changes throughout the novel. By pointing out the "feminine" and the "masculine" traits that characterize the hero, bearing in mind Judith Butler's notions on gender expression and socially established gender roles, I intend to justify this corruption caused by Achilles' destiny attributing it to his personality change once he arrives at Troy. The objective of this analysis is to argue that gender roles affect everyone within the patriarchal structure, an idea that is defended by Feminism and the LGBTQ+ movement. Both

social fights are closely related: they intend to point out the social oppression of gender roles, how women are inherently considered as inferior, and how men are forced to behave in a certain way.

This research fits between gender studies, classical studies, and theory on classical retelling. Since it considers different fields of study, this approach on Miller's *The Song of Achilles* fills an unexplored space between different subjects. Other authors, such as Carla Jiménez in "Name a Hero who was Happy: A Gender Studies Analysis of Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*" and Leticia González in "Classical Tradition and Reception Studies in Contemporary Literature Written in English: *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller," have a similar perspective in the study of the novel – the former analyses the novel from a gender studies perspective, while the latter approaches the research focusing on the retelling aspect of the novel. However, these studies do not contemplate *The Song of Achilles* in the same way that this research does. Therefore, my research fits into this aforementioned unexplored field.

My intention is to expand on the influence that society's standards and gender roles have on Achilles' behaviour in the novel through a close reading analysis of Miller's retelling, as well as considering the influence that archontic literature receives from each society's standards and considering Miller's arguments to retell Achilles and Patroclus' story in this manner. To accomplish my objective, I take into consideration Abigail Derecho's essay "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction" in order to justify Miller's approach on her retelling, as well as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999) to analyse Achilles' gender expression in *The Song of Achilles* regarding Butler's arguments on the subject.



## **1. Research frame**

To provide a thorough analysis of Achilles' evolution throughout Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, it is necessary to explain some aspects that will help understand the author's motive to retell the story in this manner, as well as some concepts regarding gender, gender roles and gender expression that are reflected in Achilles' portrayal in the novel.

### **1.1. Retellings throughout history**

It is important to highlight the fact that Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is not an original story: it is based in a mythological tradition found in Homer's *Illiad*. Therefore, it is referred as a "retelling," although at times this term could undermine the legitimacy of the content since it is a concept close to fan fiction. On this matter, Derecho's essay on archontic literature contemplates fan fiction's importance as a literary genre. She argues that it "has existed for thousands of years and includes, for example, ancient Greek and Roman literature, such as Homer's epic poems" (Derecho, 2015: 62), which is especially relevant since the *Iliad* has been considered multiple times a reference text regarding Achilles' story. However, it is important to note that the poem is just an interpretation of a previous oral tradition, and hence *The Song of Achilles* is so as well – therefore, Miller's retelling from Patroclus' perspective, and highlighting Achilles' and Patroclus' relationship, shall not be considered merely "fiction" because it is supported in ancient testimonies such as Homer and Plato, as already noted.

It is important to define the concept of archontic literature, fan fiction and, by extension, retelling. Derecho elucidates this genre as one emerged especially during the seventeenth century "to highlight the inequalities of women's situations in their culture

by creating new versions of earlier stories and producing a contrast between the old and new tales” (Derecho, 2015: 68). However, it is also meant to emphasize political and social issues that are perpetuated in previous writings. Miller’s retelling, therefore, has the same intention. As she has explained in her interview with Tom Ranzweiler, her goal was to focus on Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship, rather than on the war, since it has been popularly omitted. Influenced by the LGBTQ+ movement, the author modifies some aspects of the story to make it fit into current conventions. Moreover, although that is not thoroughly developed in this dissertation, she also retells the story from a feminist perspective: she gives Briseis a complex personality and an important role in the novel, as well as pointing out multiple times the inequalities women suffered in the context of the novel. Hence, *The Song of Achilles* fits into Derecho’s definition of archontic literature.

