



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

“I cannot name the thing I hope for”

The Reimagining of Achilles and Patroclus
in Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*

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Abstract:

In this thesis, the Greek mythological characters of Achilles and Patroclus are studied, specifically the reimagination of the two in Madeline Miller’s 2011 novel *The Song of Achilles*. While paying homage to the original mythology, Miller’s adaptation focuses on an added romantic relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. The goal in this thesis is to recognize how *The Song of Achilles* modifies the two ancient characters and analyze how they become identifiable and relatable persons for the 21st century reader. Rather than suggesting queer content in *The Iliad*, Homer’s original telling of Achilles and Patroclus, this thesis identifies the features in the text that serve as a premise for Miller’s reimagination. By first giving an overview of *The Iliad*, this thesis compares Homer’s depiction to Miller’s, and identifies the significance of the changes that have been made. These revisions are seen in areas of gender expression and power balance, as well as in adding historical inaccuracies which provide relatability for the modern reader. In addition, this thesis looks at the erotica in *The Song of Achilles* and analyzes the way this added element further develops the characters of Achilles and Patroclus.

The intent of this thesis is, with the help of *The Song of Achilles*, to demonstrate the importance of queer historical fiction. The genre explores the past through fictitious stories with queer characters, leading to historical inaccuracies at times. Yet, I suggest that historical accuracy is not of importance in *The Song of Achilles*, nor in queer historical fiction at large, as the genre has other purposes: The genre of queer historical fiction might work as a means to heal and support the mental well-being of modern queer readers through identification with characters from the past. In this thesis I suggest that even if imagined, this kind of identification allows the queer reader to envision a sense of belonging in the history of humankind.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The story of the battle of Troy has been retold from one generation to the next for nearly three thousand years. Consequently, the glorious war-hero Achilles and his closest companion Patroclus have taken on many forms and been the object of much interpretation throughout time. Many kinds of retellings of the iconic pair have been done, including reimaginations in art, literature, and film. From William Shakespeare's 17th century play *Troilus and Cressida* to Wolfgang Petersen's 2006 film *Troy*, the story of the Trojan war shows different points of interest to different audiences. Naturally, as the generations change, so do the retellings and what they represent. In these diverse works, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is also reflective of the audiences of their time. In 2011 Madeline Miller published a book that focused on this specific aspect of Achilles' life – his relationship with Patroclus. The nature of the relationship between the two had been debated already by the likes of Plato, but Miller took this exploration further by writing a retelling that makes Achilles and Patroclus' relationship explicitly queer. With the rising demand for queer storytelling in the 21st century, Miller's reimagining of the classic characters has proven popular – it became a *New York Times* bestseller and in 2012 won the *Orange Prize*, one of the United Kingdom's most distinguished literary awards.

In this thesis, I look at how *The Song of Achilles* reimagines the characters of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers, and what the significance of doing so is. By looking at Achilles and Patroclus both as individuals, as well as together as a couple, I do character analysis of the two in comparison to *The Iliad*. I identify the characteristics of Achilles and Patroclus that have been changed for *The Song of Achilles*, as well as what has been able to remain as it is, in order to analyze the queer components in the story. In other words, I identify what *The Song of Achilles* has changed in the characterization of Achilles and Patroclus to make them credible and relatable queer characters, and what kinds of elements the novel has managed to apply directly from *The Iliad*. By utilizing gender studies and queer studies, I reveal how masculinity and femininity play a part in our understanding of characters and their actions. Furthermore, the aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the importance of the genre of queer

historical fiction. Queer historical fiction is a genre of literature which utilizes tropes, styles and/or texts from history. By using these, authors of queer historical fiction create stories that are inspired by both the historical past and the queer present. By looking at excerpts from *The Song of Achilles*, I identify the significance that queer reimaginings of historical stories hold for modern queer readers. In relation to this, the aim of this thesis is *not* to prove the sexual orientation of Achilles and Patroclus, nor to push modern views of sexuality on the original writing of *The Iliad*, but rather to establish the importance of exploring the possibilities for modern readers. I suggest that queer historical fiction, such as *The Song of Achilles*, demonstrates how important identification in media is to queer readers, and historical accuracy is not of importance when it comes to such stories. *The Song of Achilles* uses tropes that are familiar specifically to queer people and combines them with romantic tropes that are familiar to all readers. This creates a story that is identifiable to the queer reader, but simultaneously allows the queer reader to envision a sense of belonging in the history of humankind.

I look at *The Song of Achilles* both as its own individual artistic work, but also as an adaptation. Linda Hutcheon writes, “Adaptation, like evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon. [...] Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments *by virtue of* mutation. [...] And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish” (2013, 32). Adaptations of classic stories like *The Iliad* are therefore not merely secondary products of the original story, but ways to keep the original story alive for future generations. Interest in Greek mythology might peak from an adaptation of one of the original stories – by this account, adaptations should be thought of as welcome descendants, passing the torch on to newer readers. *The Song of Achilles* has demonstrated its worth as a unique, artistic text through its critically acclaimed reception. In addition to this, as an adaptation, *The Song of Achilles* introduces the world of Greek mythology in a way that is engaging and approachable to newer readers, and by doing so is passing on the interest for *The Iliad*.

1.2 Achilles and Patroclus in Homer’s *The Iliad*

The original textual depiction of the battle of Troy is found in Homer’s *The Iliad*, one of the most epic mythological war stories from ancient Greece. This story depicts power, loyalty, and honor during the ten-year-long war between the Trojans and the Greeks, who are also

often referred to as the Achaeans in *The Iliad*. One of the central figures in this story is Achilles. He is the son of a king and a sea-nymph and is considered one of the heroes of the Trojan war, fighting for the Achaeans. His legendary skills in battle and unyielding pride have won the hearts of many people for the past three thousand years and continues to be the object of interest even today.

The authorship and origin of the stories in Greek mythology are debated. According to present understanding, “the traditions of Greek lyric were rooted in *oral poetry*” (Nagy, 2008, 1). This means that the stories in Greek mythology were passed on orally from one generation to another, serving as foundations to what would later be known as *epics* (Nagy, 2008, 1). *The Iliad*, the most widely known telling of the war of Troy, would be considered an epic – more specifically, a Homeric poem, believed to be from “the better part of 3,000 years ago” (Fowler, 2004, 2). *Homer* as an author is a debated figure – according to findings, “Homer was already a mystery to the archaic Greeks,” as they were uncertain who Homer is, and whether he is one or multiple authors (Fowler, 2004, 3). Attempting to uncover the mystery of Homer now, nearly three thousand years later, is therefore understandably complicated. Dating circa the eighth century BC, *The Iliad* consists of over 15 000 lines, written in Homeric Greek. The translated version that I refer to in this thesis is written by Anthony Verity, who, according to his own words, “does not claim [it] to be poetry,” but aims to “use straightforward English register and to keep closely to the Greek, allowing Homer to speak for himself” (Homer, 2011, notes). My understanding of the events and characterizations in *The Iliad*, therefore, stems from what Verity believes to be an authentic, literal translation of Homer. Although the focus of my character analysis on Achilles and Patroclus lies in how they are depicted in *The Song of Achilles*, I compare their depiction to the ‘originals.’ Therefore, I will briefly introduce how the two characters, and their relationship, are portrayed in their original written form, *The Iliad*.

