



PLATONIC OR ROMANTIC? REVISITING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACHILLES AND PATROCLUS IN HOMER'S *THE ILIAD* AND MADELINE MILLER'S *THE SONG OF ACHILLES*.

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Abstract: With the introduction of the great war of Troy in Homer's 'The Iliad' arises the myth of Achilles and Patroclus, better comprehended in light of their deep yet uncanny relationship which often surfaces as debatable for its platonic nature juxtaposed with its romantic implications. While the original Homeric exploration of their bond in Greek Literature's most acclaimed surviving epic "The Iliad" has its inclination towards the platonic sphere, it is intriguing to note that a more romantic rendition is found in the contemporary construction of the epic brought to existence by Madeline Miller in "The Song of Achilles." A comparative study of these two sources is therefore made in this paper to determine that the romantic part of the scale weighs more in bringing about its significance and for which shreds of evidence will be laid out in support of this claim.

Index Terms: Platonic, Romantic, Achilles, Patroclus, The Iliad, The Song of Achilles.

INTRODUCTION

Homer's 'The Iliad' is an epic which gloriously exhibits the last of the 10 years Trojan War in glistening glory and despair with Achilles' wrath at the centre, while Madeline Miller's 'The Song of Achilles' is a coming-of-age non-fiction birthed out from the epic which delves into the intimate bond between Achilles and Patroclus through the lens of Patroclus. The common thread that binds these two works is the representation of the unfathomable affinity between two young men who identify beyond the boundaries of mere comrades and for which the remnants of their bond remain immortal and echo beyond the walls of Greek literature even several thousand years later. Homer's ingenuity stands unparalleled and unrivalled to date but in the process of creative writing, what seems to be shrouded by his platonic claim is the existence of a profound romantic connection between Achilles and Patroclus which Miller was able to produce in her rendition of the meritorious epic which has evidently succeeded in sweeping over millions of readers across the globe, holding them captive with the queer form of love displayed in a magnum opus of a book.

In Greek mythology, Achilles was born to Peleus, the mortal King of the Myrmidons, and Thetis, an immortal Sea nymph, a fruitful amalgamation which led to his half-human and half-God nature. Achilles was considered the greatest among the Greek warriors who gloriously emerged from the long 10-year war of Troy. Achilles is a hero in a world of heroes. He holds within himself all the heroic virtues that are given singly to others (he has the swiftness of Oilean and the strength of Telamonian Ajax), but his excellence is still the sum of theirs. (Seth 1) Though laden with physical vigour, Achilles' mental state was governed by emotional extremes, be it rage, pride, ego and superego. Prominent of the lot, which stands in parallel to his greatness, was his destructive rage which fumingly arose in the form of grief at the loss of his closest companion, his confidant, Patroclus, and which eventually became the reason for a mass colossal destruction of numerous great war figures of the Trojan War, thus bringing about a tragic end to the prolonged calamitous war.

Born to King Menoetius, Patroclus, as the antithesis of Achilles, was the quintessential calm and gentle figure. While Achilles was fire, Patroclus was ice- two extreme opposites who oddly complimented each other. Patroclus was more than a mentor to Achilles, he was the wind beneath Achilles' wings, the reason for his overwhelming grief which submerged him in its entirety and swallowed him alive. As Patroclus proclaims, Achilles was 'half his soul,' (Miller 284) his better half who completed his circle of life. Though Patroclus is considered only a side character within the epic, he does have a vital role to play and is undoubtedly one of the key characters of 'The Iliad' because his death is a direct cause of the climax of the story. Their characters are opposites. And yet, there was perfect balance; Patroclus was the only person who could scold Achilles without Achilles lashing out, and Patroclus was calm enough on Achilles's behalf to give him level-headed advice. (Wittenberg 50)

The first scene perhaps in 'The Song of Achilles' which shows Achilles's treatment of Patroclus as distinct from the lot is when he summons him to sleep in his room. This can be regarded as a first for Achilles, who always had the ulterior liberty to choose anyone much superior to Patroclus as his room companion (37). Therefore, his choosing of Patroclus can be envisaged as his way of marking his territory, and the sign of an emotion taking its roots, penetrating deep which would only go on to create a colossal void in his heart resulting in his tragic end.

'The Iliad' and 'The Song of Achilles' are both prodigious books which have successfully delivered a close overview of the affinity that Achilles and Patroclus share and this study supplements how the amalgamation of 'comradeship' and 'love' can give birth to an emotion which can lead to catharsis and can imprint a scar as a constant reminder of agonising unfulfilled love with a tragic ending. Achilles and Patroclus have not only been envisaged in the light of war comrades (which is heavily underscored in 'The Iliad'), but this study has attempted to bring in a fresh perspective of a love relationship that emerges and dominates the greater lot of the 10-year war of Troy which is reflective of the society and religious beliefs of the Greeks. The knowledge gap in addressing their bond in the romantic sphere will be discussed with a series of textual evidence which can ultimately provide closure to their debatable relationship.