In his essay “Women Writers and the Fictionalisation of the Classics,” Edwin Gentzler points out the difference and the importance between translating a text from a masculine or a feminine point of view, and the consequent “post-translation” elements – retellings and reinterpretations. In a similar way that it is very relevant for Emily Wilson to have translated the *Iliad* recently, since her words suggest a new feminine perspective on the story, Madeline Miller’s fictionalisation also takes a very important part in the reviewing of classical texts, which endorse classical studies to apply a gender roles perspective in its considerations. Having a female author to take a new perspective in the interpretation of classical stories creates a completely new discourse: “New transgressive and transformative voices are emerging, ones that are challenging the very definition of the fields of both classical and translation studies” (Gentzler, 2019: 280). This is the reason why *The Song of Achilles* has been selected as the object of this dissertation: it allows a very complex reading from a contemporary point of view.

## 1.2. Notions on gender and gender roles

Before analysing Miller's contemporary portrait of Achilles, it is important to clarify what "feminine" and "masculine" actually mean in our current sociocultural context. Judith Butler's reflexions of this matter in *Gender Trouble* (1999) continue to be a landmark in gender studies after its publication more than two decades ago. In the text, Butler argues that gender is socially determined through socially imposed cultural notions. Not only biological traits are considered, but "the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute "identity" and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer" (Butler, 1999: 7), an idea that can be clearly recognized in *The Song of Achilles*: Greek women, in general, do not participate in politics, or have a saying in any relevant matter about the war; Trojan women (Briseis, for instance), on the other hand, are reduced to an even worse condition: they constitute a prize won by the soldiers, one that can be stolen and taken from another man because their humanity is disregarded.

In our particular western context, gender roles have been considered in a binary dichotomy: men are expected to behave in a certain masculine way, following socially imposed conventions such as being strong, virile, and even violent, while women are expected to act contrarily, presenting themselves as beautiful, fragile, and socially unprofitable. However, these impositions are solely based in attributes, as Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*. These attributes are constructed by opposition: those features seen as appropriate for women, such as being elegant and graceful, are usually improper for men. Therefore, in this case gender is constructed by each individual by fitting into social standards: "the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (Butler, 1999: 33). Gender is, therefore, a spectrum based in social norms based on power dynamics, that minimize

women's contribution in political organization and optimize men's opportunities to succeed.

Gender was not an unknown concept in antiquity, as Lin Foxhall argues in *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity* (2013). She exposes that some authors such as Aristotle already tried to define "male" and "female." For instance, the Hippocratic writers understood women's body as "undercooked" inferior males, incapable of controlling their inner nature and constantly succumbing to their emotions: "a man who has no self-control, no *sophrosyne*, and is a slave to his passions, is behaving in a feminine way that is inappropriate for true men and citizens" (Foxhall, 2013: 84). Foxhall applies Butler's gender theory to antiquity, arguing that it is important to understand our past and where we come from. Her analysis determines that in antiquity, "gendered bodies were thus constructed through 'appropriately' gendered bodily practices and habits" (Foxhall, 2013: 89), which is exactly what Butler argues: gender is merely an exterior expression, based on the undervaluation of women. Miller, therefore, contributes to the reinterpretation of our tradition under modern conventions: she attributes Achilles feminine traits, without denying his heroic nature, and shows the true effects of an imposed "masculine" behaviour derived in a destructive *hybris*.

The Greek concepts of *erastes* and *eromenos* are, therefore, closely related to this dichotomy since it differentiates between a primary and a secondary role. As already mentioned, Achilles and Patroclus' relationship was discussed because Achilles would fit in both roles and would therefore challenge social conventions on homosexual relationships. The *eromenos*, on the one hand, is the younger partner, usually delicate and graceful, submitted to the *eromenos*' will. Achilles fits completely in these standards, not only traditionally but in Miller's retelling as well: "I gaped at the cold shock of his beauty, deep-green eyes, features fine as a girl's" (Miller, 2011: 20).

Opposing this femininity portrayed in the *eromenos*, the *erastes* is expected to be wiser and stronger; in Achilles' case, these features are evidenced by his fight, deathful yet protective of his *philtatos*: "His gaze was on me always, preternaturally sensing the moment when a soldier's eyes widened at the easy target I presented. Before they drew another breath he would cut them down" (Miller, 2011: 227). In addition, Patroclus describes Achilles' fighting skills as elegant and impressive:

He was a marvel, shaft after shaft flying from him, spears that he wrenched easily from broken bodies on the ground to toss at new targets. Again and again I saw his wrist twist, exposing its pale underside, those flute-like bones thrusting elegantly forward. [...] I could not even see the ugliness of the deaths anymore, the brains, the shattered bones that later I would wash from my skin and hair. (Miller, 2011: 227)

Yet however strong and successful Achilles is, he does not lose his grace. It is probably this endless discussion about Achilles and Patroclus' roles in their relationship, added to her contemporary point of view, what has driven Miller to portray both partners as equals, rejecting any pederastic interpretation or patriarchal imposition. Miller's Achilles is a very complex impersonation of gender binarism, and proves the idea that gender is a spectrum in which the hero strays.