1.2.1 Glorious Achilles, Son of Peleus

Achilles is the son of king Peleus and the sea-nymph Thetis. Contrary to *The Song of Achilles*, in *The Iliad* Achilles appears as more of a central character than Patroclus. *The Iliad* begins with a depiction of Achilles’ rage against lord Agamemnon, because he has stolen Achilles’ war prize: a woman named Briseis. Due to this, Achilles refuses to fight alongside Agamemnon and the other Achaeans and spends his time sulking in his tent instead. Achilles’

Achaean allies try to persuade him to return to the war, which they are losing, but Achilles does not let anything, or anyone, stop his protest. Based on this plotline, Achilles' character comes across as proud, stubborn, and even egoistic already in the very beginning of the story. In the time between Achilles' withdrawal from the war until his return to it, Achilles is talked about frequently by the other characters. Although Achilles' pride makes the other characters resent him, they still continuously praise him for his skills. The goddess Hera describes Achilles as "glorious," (Homer, 2011, 87) Priam's son Helenus calls him the "leader of men," (Homer, 2011, 93) and Ajax names him the "lion-hearted breaker of ranks" (Homer, 2011, 110). Repeatedly in *The Iliad*, Achilles is referred to as 'swift-footed,' hinting at his nimble moves in battle. Other characters see him as a man who is talented, and even frightening, as his absence from the war is welcome news to the enemy, the Trojans. This becomes evident as Apollo, one of the gods overlooking the battle of Troy, shouts to the Trojans:

'Up with you, horse-breaking Trojans—do not yield the battle to the Argives! Their flesh is not made of stone or iron, able to withstand the flesh-tearing bronze when they are hit. Moreover Achilles, lovely-haired Thetis' son, is not fighting, but is brooding over his heart-sore bitterness beside his ships.' (Homer, 2011, 66)

Apollo tells the people of Troy to fight the Argives, another name for the Greeks, and not to fear, as Achilles is not going to be present in the battle. His absence is therefore seen as a lessening of threat, emphasizing Achilles' domination in battle.

Excluding Patroclus, Achilles' only concern in *The Iliad* seems to be himself and his pride. He refuses to fight with Agamemnon even though he offers Achilles mighty gifts, nor does he care about the losses that the Achaeans suffer throughout his absence from the war. Even Phoenix, a kind old man who practically raised Achilles, is unable to reach Achilles' heart. Contrarily, Donna F. Wilson analyzes Achilles' refusal to rejoin the war as a way to show Achilles' heroic spirit: "Achilleus reifies essential values and the human spirit and, accordingly, rejects material compensation" (2002, 3). According to Wilson, this refusal to be influenced by material compensation does not correspond with the Homeric socio-historical context, which is why Achilles' character is groundbreaking and strays from what was considered traditional in Homer's time (2002, 4). In fact, Achilles' character in many ways represents our modern-day conception of what a hero is, as Achilles values honor over material possessions (Wilson, 2002, 4). Indeed, the nature of Achilles only changes after the death of Patroclus. Although the death of his closest friend makes him vicious, angry, and resentful, it also reveals the part of Achilles that cares for another person besides himself. The

lengths that Achilles goes to in order to avenge his friend show how deeply passionate he is about his relationship with Patroclus, while simultaneously endorsing the view that Achilles does not care for material things, but rather the human spirit.

1.2.2 Great-hearted Patroclus, Son of Menoetius

In *The Iliad*, Patroclus is first introduced when Achilles leaves from his argument with Agamemnon. The narrator says: “Peleus’ son went away to his huts and well-balanced ships with the son of Menoetius [...],” (Homer, 2011, 10) Patroclus being the only companion of Achilles mentioned by name. In the beginning of *The Iliad*, Patroclus comes across as the subservient, but important, companion of Achilles, as he carries out Achilles’ demands without question. As a matter of fact, Patroclus is rarely mentioned in *The Iliad* until nearly halfway through the book. In book eight, out of twenty-four, Zeus, king of the Gods, prophecies that Achilles will return to the war for the sake of Patroclus, who will be killed.

Interestingly, more about Patroclus’ character is revealed after his passing than during his time alive. The other characters remember him affectionately postmortem: “[...] a gentle and mighty man [...],” (Homer, 2011, 282) “[...] for his death has touched my heart closely,” (Homer, 2011, 291) “[...] the gentleness of luckless Patroclus; it was his way to show kindness to all [...]” (Homer, 2011, 293). After the news of his death reaches the maidservants who were captured by Achilles and Patroclus, even they “cried aloud in agony of heart” (Homer, 2011, 297). Briseis, Achilles’ war prize, especially recalls Patroclus: “so now I mourn you inconsolably; you were always kind to me” (Homer, 2011, 320). Patroclus becomes a martyr, for he risked his life by wearing Achilles’ armor, thus distracting the Trojans. His kindness and gentle spirit are remembered by everyone for the remainder of the book.

1.2.3 Achilles and Patroclus in *The Iliad*

Before the death of Patroclus, the relationship between him and Achilles consists of Patroclus obeying Achilles’ orders and being referred to as his ‘dear companion.’ The closeness between the two becomes evident through moments such as when Achilles is able to communicate to Patroclus without words: “So he spoke, and signalled silently to Patroclus

with his eyebrows [...],” (Homer, 2011, 148) or when they engage in sexual activities in the same bed, albeit with other women: “But Achilles went to sleep [...], and beside him lay a woman [...]. Patroclus lay on the other side, and beside him too was a woman [...]” (Homer, 2011, 149). Throughout *The Iliad*, Achilles speaks to Patroclus affectionately, calling him the ‘delight of his heart.’ This soft way of speaking can also be seen when Patroclus wishes to wear Achilles’ armor to battle. Achilles wants to know what Patroclus is thinking and gently asks him: “Tell me, do not hide it in your heart, so that we may both know” (Homer, 2011, 156).

The gravity of their relationship, however, only truly reveals itself once Achilles discovers that Patroclus has died. When Achilles is told the news of Patroclus’ death, “[...] a black cloud of grief covered Achilles; with both hands he gathered up sooty dust and poured it over his head, disfiguring his handsome face [...]. [...] and with his own hands tore and disfigured his hair [...]” (Homer, 2011, 297). He then cries so loudly that even his mother hears him “in the depths of the salt sea” (Homer, 2011, 297). Following this, we see countless instances of Achilles’ affection towards the late Patroclus. Achilles goes as far as to wish for his own death immediately after Patroclus dies, but decides to kill Hector, “the destroyer of that dear life,” first (Homer, 2011, 299). The anger, loudness and exasperation in his voice is mentioned many times, and it is described as loud enough to scare away the Trojans who were trying to steal Patroclus’ dead body. Achilles speaks to Patroclus’ dead body, promising to join him below the ground soon. He refuses to eat or drink: “I have no interest in my heart in food and drink, but only in slaughter and blood and the anguished groans of men” (Homer, 2011, 318). He directly tells the dead Patroclus that “I could not suffer anything worse than this” (Homer, 2011, 321).

Even after killing Hector, Achilles’ pain does not subside. He says:

‘Patroclus, whom I shall never forget, so long as I am in the world of the living and my knees have power to move. And though in Hades the dead may forget the dead, yet even there I shall always remember my dear companion’ (Homer, 2011, 362)

Achilles vows to remember Patroclus even after his own death – though that is not the only promise he makes to Patroclus. When Achilles falls asleep, Patroclus comes to him in a dream. Achilles meets his ‘lovely eyes and voice,’ and Patroclus asks him to give him his hand, for they will never be able to be with each other in this way again. Then Patroclus requests: “do not lay my bones in a different place from yours, Achilles, but together [...],” and continues, “So may one and the same vessel hide the bones of us both” (Homer, 2011,

368). Achilles agrees to do this, and desperately asks Patroclus to embrace, although this is impossible due to Patroclus' presence only being a dream. Later, Achilles tries to summon the spirit of Patroclus again but fails. Achilles is unable to sleep and, weeping, remembers Patroclus: "He tossed and turned, thinking with longing of Patroclus, of his manhood and his valiant strength, of all that he had accomplished with him" (Homer, 2011, 389).