This paper aims to bring out the romantic significance of Achilles and Patroclus's relationship by using qualitative textual analysis and comparative study as its methodology to disclose the episodes of relevance associated with the topic of study.

Achilles and Patroclus as depicted in Homer's 'The Iliad.'

It is thought-provoking to learn that Homer, the birth giver of Achilles and Patroclus in 'The Iliad', did not perceive or depict their relationship as romantic in the meaning of the term. The ambiguous nature of their relationship may have been a deliberate attempt by Homer to maintain the art of writing and leave audiences with the scope to deconstruct and discover. Still, it did ignite a series of interpretations from numerous scholars like Hayley Rhodes Wittenberg, W. M. Clarke, and Plato for that matter who discussed Achilles and Patroclus' intimate relationship. Though Homer never explicitly explores their relationship as romantic or sexual, the idea that they were lovers prevailed and in support of this, pieces of evidence can be found in 'The Iliad' which underscores the idea of the existence of a bond far greater and meaningful than Homer's embodiment of their relationship as platonic.

The term 'Homosexuality' was coined by a German-Austrian writer Karl Maria Kertbeny in the 19th century and is derived from the Greek *Homos* which means 'Same' and *Sex* referring to gender and it is noteworthy to mention that same-sex relation existed and was practised extensively since the ancient period which is underscored by Plato in his *Symposium*, specifically in the speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias and Aristophanes. Ancient Greece for that matter was a period where male nudity and sensuality were celebrated in the form of paintings and literature. Homosexuality was not a new social practice during or before Homer's time as is evident in the tragic love story of the then Roman Emperor Hadrian and his young lover Antinous who drowned in the river Nile under mysterious circumstances, with even concrete speculations of Alexander, the Great, having a same-sex relationship with his second-in-command, his comrade, Hephaestion, as he sank into the abyss of despair following Hephaestion's passing, to the existence of the *Secret Band of Thebes*- an army of 300 homosexual couples, to the Greek Sun God Apollo's infamous relation with Hyacinth. Therefore to find this social element incorporated into Homer's work gives us a certain pretext in envisaging Achilles and Patroclus's relationship in the light of a romantic couple.

An engaging classical view of who among Achilles and Patroclus played the role of Erastes (the lover) and Eromenos (the beloved) respectively is also a matter of concern put up for debate. Plato, who viewed them through the lens of Pederasty- a form of socially accepted homosexuality where an elder man (erastes) falls in love with a younger boy (eromenos) in his *Symposium* assigns Achilles the role of eromenos and Patroclus the role of erastes (120). This could be accounted for by taking into consideration the status of Achilles who was superior in rank and strength when brought in parallel line with Patroclus, though the fact remains that Patroclus was older than Achilles. Plato further stated how Achilles fitted into the role of erastes owing to his rage which emerged as a result of the death of Patroclus.

It remains a fact that the greater cause of Achilles' rage and anguish surfaces after Patroclus' death which further validates his love for Patroclus. Still, it cannot be denied that there is evidence in 'The Iliad' which proves the existence of a greater bond before the death of Patroclus when he was alive as is apparent from their conversations. A substantial example is found in *Book 16* when Patroclus goes to Achilles weeping over the collateral damage of the war on the Greeks. (293) It was the first time since Achilles' withdrawal from the war that he found himself practicing sympathy, ignited by Patroclus' woeful predicament. He valued Patroclus enough to be affected and consumed by his anguish. Another valuable piece of evidence is when Achilles offered a prayer to Zeus seeking protection for his dear comrade alone completely side-lining the Myrmidons who were accompanying him- he prayed for his comrade to let him come back to him safe and sound which only further validates their connection (298).

The greater evidence of their love perhaps can be witnessed in Achilles' mourning of Patroclus's death. When King Nestor's son, Antilochus, delivers the news of Patroclus's death with hot tears pouring down his cheeks, Achilles sinks into "the black depths of despair. He picked up the dark dust in both his hands and poured it on his head. He soiled his comely face with it, and filthy ashes settled on his scented tunic. He cast himself down on the earth and lay there like a fallen giant, fouling his hair and tearing it out with his own hands." (Iliad 18.337). His loud and dreadful cry was heard from the depths of the sea by his mother, Thetis, who emerged before his son on land and soothed him. Achilles in his reply to his mother's query about his grief states that he lost Patroclus, his dear friend, "who was more to me than any other of my men, whom I loved as much as my own life." (339) This is perhaps proof enough to corroborate the deep bond they shared because one has to be more than a comrade to be loved in equivalent to a person's life. Patroclus meant more to Achilles than any other of his comrades. He was the love of his life and therefore with his death, Achilles' lifeline attached to him was disrupted.