## **2. Achilles' feminine traits**

Before considering all the feminine aspects that Miller portrays in *The Song of Achilles*, it is important to point out the social implications of being a woman, in order to understand Achilles' pressure to leave behind any feminine trait and succumb to social impositions. Patroclus explains at the beginning of the novel that as a child he killed a boy by accident – which is the reason why he became an orphan and ended up exiled in Phthia, under the guardianship of Peleus, Achilles' father. While women were not regarded as valuable enough to merit social recognition, killing, injuring, or

disrespecting a man was severely punished. Women's circumstances were demeaned based on gender issues:

The 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. For this, the nobles would riot. (Miller, 2011: 17)

According to social impositions, women are traditionally perceived as more caring, loving individuals, and these are traits that Patroclus describes in Achilles in Miller's retelling: "When we were finished, Achilles bent towards me for a kiss. His lips on mine were soft, and stirred me" (Miller, 2011: 144). However, these traits were disdained since they were not optimal for political responsibilities. As a child, before going to war and having to accommodate to society's standards and impositions, Achilles is depicted as a very quiet, loving, patient person – even naive: "It was the sort of innocence other boys taunted out of you; even if you felt it, you did not say it" (Miller, 2011: 30). Achilles is very reasonable and nonbelligerent, an individual that would never kill a man without a valid reason. This is reflected in his first refusal of the war – he is not willing to fight in Troy, arguing that killing innocent men will not bring him any joy. Whenever anyone brings out Achilles' destiny, and the fact that he must be the one to kill Hector, he declares that he will not do so because Hector has not done anything dreadful to him: "Perhaps I would, but I see no reason to kill him," Achilles answered coolly. 'He's done nothing to me" (Miller, 2011: 168).

Although he is aware that his destiny is to become the greatest Greek warrior in the Trojan War and a hero to be remembered since he was a child, his education was not focused on overdeveloping his fighting skills, rather allowing him to learn how to play the lyre, as it is his desire. While all the boys at Peleus' palace learn how to succeed in the battlefield, Achilles not only trains in private but also spends most of his time developing other skills: "But I had long since learned the truth: other than his lyre

lessons and his drills, he had no instruction” (Miller, 2011: 46). The following quotation is an example of how Achilles is obliged to be instructed in private:

‘No one sees me fight.’ The words came as if he were used to saying them.  
‘Why?’  
He looked at me a long moment, as if weighing something. ‘My mother has forbidden it. Because of the prophecy.’  
‘What prophecy?’  
‘That I will be the best warrior of my generation.’ (Miller, 2011: 36)

Him being able to play the lyre magnificently is an ability that not many soldiers would have had, and it is commonly attributed to men without belligerent aspirations: “The sound was pure and sweet as water, bright as lemons. It was like no music I had ever heard before” (Miller, 2011: 33). This is probably related to his ability to dance convincingly the way women do in Skyros, an episode that will be analysed next. However, this connexion is not specifically associated in Miller’s retelling.

The aforementioned social devaluation of women is the main reason why men would never consider acting in any feminine way, since that would degrade their masculine privilege. Nevertheless, Achilles is not reluctant to expressing himself in a feminine manner. On his attempt to escape the war, he hides in Scyros passing as a woman, knowing that what pushes him to transgress his socially accepted gender presentation is a matter of life and death. Although crossdressing is an absolute shame in the context of the novel, Achilles feels comfortable enough to show himself in a dress in front of Patroclus: “He made a face, and yanked at his hair, hanging in still in its womanly curls. An irritant, but not a crippling shame, as it would have been to another boy. He did not fear ridicule; he had never known it” (Miller, 2011: 130). This proves that Patroclus being the narrator of the novel is an insightful way for Miller to portray the hero in the most personal, and hence accurate way. Because of the intimacy they share, Achilles can escape the pressure of the prophecy imposed on him, which leads him to behave naturally. Therefore, his destiny can be read as a social imposition:

although he has the choice of avoiding fighting in Troy, everyone is expecting him to and he is pressured to do so, since he is the *aristos achaion* and must lead the battle.