Despite all these examples of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship being of a passionate and affectionate nature, in *The Iliad* they are never referred to as anything but 'companions.' More importantly, Achilles enjoys the company of many women throughout the story, including Briseis, who is the cause of Achilles' withdrawal from the war. He says that Briseis warmed his heart and that he loved her from his heart. Later in the book, however, Achilles regrets having his conflict with Agamemnon "all for the sake of a girl" (Homer, 2011, 314). This suggests that Achilles withdrew from the war for the sake of his own honor more than anything, because he belittles Briseis' importance, and does not see her as a valuable reason for conflict in retrospect. In fact, most of the women in *The Iliad* serve as currency, which can be seen in Agamemnon's gifts to make amends with Achilles. He offers Achilles seven women from Lesbos, twenty women from Troy and one of his own daughters to marry, without Achilles having to give 'bride-gifts.' These incidents imply that Achilles had sexual relations with many women throughout his life, and, in addition to this, he loved Briseis. Aside from the aforementioned scene where Patroclus lies between Achilles and a woman, Patroclus' romantic and sexual relations with women are not described in *The Iliad*.

Homer's passionate writing about the two conveys the impression of an emotional relationship that could easily be read as queer-coded, which is why previous research into the nature of the relationship between the two exists in abundance. Manuel Sanz Morales and Gabriel Laguna Mariscal analyze the history of interpreting the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus:

From the fifth century B.C., the nature of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus as presented by Homer was a matter for discussion among writers and scholars in antiquity: was it a relationship of homosexual love or was it simple friendship? [...] At no point does Homer make explicitly clear the nature of the relationship between the heroes, as noted already by Aeschines in his speech *Against Timarchus* 1.142. This uncertainty brought about the controversy, but the view that they were lovers prevailed. (Morales & Mariscal, 2003, 292)

Discussion on the nature of the relationship has sparked differing opinions, but nonetheless the discourse continues. This motivates the question: what is it about the relationship between

the two that awakens such lively discourse? W.M Clarke's article from the 1970s, "Achilles and Patroclus in Love," looks at their relationship in *The Iliad* in detail and establishes the following as the imperative cause for queer speculation: "The ruthlessness and egotism of Achilles yield only to Patroclus — but to him readily and naturally. It is as if they are one person" (Clarke, 1978, 385). The defining feature is thus the exclusion of everyone else, and Achilles' inclination to act tenderly with Patroclus, and Patroclus alone. The relationship presented between Achilles and Patroclus in *The Iliad* is by this account complicated to define, and leaves room for interpretation. There are elements which appear homoerotic to today's readers, but *The Iliad* is also rich with material that suggests otherwise. Through the textual examples above, however, it is apparent that the original text by Homer cannot be thoroughly analyzed through our understanding of sexuality today, as the socio-historical context does not provide similar sexual identities to those of today. In this regard, *The Song of Achilles* demonstrates one possible reimagination of the relationship between the two, as interpreted by an author nearly three thousand years after Homer's original text.

2. Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles*

2.1 Background to *The Song of Achilles*

Before I begin analyzing the characters of Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles*, I will introduce some background information that is necessary for my approach. First, I establish my view on character analysis and introduce the mimetic approach to characters, which I will be utilizing in this thesis. Following this, I give an overview of the novel, with a focus on how the change in focalization modifies the original story. Finally, I discuss the historical inaccuracies in *The Song of Achilles*, as the discussion on overlooking the inaccuracies is an integral part of my thesis. With this in mind, the point of analysis is *why* *The Song of Achilles* has chosen to ignore historical accuracy in certain aspects of the novel, and *how* the novel has chosen to approach these inaccuracies.

2.1.1 Mimetic Approaches to Characters

As mentioned, I analyze the characters of Achilles and Patroclus with a *mimetic* approach: how characters are reminiscent of real-life people (Polvinen & Sklar, 2019). However, character criticism done in this way raises an important question: should fictional characters be analyzed only in terms of form, where you study language and other formal and *synthetic* aspects of the characters, or is one allowed to look beyond that? Many scholars (Frow 2014; Moi 2019; Polvinen & Sklar 2019) today believe that characters can also be analyzed in a more mimetic manner, where characters are treated *almost* as real persons with intentions and motives. This derives from how we as readers respond to characters in a somewhat similar way as we do towards real people. As Toril Moi writes, “it makes no sense to ask whether a character ‘really loves’ another character, since they exist only on paper and therefore don’t have existential depths” (Moi, 2019, 31). But even though fictional characters are by their very definition fictional, readers and scholars continue to ask questions about characters and their ‘true nature.’ John Frow opens his book on character criticism with the following:

This is the first part of the problem we encounter when we try to understand the nature of fictional character: these figures are made of words, of images, of imaginings; they are not real in the way that people are real. The second part of the problem is this: why

and how do we endow these sketched-in figures with a semblance of reality? Why are we moved by these ontologically hybrid beings that people the pages of novels or the space of the theatre or the storyline of films? What makes us imagine that these clusters of words or images are in some way like persons? (Frow, 2014, web)

This passage demonstrates that even though readers are aware that the characters they are reading about are not real, they are still interested in the intricate details about their ‘personalities’ and ‘lives.’ Fan culture is solid evidence for the fact that fictional characters can and do affect readers in a very significant and real way. However, for literary research, the *interest* in fictional lives alone is not enough, which is why a more mimetic way of looking at characters needs theory to function. Frow likes to refer to characters as ‘person-like entities’ and believes that the formalist and the mimetic do not have to cancel each other out, but instead are most productive when combined (2014, web). This is also the aim of my approach – to acknowledge both views. In the following analysis, I will look at the characters both as person-like entities that are reminiscent of real people, all the while keeping in mind that they, in fact, are not.

2.1.2 A Change in Focalization

As was established in the introduction, the aim of this thesis is to analyze how Miller has changed the characters of Achilles and Patroclus in her own adaptation of *The Iliad*. *The Song of Achilles*, published nearly three thousand years after *The Iliad*, is a young-adult coming-of-age story, rather than a poetic war epic. Although *The Iliad* might ambiguously imply that Achilles and Patroclus shared more than a friendship, *The Song of Achilles* makes their romantic relationship the main subject matter. The fact that Achilles and Patroclus are both men, makes *The Song of Achilles* a queer novel, which *The Iliad* arguably is not. By this account, Miller’s novel has significant modifications in theme, genre, as well as subject matter. In addition to these changes, a major difference to *The Iliad* is that *The Song of Achilles* retells Achilles and Patroclus’ story from Patroclus’ point of view, leading to a considerable difference in the story’s essence. In *The Iliad*, the focalization is not that of one specific person, but rather is told through an omniscient narrator. Because *The Song of Achilles* is focalized by Patroclus, the reader is given intimacy, private thoughts, and a deep understanding of Patroclus’ character in a way that *The Iliad* does not. However, first-person narration also means that the descriptions that the reader gets of the other characters are subjective. This means that the way the reader feels about and understands the situations,

motives and relationships in the story are heavily influenced by Patroclus' own views on them. As Hutcheon says in her book on adaptations, "Shifts in the focalization or point of view of the adapted story may lead to major differences" (2013, 11). In the case of *The Song of Achilles*, the story transforms from a Homeric poem with no specific main character to a modern novel with an obvious main character. This is already a major change in what the story considers important to tell, but also in what becomes insignificant for the purpose of its framework.