Additionally, when Achilles is reprimanded and directed in his dream by Patroclus to bury him instantly and let him pass the Gates of Hades, Achilles addresses him as 'Dear Heart,' and states "Of course I will see to everything and do exactly as you wish. But now come nearer to me, so that we may hold each other in our arms, if only for a moment, and draw cold comfort from our tears." (Iliad 23.414) This only further confirms the indisputable connection between them which Homer shrouded under the name of 'comradeship' but ironically, the lines which were brilliantly well-crafted by him speak for themselves in greater volumes as they only hint at the fact that they were more than comrades who valued each other. They were each other's soulmate, alive or

dead, and following the wishes of Patroclus, their bones were to be buried together when Achilles met his end. (414) Fate betrayed them when they were alive, so they decided to unite at death where fate could not deceive them.

Achilles and Patroclus in ‘The Song of Achilles.’

Madeline Miller’s ‘The Song of Achilles’ is replete with what can be termed as ‘Queer’ love of the 21st century, a book which partially fulfils the frustration of millions of readers of ‘The Iliad’ yearning to suffice their hunger to learn more about Achilles and Patroclus’s relationship had they were not constrained by Homer as just comrades. In ‘The Song of Achilles’ both Achilles and Patroclus grew up in each other’s company wherein their feelings developed over the years of their life which eventually reached the zenith with the two embracing and kissing, sealing a first for them both, all in Pelion where the stern power of Thetis could not locate them. (94) Achilles was so attached to Patroclus that at Phthia when they arrived for dinner at the palace of Peleus, finding no seat reserved for Patroclus near him, he even demanded an extra seat for him to be placed beside the latter because he was “my sworn companion. His place is beside me.” (105) Patroclus, in turn, was seen reciprocating his love whenever required, and as he proclaims, Achilles is ‘half of his soul’, (284) the person whom he sacrifices his life for on the battlefield.

Achilles and Patroclus were not a conventional pair, in the sense that they were open to choices for their partners, given the war scenario they were in. Though they had options at their disposal, they were always each other’s priority. On their usual night in their tent, when Patroclus asks Achilles if he likes Briseis, his war prize, or wishes to have children, Achilles fails to register the question and answer appropriately. But Patroclus cleared the air with him and stated that Briseis wishes to have a child, not with Achilles but with him, to which Achilles’s jealousy arises- ‘Jealousy was strange to him; a foreign thing. He was hurt, but did not know how to speak of it.’ (256) They deeply cared for each other but circumstances sometimes led them to mask their love under the name of comrades because they could not act selfishly with a literal war waging at the backdrop. But it was only a matter of time before their love would be tested to the highest of intensity throwing them off the cliff to a tragic end which will be witnessed by everyone engaged in the war of Troy.

Following the narrative of the myth as elucidated in Homer’s epic ‘The Iliad,’ it is the death of Patroclus which forms the climax not only in ‘The Song of Achilles,’ but in Achilles’s life as well. When Patroclus is on the edge of death, the last thing he thinks of is- Achilles. (319) When Achilles receives Patroclus’ dead body, he screams his name over and over again until it is sound only. He held him with all his might, wailing, cradling him and refusing to eat and speak a word other than Patroclus’s name. He even cast Briseis away when she tried to clean Patroclus’s wounded, blood-stained body as he could not have anyone other than himself near the body of the man he loved. Achilles wanted him all to himself, alive and dead. He ended his hiatus from war by murdering both his ego and Hector to avenge Patroclus but it was futile because the love of his life was no longer with him. However, unlike ‘The Iliad,’ Achilles does meet his end and reunite with Patroclus in the underworld as their bones are buried together in a golden urn, with the tombstone that reads ‘A C H I L L E S P A T R O C L U S.’ “*In the darkness, two shadows, reaching through the hopeless, heavy dusk. Their hands meet, and light spills in a flood, like a hundred golden urns pouring out the sun.*” (The Song of Achilles, 352)

It is achingly illuminating to note the fact that Achilles who was always regarded as the sun by Patroclus is the guiding force, the beginning and the end of ‘The Song of Achilles,’ as the first word of the book stands as “**MY** father was a king and the son of kings,” and the last word of the book “...like a hundred golden urns pouring out the **SUN**,” together forming **MY SUN** making their tragic end full of warmth even after death.

Conclusion.

Madeline Miller’s ‘The Song of Achilles’ may have touched upon the romantic sphere more vividly without raising any ambiguous meaning to the bond between Achilles and Patroclus but it is in Homer’s ‘The Iliad’ where more shreds of evidence of their love being more than what Homer painted it to be before the reader’s eyes are found and which are enough to prove that Achilles and Patroclus did love each other romantically and not just in the light of their comradeship. Homosexuality was normative in Greek culture through the extensive practice of pederasty and its existence makes it easier to accept their relationship. It is also fascinating to note that while homosexuality is labelled as ‘Queer’ and ‘Odd’ in the 21st Century which is ironically brimming with modernity, it has, in fact, always been an integral part of human society since ancient days and so acknowledging and accepting this idea becomes pivotal in our understanding of Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship. Thus, to a great extent, this paper proves that their bond is romantically inclined as opposed to Homer’s platonic appellation. This research has been done with scope for further research in queer studies, leading to unveiling other cultures beyond Greek culture which may eventually provide the key to experiencing the eureka moment.

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