In Scyros, Patroclus describes the woman dancing with Deidameia, Lycomedes' daughter and the one who hosts Achilles between her dancers to dissemble his identity, as someone elegant, a great dancer able to seduce most of the men present, just like the rest of the dancers, way before suspecting Achilles is hiding under that dress. He successfully presents and behaves as a woman: "Achilles kept to the back, drifting slowly along the tables. He paused to dab some perfume on his slender wrists, stroke the smooth handle of a mirror. He lingered a moment over a pair of earrings, blue stones set in silver wire" (Miller, 2011: 151). However, although he does not feel ashamed of crossdressing in front of Patroclus, as it has already been noted, he is ashamed when Odysseus finds him in Scyros, as he impersonates the social pressure imposed on Achilles for his participation in the war. For unveiling Achilles' identity, it is necessary to set a trap for him to reveal himself:

Girls screamed and clung to each other, dropping their treasures to the ground in tinkles of breaking glass.

All the girls but one. Before the final blast was finished, Achilles had swept up one of the silvered swords and flung off its kidskin sheath. The table blocked his path to the door; he leaped it in a blur, his other hand grabbing a spear from it as he passed. He landed, and the weapons were already lifted, held with a deadly poise that was like no girl, nor no man either. (Miller, 2011: 152)

What is indispensable for Achilles to pass as a woman is to suppress any fighting skill, since that does not agree with the way women were expected to behave, fragile and submissive: "Achilles could not be seen moving too quickly, climbing too skilfully, holding a spear" (Miller, 2011: 131). However, his nature is inherently heroic, so whenever he feels any danger approaching, he prepares to fight. Odysseus uses this nature against Achilles, and this anecdote as a blackmail to insist on his participation in Troy. Odysseus knows this will convince him to participate in the battle, because



everyone knowing he had dressed and behaved as a woman would destroy his reputation as the prince of Phthia. “It was one thing to wear a dress out of necessity, another thing for the world to know of it. Our people reserved the ugliest names for men who acted like women; lives were lost over such insults” (Miller, 2011: 154). Hence, Odysseus embodies the social pressure that is imposed on Achilles: not only he tricks him into going to war, but his blackmail is based on social gender discriminations as well. The threat of his crossdressing being exposed is what encourages Achilles to participate in the war:

Achilles lifted an eyebrow in princely hauteur. ‘Well? You’ve found me. What do you want?  
‘We want you to come to Troy,’ Odysseus said.  
‘And if I do not want to come?’  
‘Then we make this known.’ Diomedes lifted Achilles’ discarded dress. (Miller, 2011: 154)

This episode of Achilles’ story is not only relevant for the objective of this dissertation, but it was also interpreted in multiple ways in antiquity, as Marco Fantuzzi argues in *Achilles in Love* (2012). He dedicates a whole chapter on analysing the motives proposed in other retellings of the hero’s life. Considering the shame that would provoke Achilles being publicly known for cross-dressing, some poets explain that the whole situation is planned by his mother, Thetis, to save him from the inevitable death awaiting in Troy; hence, justifying his shameful acts. However, as his motives are barely hinted in the *Iliad*, some authors have argued that Achilles willingly transgresses his gender expression with the intention of exploring his sexuality; Statius’ *Achilleid* even suggests that Achilles rapes Deidameia to “retrieve” his masculinity after behaving as a woman (Fantuzzi, 2012: 56). This question is once again related to the *erastes* and *eromenos* dichotomy, hence the contrast between his femininity and his masculinity since this agreement to cross-dress reflects his gender conformity. However, Miller successfully treats this episode from a neutral perspective: she insists in Thetis

compelling Achilles to hide in Skyros, but at the same time Patroclus allows the reader to understand that he does not feel uncomfortable in a dress, although he feels no pride in that.