The change in the focalization also naturally allows the novel to focus on the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles more deeply. *The Song of Achilles* focuses largely on the youths of Achilles and Patroclus. Although it is mentioned in *The Iliad* that Patroclus was sent to Phthia as an exile, the events before the war of Troy are not explained in detail. *The Song of Achilles* therefore reimagines what Achilles and Patroclus' time together was like before the war. The story begins as Patroclus is exiled from his own kingdom at ten years old, and sent to Phthia, the home of King Peleus and his son Achilles. As children in Phthia, Achilles takes note of Patroclus, and they become friends. Patroclus quickly begins to show infatuation towards Achilles, which culminates in a kiss shared between the two youngsters. Achilles is surprised by the kiss and runs away, after which his mother, the sea-nymph and goddess, Thetis appears. Thetis has the ability to see Achilles at all times, even when she is physically away from him. Following the kiss between Achilles and Patroclus, Thetis sends Achilles to Pelion to receive his physical training, and to separate him from Patroclus. Against Thetis' intentions, Patroclus follows Achilles to Pelion, where they spend their teen years together. In Pelion, Patroclus is deeply enamored by Achilles, as they grow from children to young adults. Eventually, it is revealed that Achilles is also in love with Patroclus. A romantic relationship develops between the two, but the affair is cut short as Achilles is called to lead the war of Troy. Following this, Achilles goes into hiding in Scyros as a woman, fearing a prophecy that suggests Achilles' death in the battle of Troy. As before, Patroclus goes after Achilles to Scyros, which they eventually leave to face the war of Troy together. The ten-year-long war ends with Patroclus' death, followed by the death of Achilles, thus fulfilling the prophecy. The two are buried together, meaning that their souls can live on in the Underworld for eternity. By this account, some of *The Song of Achilles*' plotlines align with *The Iliad*, but it has also created a significant amount of additional material to the story.

2.1.3 Historical Inaccuracy

A common theme throughout this thesis is, and will continue to be, the fact that Miller's novel is not, and I argue not need be, historically accurate. It is commonly believed that homosexuality was widespread in ancient Greece, but this is a misconception. Therefore, I will attempt to briefly define the socio-cultural context of ancient Greece – to debunk the misconception that *homosexuality* was common. Robin Waterfield, a scholar of ancient Greek philosophy defines homoeroticism in ancient Greece as follows:

In ancient Athens, homoeroticism was considered perfectly natural, especially in the leisured classes. I use the less familiar term 'homoeroticism' because not many Athenians were actually homosexual in the sense of being inclined to love *only* members of their own sex: Pausanias and Agathon in our dialogue, with their lifelong affair, were **exceptions rather than the rule**. More commonly, the same people were sexually inclined towards members of both sexes [...] (Waterfield, 1994, xv; emphasis added)

Waterfield defines the activities in ancient Greece as 'homoerotic,' with older men regularly seeking out younger men and boys to have sexual affairs with (1994, xvi). The younger men, or boys, would in return receive advantages, such as 'political advancement' or lessons in philosophy from the older men (1994, xvi-xvii). On the grounds of this, it is safe to say that the homoerotic tendencies of ancient Greece certainly do not align with our understanding of homosexuality today. It could also be argued that Waterfield's definition of sexuality in ancient Greece is more reminiscent of our modern understanding of *bisexuality*, the attraction to more than one gender. As Waterfield writes, a homosexual relationship was an exception, not the predominant form of relationships in ancient Greece. On that account, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* is not a historical account of a common relationship in ancient Greece, but rather a modern reimagination that is surely *inspired* by the homoeroticism that existed in the cultural context.

In this manner, *The Song of Achilles* has altered the story of Achilles and Patroclus in many ways that do not add to or conform to historical accuracy. However, *The Song of Achilles* was published in 2011, whereas *The Iliad* was written nearly three thousand years ago – as individual texts, they both reflect the socio-historical context during which they were written. What is significant, is that Miller's adaptation takes place in the same socio-historical storyworld as *The Iliad*, yet clearly blends in some of the culture of the 21st century. As Hutcheon writes, "In shifting cultures and therefore sometimes shifting languages, adaptations make alterations that reveal much about the larger contexts of reception and production"

(Hutcheon, 2012, 28). This means that not only do adaptation writers write according to their own artistic vision, but also through the lens of reader reception and economic gain. To explain further, it means that adaptation writers write to fit the interests and morals of readers of their own time. In *The Song of Achilles*, we see many changes from *The Iliad* that fit the interest of the reader today: they do not necessarily make the story more historically accurate but certainly make it more relatable. An example of this is seen in how Achilles and Patroclus *save* the enslaved women from Troy from rape and abuse by the other men, rather than being the ones responsible for it. This change makes no sense in terms of historical accuracy, yet it makes the characters of Achilles and Patroclus more identifiable and likable to the reader. It would hardly make sense for a writer today to write about a character who sexually abuses, and then expect readers to enjoy reading the story as a romantic novel.

Another change in *The Song of Achilles* that is obviously modern is the homophobia. Achilles' mother Thetis acts as the homophobic antagonist in *The Song of Achilles*. Although she does not explicitly say homophobic things, perhaps to keep the illusion of ancient dialogue alive, her incessant disapproval of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship is easily coded as homophobic. Thetis, however, is not a homophobic character in *The Iliad*. In fact, homosexuality has existed in human race since the beginning of recorded history, yet homophobia in the way that it is experienced today has not. In ancient (776-480 BC) and classical (480-323 BC) Greek literature and art, there exist countless instances of homosexuality (Crompton, 2003, 2). Homophobia, however, did not begin to prevail in social consciousness until the 4th century onward, with the fall of the Roman Empire, and subsequently the Christian norms beginning to prevail (Crompton, 2003, 151). This happened well over a thousand years after *The Iliad* was written, meaning that homophobia most likely did not exist in ancient Greece, at least not in the way we understand it today. Yet homophobia exists in Miller's novel. Why? I suggest that the reason is that *The Song of Achilles* is written in the 21st century, and it thus reflects 21st century society, and its issues. Adaptations can do just this – play between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Hutcheon writes, “the appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty” (2012, 114). This is precisely why an adaptation writer would want to rewrite a known story with their own vision of it. I will explore reasons for adding homophobia to a queer retelling, as well as the notion of rewriting historical stories for a queer modern audience in more detail in chapter three, *Queer Historical Fiction*.

2.2 Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles*

In this section, I compare the characters of Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* to how they appear in *The Iliad*, with a focus on the choices of characterization that *The Song of Achilles* has made for the two. I look at Achilles and Patroclus as individuals and identify the features of their characters that have stayed the same from *The Iliad*, as well as the features that have been created for the adaptation. A significant focus of mine is on gender and the queer elements of their characters, and how *The Song of Achilles* has chosen to adapt the sexual ambiguity in *The Iliad* in its own version. In addition to this, I analyze Achilles and Patroclus' relationship in comparison to *The Iliad*. I find this division between the individual and the relationship important, as the characters have been altered as individuals in addition to the revision in the nature of their relationship in *The Song of Achilles*. By uncovering modifications in gender expression and sexuality, I discuss the relationship between hyper masculinity in war heroes and the choice to write such a character as gay. I argue that *The Song of Achilles* plays with the reader's conceptions of sexuality and gender in ancient Greece in combination with modern understandings of sexuality and gender. I find it worthwhile to consider how *The Song of Achilles* has changed the characters of Achilles and Patroclus to make them believable and accurate representations of gay men, and subsequently romantic partners to one another.

2.2.1 New Perspective, Same Achilles

As has been established, the most significant difference between Achilles' characterization in *The Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles* is that in the latter, he is described through an individual, Patroclus. Furthermore, the focalizer being Patroclus means that Achilles is described by a man who is deeply in love with him. Therefore, the description that the reader receives of Achilles is not as objective as another point of view besides Patroclus might have given. In *The Song of Achilles*, there is a clear difference in how Achilles acts towards other people, and how he acts with Patroclus, which arguably is also the case in *The Iliad*. However, because Miller writes from Patroclus' point of view to whom Achilles is kind and caring, Achilles seems more loving and gentler in *The Song of Achilles* than in Homer's version. In fact, when looking at how Achilles acts towards people besides Patroclus, Achilles' personality seems rather alike in both *The Song of Achilles* and how it appears to be in *The*

Iliad. As was mentioned before, a change in focalization can change the story drastically (Hutcheon 2013, 11), as becomes evident in this case. Not only does the plot change due to the change in focalization, but also the nature of Achilles' character – what is significant, however, is that *The Song of Achilles* has kept the defining aspects of Achilles' personality from *The Iliad*, but 'revealed' another side to him. The new Achilles is therefore simply the side of Achilles as seen by Patroclus. When Patroclus first meets Achilles and they do not have any kind of a relationship, the reader gets to see Achilles *before* he is influenced by his relationship with Patroclus. At this point Achilles is around ten years old, and shows signs of being a young, smug prince. When Patroclus enters Achilles' room to meet him for the first time, Achilles "[Is] lying on his back on a wide pillowed bench [...]. He did not hear me enter, or he did not choose to look" (Miller 2011, 20). Achilles yawns many times during their first conversation and seems by all accounts unsympathetic. This standoffish nature aligns with Achilles' character in *The Iliad*, in which he prioritizes himself by putting his needs before others' time after time. This further indicates the significance of the changed focalization, and that Achilles has kept many key characteristics from *The Iliad* in *The Song of Achilles*.

After Achilles and Patroclus become friends, we begin to see a change in Achilles' nature. Whereas in *The Iliad* Achilles and Patroclus' relationship is mostly discussed after Patroclus' death, in *The Song of Achilles* their relationship before their deaths takes up almost the entirety of the book. Because of this, we see how Achilles was with Patroclus before the war, before Patroclus' death, and before Achilles' rage. This gives *The Song of Achilles* an exceptional opportunity to introduce Achilles as a lover and devoted friend. During their childhood in Phthia, Achilles becomes caring and kind, at least according to Patroclus' focalization. Achilles takes special interest in Patroclus, as he chooses him to be his *therapon*, "a brother-in-arms sworn to a prince by blood oaths and love" (Miller 2011, 35). Patroclus becomes an exception to Achilles' usual ego, and quickly turns into the most important person in Achilles' life.

Nevertheless, Achilles does not show the softer side of his personality to the other characters that he interacts with. Although Achilles is kinder in *The Song of Achilles*, it is clearly for the most part due to the change in focalization, because it is possible to see instances of Achilles having a smug attitude towards others besides Patroclus. As an example, when Achilles brings Patroclus along to his lyre lesson, the teacher refuses to teach Patroclus with the lyre that Patroclus holds in his hand. Achilles protests to his lyre teacher by grabbing him by the wrist when the teacher tries to remove the lyre from Patroclus. This very early interaction shows Achilles' readiness to be aggressive towards those who hurt Patroclus. For

the most part, he is not unkind towards others, nor is he particularly sympathetic either: “But in all those years, Achilles showed no special interest in any of the boys, though he was polite to all” (Miller, 2011, 37). During their time at Phthia, Achilles’ home kingdom, Achilles wants to spend time with Patroclus and when they do, they have fun together. They play, laugh and tease each affectionately. We see a version of Achilles that is not driven by ego, rage, or pride, but by tenderness. By showing this other, ‘secret’ side to Achilles, *The Song of Achilles* allows the reader to sympathize with and become fond of him.

A significant aspect of the new focalization is that Patroclus has the power to redirect the reader’s way of seeing Achilles, even when Achilles’ actions are immoral. This is seen through Patroclus’ habit of putting Achilles on a pedestal. Patroclus’ language when describing Achilles’ looks makes Achilles seem majestic and elusive, which will be elaborated below. However, at the end of the story, Patroclus puts him on another kind of pedestal by assuring himself that Achilles is an innocent person, and not as responsible for his actions during the war as an objective onlooker might consider Achilles to be. When Achilles allows Agamemnon to seize Briseis, whom Patroclus has befriended, Patroclus is enraged. Achilles and Patroclus have an argument following this, where Patroclus says: “But I would have the memory be worthy of the man. I would have you be yourself, not some tyrant remembered for his cruelty” (Miller, 2011, 280). It is obvious in this passage that Patroclus dissects Achilles into two: the man he is in love with, and the actions that he does during the war. Patroclus does not believe that these actions are a part of him, but rather something additional. After Achilles has shown regret over his actions, Patroclus says, “You left yourself today. And now you are returned” (Miller, 2011, 281). By saying this, he is assuring the reader, and himself, that Achilles is a good-hearted person and that there is a disconnect between these two versions of Achilles. It could therefore be argued that it is the change in focalization that alters Achilles’ persona, as even in Miller’s version Achilles commits war crimes that are cruel, but they are ‘forgiven’ by Patroclus. This puts Achilles on a pedestal both for Patroclus, and for the reader.

2.2.2 Femininity and Masculinity

An aspect that *The Song of Achilles* emphasizes in its depiction of Achilles is his feminine appearance. Achilles is introduced in *The Song of Achilles* for the first time when Patroclus sees him competing in a running competition. This is when the reader gets the initial description of Achilles’ physical appearance: “My eye catches on a light head among dozens

of dark, tousled crowns. I lean forward to see. Hair lit like honey in the sun, and within it, glints of gold – the circlet of a prince. [...] His hair is long, and tied back with leather” (Miller, 2011, 3). In this physical description, Patroclus paints an attractive picture of Achilles’ looks. When Patroclus meets Achilles for the second time, he thinks to himself: “I gaped at the cold shock of his beauty, deep-green eyes, features fine as a girl’s” (Miller, 2011, 20). He continues: “Then he blinked and yawned again, his mouth cracked wide as a cat’s” (Miller, 2011, 21). These descriptions solidify a central part of Achilles’ appearance and demeanor: he is feminine – cat-like movements are often connected with femininity. His feminine demeanor also becomes evident in many other ways throughout the novel, with his time in Scyros being a significant example. Patroclus travels to Scyros to find Achilles, but is met by Deidameia, the Princess of Scyros. She then puts on a show for Patroclus with ‘Deidameia’s women’ who dance while wearing white dresses and jewelry. As the dance ends, Patroclus notices that one of the dancers is in fact Achilles, dressed as a woman. Achilles has managed to convince the people at Scyros that he is a woman, which indicates that he truly has feminine features and is capable of convincingly portraying the demeanor of a woman.

Achilles’ femininity is presented in contrast with his ‘war-hero’ side, which is assertive, dominant, and powerful – traits that are traditionally connected with masculinity. By combining two stereotypical opposites, *The Song of Achilles* creates a character that is anything but a stereotype. The brooding yet assertive Achilles in *The Iliad* represents traditional masculinity in a lot of ways, but Achilles in *The Song of Achilles* represents a more natural mixture of femininity and masculinity. This combination of femininity and masculinity makes Achilles’ character more identifiable to the reader, as John Archer and Barbara Lloyd suggest, “Masculinity and femininity turn out to be more complex than is often supposed, and most people have masculine and feminine aspects to their personality, interests, appearance, and behaviour” (2002, 38). Even so, Archer and Lloyd explain that people commonly assume links between gendered activities: a person who enjoys a traditionally feminine activity, like cooking, will be assumed to also enjoy other traditionally feminine activities, such as sewing (2002, 35). In Achilles’ case, his femininity in *The Song of Achilles* might bother some readers because they assume that his masculine behavior in *The Iliad* suggests that he *only* enjoys and shows masculine activities and behaviors. *The Song of Achilles*, however, makes the alteration to his character by mixing both the masculine and the feminine. As it is more common for humans to have both masculine and feminine features, Achilles becomes a more believable and identifiable character in Miller’s novel.