In the end, Odysseus' trick succeeds, and Achilles agrees to fight in Troy. Once arrived, a series of events make him completely surrender to his destiny and the social pressure to become a violent, bloodthirsty warrior, fact that will be explored in the following chapter. Behaving with *hybris*, an extreme overconfidence, hence submitting to "toxic masculinity," eventually leads to Patroclus' death. Achilles laments his behaviour and blames himself for his companion's death, which humbles him to behave the way he originally was – away from toxic masculine behaviours, unashamed of his love and respect for Patroclus: "He collects my ashes himself, though this is a woman's duty" (Miller, 2011: 334). This is a very significant deed, because only when society's impositions make him lose his *philtatos*, the most beloved person, Achilles realizes the mistakes he has made and finds solace in his inner feminine side.

### **3. Achilles' masculinization and its relationship with his destiny**

Contrary to what is expected from women, in the context of the novel, men are pressured to be strong, brave, and violent against the enemy. These traits make a soldier successful and would grant great honours in the battlefield – if succeeding noticeably, a soldier would gain the title of *aristos achaion*, the best of the Greek: "It was on the battlefield that men showed they were 'real men' amongst other men, and achieved status and honour which then spilled in various ways over into political and communal life" (Foxhall, 2013: 87). Achilles has this title because it is his destiny, as the prophecy had foretold: "I will be the best warrior in our generation" (Miller, 2011: 36). However,

he does not physically fit this standard: as has already been discussed, Achilles is beautiful and graceful in the way women are expected to be. If it had not been because of his divine genealogy, since he is the son of the goddess Thetis, his cousin Ajax would have gained the title of *aristos achaion*: “I pitied Ajax, a little. He would be *Aristos Achaion*, if Achilles were not” (Miller, 2011: 205). As Patroclus describes him in Tyndareus’ palace in Sparta, Ajax was already exceptionally big:

The man kneeling now was huge, half again as tall as my father, and broad besides. Behind him, two servants braced an enormous shield. It seemed to stand with him as part of his suit, reaching from his heels to his crown; no ordinary man could have carried it. And it was no decoration: scarred and hacked edges bore witness to the battles it had seen. Ajax, son of Telamon, this giant named himself. His speech was blunt and short, claiming his lineage from Zeus and offering his mighty size as proof of his great-grandfather’s continuing favour. (Miller, 2011: 10-11)

Ajax has overdeveloped muscles and calluses on his hands, proof of his exhaustive training for the war and the realization of forceful jobs. This is not the only time he is describe in this manner, as later in Troy Patroclus’ gives a very similar description of him. Furthermore, he mentions the rumours spread between soldiers, which highlight his impressive deeds. Hence, his description is completely opposed to Achilles’, who is not only beautiful but has no marks of his training. His hands are not calloused, but rather immaculate from playing the lyre:

Along the way we passed the camp of Achilles’ famous cousin, towering Ajax, King of the Isle of Salamis. We had seen him from afar at Aulis, and heard the rumours: he cracked the deck of the ship when he walked, he had borne a bull a mile on his back. We found him lifting huge bags out of his ship’s hold. His muscles looked large as boulders.

‘Son of Telamon,’ Achilles said.

The huge man turned. Slowly, he registered the unmistakable boy before him. His eyes narrowed, and then stiff politeness took over. ‘Pelides,’ he said thickly. He put down his burden and offered a hand knobbed with calluses big as olives. (Miller, 2011: 205)

As it has been hinted in the previous chapter, when they arrive to the battlefield, Patroclus notices an evident change in Achilles’ behaviour. At first, he starts justifying killing innocent men just by the fact that they are armed, trying, therefore, to fit into the

heroic standards imposed on him. Not only he feels proud of his fighting ability, but he changes his previous opinion that he should not kill *innocent* men, to not kill *unarmed* men. This is an example on how Achilles loses his most honourable traits and changes his own beliefs in order to fit into society's standards. The expectations society have on him result in his personal corruption, which is exactly what Miller intended to reflect, as she explains in an interview with Ranzweiler: "he is very drawn to this kind of toxic masculinity world of Agamemnon and competition and honour, and he resisted actually a fair amount – he's much less cruel. [...] I wanted it to feel a little bit like a poison that is seeping into his life." ("Was Achilles Gay?" 20:55-21:18). The following quotation is an example of Achilles' pride in his fighting skills:

'They could not get close enough to touch me,' he said. There was a sort of wondering triumph in his voice. 'I did not know how easy it would be. Like nothing. You should have seen it. The men cheered me, afterwards.' His words were almost dreamy. 'I cannot miss. I wish you had seen.'