In contrast with Achilles, Patroclus' secret desires, frustrations and fears are all on display for the reader because the novel is focalized through him. The character of Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* is resemblant in many ways to how he is in *The Iliad*: he is kind, good-hearted and in the end, fierce. However, in *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus is less submissive towards Achilles than he is in *The Iliad*. In the aforementioned excerpts from *The Iliad*, it becomes clear that the power dynamic between Achilles and Patroclus is very uneven in Homer's depiction. Patroclus does as he is told by Achilles, and acts like a servant to him. *The Song of Achilles* has altered the power dynamic between them to be more equal, adding to the romantic credibility of the novel. In fact, Patroclus quite often goes against Achilles, and not only at the end of their story, but all throughout the novel. When Patroclus and Achilles have just met, Achilles invites Patroclus to watch him train, during which Patroclus goes through several emotions. He initially feels jealousy and anger towards Achilles because Achilles is the greatest fighter of their time. Not knowing how to handle his emotions, Patroclus asks Achilles to fight. "Fight me," (Miller, 2011, 43) he says twice, but Achilles does not want to. Patroclus ends up attacking Achilles without permission, thinking to himself, "Something burned hot in me now, an impatience, a certainty. I would have this thing. He would give it to me" (Miller, 2011, 43). This desire to dominate Achilles is seen in Patroclus' focalization from time to time, expanding his character from merely a submissive servant to an equal partner, with submissive *and* dominating qualities. As was the case with Achilles, this combination makes Patroclus more believable, because, as Archer and Lloyd suggest, people most commonly possess traits that are both feminine and masculine, and not just one or the other (2002, 38). Thus, *The Song of Achilles* makes Patroclus a character that is more balanced and more mimetic, rather than synthetic and only there for the purpose of the story's continuation.

2.2.3 Eroticism and Shame

As was presented in the introductory chapter, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is passionate and tender in *The Iliad*. The epic poem depicts countless instances of affection between the two, giving Miller a genuine source of inspiration to explore her own vision of the characters. My previous analysis on how *The Song of Achilles* has changed the characters of Achilles and Patroclus as individuals shows that, although they have been altered, they also stay true to the essence of their characters in many ways. What has been altered lies mostly in

areas of gender expression in terms of femininity and masculinity. Moreover, *The Song of Achilles* has modernized the two characters to fit the expectations of a 21st century reader: in *The Iliad*, Achilles ‘takes’ many women as slaves and has sexual relations with them, presumably by force, either with physical violence or by the threat of it, as these enslaved women do not have any power over him. This plot has been altered in Miller’s novel to have Achilles and Patroclus *saving* the women, giving them shelter in their hut. This alteration could be seen as wildly problematic, as it suggests that an oppressor of women was in fact helping them. Despite the obviously questionable nature of doing this, it nonetheless makes Achilles fit into the frame of morality of the modern reader, which is presumably the reason behind the alteration. Because the aim of *The Song of Achilles* is not to give a historical account of these two characters, nor to represent them directly, making such alterations should not be an issue: for the purpose of reimagining the story of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers and turning the story into a romance novel, it is necessary to make the characters seem fitting romantic partners to each other, as well as characters that the reader can root for. In this section, I look at how *The Song of Achilles* has, with the help of adapting the characters in the previously established ways, created a romantic and sexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus that is identifiable to the queer reader.

The Song of Achilles draws from both queer history and typical queer storytelling to create a relationship that is engaging to queer readers. The very essence of Miller’s reimagination lies in the idea that there was an underlying story, a secret that *The Iliad* left untold. The well-known phrase “the love that dare not speak its name,” made famous by Oscar Wilde, represents the act of hiding one’s sexual and romantic desires to fit societal norms. It was used to describe the kind of prose and poetry that represents homoerotic tendencies without “naming the unnamable,” as Richard Bozorth puts it: “Wilde was also expressing one motive of lesbian and gay love poetry: the drive to put such love into language – to speak it in the face of forces that would make it unspeakable in every sense. This political impulse is one of the most persistent in gay and lesbian love poetry” (Bozorth, 2011, web). This notion is seen in a scene in *The Song of Achilles* where Patroclus and Achilles are playfully fighting, and Patroclus says to Achilles:

‘I have never seen anyone fight the way you do,’ I told him. Confession or accusation, or both.

‘You have not seen much.’

I bridled, despite the mildness in his tone. ‘**You know what I mean.**’

His eyes were unreadable. Over us both, the unripe olives rattled gently.

‘**Maybe.** What do you mean?’

‘I mean—’ I broke off. [...] ‘**There is no one like you,**’ I said, at last.
(Miller, 2011, 44; emphasis added)

Patroclus saying “you know what I mean” suggests that there is something happening between the two, something which only they understand. However, Patroclus cannot directly say what he means, so they speak in ambiguous terms. Achilles’ response, “maybe,” is also highly ambiguous yet telling, as it conveys that Achilles also knows what is happening between them but does not dare speak it out loud: Achilles wants Patroclus to confirm that they are thinking of the same thing. By this account, *The Song of Achilles* combines the queer context of ancient Greece with the tactic of ‘telling the story untold,’ which creates a narrative that draws from both queer history and typical queer storytelling.

A significant amount of the untold story between Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* happens during Achilles and Patroclus’ childhood and teenage years, the formative years during which many queer people begin to understand their desires as something other than heteronormative. The following passage depicts Patroclus’ emerging desires towards Achilles at the age of thirteen:

At night, in bed, images come. They begin as dreams, trailing caresses in my sleep from which I start, trembling. I lie awake, and still they come, the flicker of firelight on a neck, the curve of a hipbone, drawing downwards. Hands, smooth and strong, reaching to touch me. I know those hands. But even here, behind the darkness of my eyelids, **I cannot name the thing I hope for.** During the days I grow restless, fidgety. But all my pacing, singing, running does not keep them at bay. They come, and will not be stopped.
(Miller, 2011, 59; emphasis added)

This passage describes the complicated and complex emotions that queer desire raises in a person. Patroclus thinks that even in his own head, in his dreams, he is not allowed to fantasize about what he wants. The underlying reason for Patroclus’ denial is *shame*, specifically, shame for his non-heteronormative sexual desires. According to Gayle Rubin’s concept of the charmed circle, there exists a hierarchy in society for different types of sex, where some types of sex are considered good, and others bad (Rubin, 1999, 151). This hierarchy has its roots in modern Western religion, which prevails in moral ideologies still today (Rubin, 1999, 152). In Rubin’s charmed circle, the ‘good’ sex is heterosexual, married, and procreative, to name a few (1999, 153). The ‘bad’ sex is then the opposite of these: homosexual, outside of marriage and non-procreative. The sexual desire that Patroclus feels for Achilles is in many ways from the ‘bad’ side of sex, leading to feelings of shame in Patroclus for not coinciding with what is considered moral. This can be seen in the passage above, as Patroclus says, “I cannot name the thing I hope for” (Miller, 2011, 59). The feeling

of shame continues in Patroclus as they grow. Another form of ‘bad’ sex in Rubin’s charmed circle is having sex alone, which is also seen in *The Song of Achilles* through Patroclus. Patroclus’ thoughts when masturbating, are focalized as follows: “There was shame in this thing that I did, and a greater shame still in the thoughts that came with it” (Miller, 2011, 89). In this line, Patroclus’ shame for masturbating is combined with his shame for his homosexual desires. Patroclus’ phrasing conveys that masturbating alone would cause him shame, but the same-sex images that he thinks of lead to even more shame.