'How many?' I asked.

'Twelve.'

Twelve men with nothing to do with Paris or Helen or any of us.

'Farmers?' There was a bitterness to my voice that seemed to bring him back to himself.

'They were armed,' he said, quickly. 'I would not kill an unarmed man.' (Miller, 2011: 211)

Achilles progressively starts behaving in an unusually raging way, with an overdeveloped sense of honour that eventually will bring death and destruction to the Greek warriors: the *hybris*. The pressure that society and war impose on him, as well as the imposition of his destiny, make him lose himself to the toxic masculine heroic expectation. Achilles, however, cannot escape this pressure: either because of his destiny, or because the pressure being the prince of Phthia supposes, Achilles is forced to adapt to the standards of Ancient Greece: "Our world was one of blood, and the honour it won; only cowards did not fight. For a prince there was no choice. You warred and won, or warred and died" (Miller, 2011: 209). This extreme sense of honour

is what confronts him against Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, a very powerful and arrogant individual:

‘I do not need to prove myself to you. To any of you.’ Achilles’ voice was cold, his chin lifted in disdain. ‘I am here of my own free will, and you are lucky that it is so. I am not the one who should kneel.’

It was too far. I felt the men shift around me. Agamemnon seized upon it, like a bird bolting a fish. ‘Do you hear his pride?’ He turned to Achilles. ‘You will not kneel?’

Achilles’ face was like stone. ‘I will not.’ (Miller, 2011: 267)

At the beginning of the war, before submitting to *hybris*, Achilles already confronts Agamemnon when deciding not to kneel before him. The reason why they clash so much is because both expect to become the greatest heroes of the war: Achilles is the *aristos achaion*, but Agamemnon is the leader of the Greek army. They are the most recognized warriors in Troy, which justifies their pride: “It was on the battlefield that men showed they were ‘real men’ amongst other men, and achieved status and honour which then spilled in various ways over into political and communal life” (Foxhall, 2013: 87). Their engagements are usually found in the novel:

Agamemnon stepped forward. He opened his hands in a gesture of welcome and stood regally expectant, waiting for the bows, obeisance, and oaths of loyalty he was owed. It was Achilles’ place to kneel and offer them.

He did not kneel. He did not call out a greeting to the great king, or incline his head or offer a gift. He did nothing but stand straight, chin proudly lifted, before them all.

[...]

Achilles spoke. ‘I am Achilles, son of Peleus, god-born, best of the Greeks,’ he said. ‘I have come to bring you victory.’ A second of startled silence, then the men roared their approval. Pride became us – heroes were never modest. (Miller, 2011: 183)

Furthermore, his *hybris* does not only condemn the Greek soldiers to death (because without him in the battlefield, the Trojans were stronger), but it also changes his relationship with Briseis, the Trojan woman given to Achilles as a war prize. At first, Achilles agrees to keep Briseis as a reward for his participation in the war to save her from the treatment she would have received by any other man: as she was treated as an object, no one would lament sexually abusing her: “The men gathered eagerly. They

knew what her presence meant – Agamemnon was giving us permission for camp followers, for spear-wives and bed slaves. Until now, the women had simply been forced in the fields, and left. In your own tent was a much more convenient arrangement” (Miller, 2011: 214). Patroclus insists persuasively on Achilles to accept her, knowing that with them she will be safe. His insistence on protecting Briseis might be related to his own underestimation between soldiers, which allows him to empathise with her: “Am I not just Achilles’ pet rabbit? If I were a warrior they would fight me, but I am not” (Miller, 2011: 275). Patroclus senses Agamemnon’s intentions, and insists on Achilles to save her:

Agamemnon mounted the dais, and I saw his eyes slide over the girl, a slight smile on his lips. He was known, all the house of Atreus was, for his appetites. I do not know what came over me then. But I seized Achilles’ arm, and spoke into his ear.

‘Take her.’

He turned to me, his eyes wide with surprise.