The feeling of shame for having homosexual desires is another element that *The Song of Achilles* has brought from our modern world into the novel. The storyworld of *The Song of Achilles* appears to be a mixture of the storyworld of *The Iliad*, but also that of our modern world. This becomes especially evident through the conception of homosexuality in *The Song of Achilles*. As I have mentioned, Achilles’ mother Thetis acts as a modern homophobic force in Achilles and Patroclus’ life, which does not fit into the socio-historical context of the story, due to the lack of homophobia in ancient Greece. *The Song of Achilles* has not modernized the storyworld completely either, as it has added moments that reveal the ancient Greek way of seeing sexuality. Patroclus thinks to himself: “As Odysseys said, many boys took each other for lovers. But such things were given up as they grew older, unless it was with slaves or hired boys” (Miller, 2011, 166). A monogamous relationship between two men of the same age is quite clearly not usual, which mirrors exactly what Waterfield said of homoeroticism in ancient Greece and how it was not homosexuality that was common (1994, xv). Patroclus insinuates that it is precisely the monogamous relationship of two equals of the same gender that is bizarre – but he also seems to suggest that for young boys to have other boys as lovers is common. Why, then, does Patroclus feel shame for imagining Achilles when he is aroused, being young? The answer is quite simple: this idea that a person would feel shame for same-sex attraction comes from our modern world. By looking at how Patroclus feels internalized homophobia in these erotic moments, it is evident that the storyworld that *The Song of Achilles* has created intermingles conceptions of sexuality from today *and* from ancient Greece. The storyworld is therefore not a utopia where Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship would be celebrated, but it is rather quite heteronormative by making Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship seem as the odd one out, reflecting today’s society. Besides Achilles and Patroclus, all the characters in the novel have heterosexual relationships and desires, conveying that heteronormativity does prevail in *The Song of Achilles*’ storyworld.

During Achilles and Patroclus’ time in Pelion, they are secluded. They are away from home, away from their normal life, and perhaps in a way, also away from the heteronormative

reality. Ruth Vanita, the accomplished scholar of gender and sexuality studies, suggests in her article “The Homoerotics of Travel: People, Ideas, Genres” that characters tend to abandon reason when traveling, allowing them to act upon desires that otherwise might not have materialized (Vanita, 2011, web). By this notion, Achilles and Patroclus seem to leave something behind as they leave for Pelion, where their relationship eventually comes into being. Back home in Phthia, Achilles is trapped – his father suggests multiple times that Achilles should have sexual relations with their servant women, which Achilles refuses time after time. As was mentioned, Achilles’ mother Thetis is a watchful eye, because she sees Achilles all the time due to her abilities as a goddess. Achilles is allowed privacy for the first time when he is at Pelion, as Thetis is unable to see him there. Thus, Vanita’s idea that queer characters are able to fulfill their desires when they are away from home, away from their regular people and activities, occurs in *The Song of Achilles*. After reading about years of Patroclus’ desires and mixed signals from Achilles, the reader gets to see how the two finally begin a relationship in Pelion. “She says she cannot see us here,” (Miller, 2011, 92) Achilles says about his mother to Patroclus. This statement means that they have privacy from the watching eyes, from the heteronormative society, and can openly embrace. The two sleep together, commencing their relationship.

The sexual actions between Achilles and Patroclus are described somewhat in detail in *The Song of Achilles*. Their first night together is described in the most detail, beginning with Achilles’ announcement that his mother does not watch him in Pelion. This means that they have complete privacy and the freedom to do whatever they want, which makes them both nervous. Achilles’ dialogue is different from his usual poised language: he speaks hesitantly and, according to Patroclus, in a higher pitch. When Achilles is trying to explain why he has told Patroclus about their newfound privacy, he says, “‘I wished to tell you. Because—’ he paused. ‘I thought you would wish to know’” (Miller, 2011, 93). Achilles saying this makes him seem wishful that Patroclus would want to act on this fact somehow. Achilles continues by noting that Thetis was not happy that Achilles wanted to know whether they have privacy in Pelion: “‘She—’ he hesitated, again. ‘She was not pleased that I asked her’” (Miller, 2011, 93). Patroclus’ nerves are also on display through his focalization. He thinks, “I felt dizzy, my mind turning and turning through his words” (Miller, 2011, 93). Both show signs of uncertainty, which is followed by them kissing:

I closed my eyes, and waited, long minutes, until I guessed he was asleep. Then I turned to look at him. He was on his side, watching me. I had not heard him turn. *I never hear*

him. He was utterly motionless, that stillness that was his alone. I breathed, and was aware of the bare stretch of dark pillow between us. He leaned forward. (2011, 94; emphasis original)

This passage is reminiscent of their first kiss years before, which is described as follows:

My pulse jumps, for no reason I can name. He has looked at me a thousand times, but there is something different in this gaze, an intensity I do not know. My mouth is dry, and I can hear the sound of my throat as I swallow. He watches me. It seems that he is waiting. I shift, an infinitesimal movement, towards him. (2011, 60)

After their first kiss, Achilles runs away, leaving Patroclus embarrassed. This could be seen as the reason why Achilles makes the first move the second time they kiss. But even there, Achilles is watching Patroclus. The idea that “It seems that he is waiting” (2011, 60) can be applied to the later situation as well, as both these initiations show a similar pattern: Achilles waits for Patroclus to make the first move.

In these sexually charged moments, the power dynamic between Achilles and Patroclus becomes asymmetric. Usually, the power dynamic between the two is balanced, perhaps shifting slightly towards Achilles at times, due to his position as war leader and a demigod adored by many. However, as seen above, Achilles wishes for Patroclus to take charge during sexually charged moments. This suggests that at least at times, Achilles prefers to be submissive during sexual acts. This notion is fundamental when considering the disapproval readers might have of Achilles being explored as gay – for a man, a man skilled in battle at that, to also be submissive during sexual acts. Ronald Long in his book, *Men, Homosexuality and the Gods* (2013), explores the roots of religious condemnation of male homosexuality. Long discovers that the major issue lies in the idea that a man would lose his masculinity in being submissive during sexual acts (2013, 14). He writes, “To be a man who plays the role of insertee is, depending on culture, either deemed effeminate and/or boyish or servile” (2013, 13). This means that if a man does not play the part of the ‘insertee’ but rather the part of the ‘inserter,’ he loses his masculinity and gains feminine traits. It is precisely the loss of masculinity and gain of femininity that is in many cultures considered to be disgrace among men. Not only do views such as this demonstrate the roots of homophobia, but also those of sexism, as femininity is seen as a less valuable trait than masculinity. Long argues that a part of the contemporary gay rights movement is to normalize the role of the ‘insertee’ in a homosexual sex act as “part of the repertoire [sic] of a normal, adult, fully masculine male” (2013, 14). Achilles represents this efficiently: he does not lose his masculinity by

being less dominant during sexual acts. It is the juxtaposition of a war hero combined with submission during sexual acts that challenges traditional gender roles in *The Song of Achilles*.