‘Take her as your prize. Before Agamemnon does. Please.’ (Miller, 2011: 214)

Patroclus’ necessity to relay on Achilles’ authority proves, once again, that Achilles is well-considered among soldiers, while Patroclus is not. However, as the events in Troy advance, Achilles progressively starts considering Briseis as an object, rather than a companion or a friend the way Patroclus does. Considering both partners usually agreed on every matter, this disagreement proves Achilles’ submission to the toxic masculine standards imposed on men.

‘You are not going to let him take her.’

He turned away; he would not look at me. ‘It is his choice. I told him what would happen if he did.’

‘You know what he will do to her.’

‘It is his choice,’ he repeated. ‘He would deprive me of my honour? He would punish me? I will let him.’ His eyes were lit with an inner fire.

‘You will not help her?’

‘There is nothing I can do,’ he said with finality. (Miller, 2011: 270)

#### 4. Conclusions and Further Research

After analysing Miller's retelling of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship and her portrayal of Achilles, I can assert that the interpretation of Achilles' destiny as a social imposition is valid. Not only has it been stated by the author that her intention was to make his fate act as a "poison," but it is also explicitly narrated in the novel. As a reader, one can observe how the hero's personality completely changes with his arrival in Troy. At the beginning of the novel, as I have argued in chapter 2, Achilles is an unproblematic naive young man, who had grown up with a passion for playing the lyre and without the pressure to become a soldier, and even comfortable enough with his most feminine traits to cross-dress and maintain a homoerotic relationship with Patroclus. The close reading analysis made in this chapter proves that Achilles has some personality traits that fit into the spectrum of what is considered "feminine," although he does not explicitly question his gender identity.

However, with his arrival at Troy, he becomes a man willing to condemn many Greek lives to death in order to defend his honour in front of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, in spite of his previous unwillingness to kill innocent people. In chapter 3, I argue that there are many aspects in Achilles' personality that change with the pressure that society imposes on him, especially his approach towards killing people and his behaviour with Briseis. Furthermore, Odysseus is a key character in Achilles' change, because he embodies the social pressure to become the *aristos achaion*. Because he is expected to be the best of the Greek, Achilles gives up the "feminine" features noted in the previous chapter and succumbs to the heroic masculine standard of the time – a "masculine" gender expression that is portrayed in Ajax, as argued in chapter 3.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that Miller's intention to upraise Achilles and Patroclus' homoerotic relationship is very significant from a classical

studies perspective. As already noted, most traditional retellings of the *Iliad* have omitted this romance and have focused on Achilles' most masculine traits. What must have caused this omission of this relationship would probably be the socially imposed gender dichotomy: due to homophobic and misogynistic values, often gay men were marginalized for behaving in what was considered an unmasculine way. Because of their sexual orientation, men would have been undervalued and even assimilated to women. Hence, to attribute a mythological hero this "shameful" features would have been illogical. Therefore, Derecho's arguments explained in chapter 1.1 prove that Miller's novel is influenced by current conventions, and she portrays them in this retelling of the *Iliad*. The motives of the author to change the perspective of Homer's poem is to point out the social inequalities of antiquity, and to replace them with a feminist and LGBTQ+ approach. Therefore, the fan fiction nature of *The Song of Achilles* should not undermine its social and academic relevance.

Judith Butler's notions on gender and identity are very relevant for the analysis of Achilles' character as well, because, as has been argued in chapter 1.2, Butler explains that what makes someone a "man" or a "woman" is their social expression and how they are perceived by other people. Miller's Achilles, therefore, challenges gender boundaries without underestimating his heroic nature – there are obvious "masculine" and "feminine" features in his personality, which proves Butler's argument that gender is based on each individual's behaviour and expression. Nevertheless, it is not determinative of each individual's identity. In consequence, although beyond the scope of the present research, it could be argued in a further study that Achilles could be considered a non-binary person based on Miller's interpretation of his gender expression.



However, to present this story from this new perspective proposes many possibilities to study antiquity from a gender studies and feminist point of view, among many other more perspectives. It is important to constantly reconsider what has been traditionally assumed, because the application of modern values to ancient stories allows us to understand our cultural roots in a deeper, richer manner. Madeline Miller is not the only author to approach Achilles and Patroclus' relationship or other classical stories from a modern point of view: many more authors have also rewritten ancient myths successfully. These retellings should be addressed by classical studies in order to contemplate antiquity from different standpoints.

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