With these changes in gender, sexuality and power, *The Song of Achilles* creates a story that is inspired by queer history and queer literary tropes. *The Song of Achilles* explores many ideas about femininity and masculinity by juxtaposing conceptions of what masculinity and femininity can be. It seems that the mixing of feminine and masculine traits in Achilles and Patroclus comes across as more natural when considering characters' ways of mimicking real-life people. More than that, *The Song of Achilles* challenges the reader to consider their conceptions of sexuality, and whether they believe that one's sexual preferences are connected to one's other abilities, such as leadership. By giving the reader the opportunity to explore such current topics while reading a story with an ancient storyworld, *The Song of Achilles* gives the impression of longevity for issues of gender and sexuality. In the following chapter, I will discuss reasons behind doing so, as well as the genre of queer historical fiction, thereby focusing my analysis on the significance of *The Song of Achilles* to the modern queer reader.

3. Queer Historical Fiction

It is safe to say that Miller's reimagining of these two iconic characters has gained immense popularity over the past decade. With more than one million ratings on the popular online 'book club' *goodreads*, *The Song of Achilles* has an average rating of 4.37 out of five ("The Song of Achilles," *goodreads*, 2023). The novel has in recent years gained a new audience by trending on the social media platform *TikTok*, where mostly younger book lovers recommend the novel to other users. The book has over 4.0 ratings on most of its retailer websites ("The Song of Achilles: A Novel," *amazon.com*, 2023; "The Song of Achilles," *bookbeat.fi*, 2023), and seems to be loved by many of its readers. In this section I explore an aspect of *The Song of Achilles* which I believe to be one of the reasons for its success and appeal to the modern audience: its genre, *queer historical fiction*. I begin this chapter by defining the concept and genre of queer historical fiction, and subsequently discuss the reasons for its existence. I then apply the idea behind queer historical fiction to *The Song of Achilles* and identify the elements that make it relatable for today's queer readers.

3.1 What is Queer Historical Fiction? Why Does it Exist?

As was mentioned earlier, queer existence has been under persecution for centuries, millennia, even (Crompton, 2003, 151). It is highly debatable whether this homophobia of the past centuries can be equated with the homophobia that exists currently, as the *identity* of homosexuality has only become visible in the recent decades. However, due to the erasure of queer histories and the lack of a visible gay identity in the past the way that it exists today, the amount of explicitly queer texts from the past is small. Although accounts of what could be seen as modern homosexuality exist throughout history, heteronormativity prevails in historical telling. Rictor Norton, scholar of queer literary history, addresses the silencing of queer voices in his essay "The Suppression of Lesbian and Gay History" by revealing the different forces behind the notion. He explains that queer writing has been thought of as being obscene, even when the content is not sexual (Norton, 2005). This means that even modest romantic stories have been marked as pornographic if they depict a romance between two

people of the same gender. Norton writes that many queer texts have therefore been destroyed from ancient Greek literature, while only ones where queerness is not the main content have survived (Norton, 2005). He writes, “[...] the fact that not one single play dealing entirely with a homosexual theme has survived seems to suggest that queer works were deliberately suppressed and destroyed rather than merely lost during the passage of time” (Norton, 2005). Additionally, of the few, queer ancient Greek texts that have survived from the past to modern readers, only some represent homosexuality the way queer people experience it today. An example of this is in the homoerotic writings of ancient and classical Greece. Arguably, these stories about older men having sexual relations with adolescent boys do represent homoerotic desire, but very differently from today’s conception of it. Because of this, and due the deliberate erasure of queer texts from the past, modern queer people have few opportunities to return to history and find themselves in texts written before the 20th century.

In their article “Making Up Lost Time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history,” Laura Doan and Sarah Waters argue that gay men and lesbians have unequal opportunities to search for identification in historical writing (2000, 13). Specifically, they suggest that today’s homosexual men are able to “feel nostalgia” by looking into the practices of ancient and classical Greece, to name a few, whereas the lack of lesbian stories “[makes] it difficult for women to imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love” (Doan & Waters, 2000, 13). While I do agree with Doan and Waters in the fact that lesbian historical representations do not exist to the same extent as gay male historical representations do, I disagree with their notion on two levels. Firstly, I suggest that modern gay men do not necessarily read about Plato and his views on homoeroticism and find nostalgia, as homoeroticism in classical Greece was in many cases close to what we today would classify as pedophilia. For this reason, I believe that gay men today do not identify with such texts to the extent that Doan & Waters make it seem. Secondly, although I agree that there are individual and separating features between gay and lesbian experiences, I do not think that it is impossible for a modern lesbian reader to identify with historical accounts of male homosexuality. Indeed, the rise of the LGBTQ+ community and the unifying word ‘queer’ proves how much gay men and lesbians actually can relate to one another. Especially in the past decade or so, with the diversification of gender and the breaking of gender norms within the queer community, it becomes evident that there is something beyond binary gender that unifies queer people. For this reason, I suggest that queer historical fiction can be identifiable to queer men, women, and non-binary people alike – there are elements that transcend gender.

The unifying factor between all members of the queer community ultimately comes down to being excluded. The reason why a gay man and a lesbian can relate to one another does not come from being attracted to the same gender, nor from being the same gender, but from being able to relate to the mutual feeling of shame, exclusion and being different. I suggest that this is also why a non-heterosexual person can, at least to some extent, identify with a non-cisgender person: it is the uniting feeling of being underrepresented and misrepresented that brings the LGBTQ+ community together. It is also one of the underlying reasons for the poor well-being of queer youths. In his book about suicide among young members of the queer community, Rob Cover identifies *belonging* as one of the most integral parts of healthy queer development (Cover, 2011, 103). He goes on to say that in today's world, this sense of belonging can emerge through unconventional ways, with media representation being one (Cover, 2011, 103). Cover also suggests that the identity of self is always constructed through a broader set of representations: queer people are affected by every representation of their sexuality that they see, rather than through one specific representation, such as one specific character (Cover, 2011, 103). This means that one representation of queer experience might be accurate to a queer person, affecting their identity positively. However, another, misrepresented portrayal will also affect the person's construction of self, but this time in a negative way. In light of this, it is extremely vital that queer youths have access to accurate representations of themselves, which is achieved by representations that are *frequent* and *diverse*. For a queer person, media identification can be a powerful tool for the feeling of being included, and that one belongs somewhere, even when the physical surroundings of said individual might suggest otherwise.

With this in mind, I suggest that one of the ways that queer people should feel included is in the history of humankind. Queer historical fiction can function as a tool for making this happen. Writing queer historical fiction is the act of telling a queer story that is inspired by either a period in history, historical events or historical people. In her article "Encountering the Past in Recent Lesbian and Gay Fiction," Jodie Medd defines the purpose of queer historical fiction as follows:

These texts offer distinct models of queer literary engagement with history, where the past may function as a structure of pedagogy, an inspiration for future transformation, a literary template for addressing past and present queer issues, a source of narrative pleasure that transforms established genres while imagining occluded sexual desires and cultures, and an imaginative playground for destabilizing temporality and subjectivity. (Medd, 2011, web)

By this definition, queer historical fiction allows writers and their readers to explore the possibilities of seeing and identifying themselves in past eras in a way that is comforting. In alignment with the aforementioned lack of historical material for queer people to identify with, queer historical fiction aims to fill the void. By writing about “lost histories,” authors of queer historical fiction offer their readers the opportunity to explore a fictitious alternative past, where they can identify with a person of the past, even if it is pretend (Doan & Waters, 2000, 13). In fact, the point of queer historical fiction is not to replace history or to suggest that our understanding of homosexual identity has been understood similarly throughout time. Rather, as Medd explains about Jamie O’Neill’s queer historical fiction work *At Swim, Two Boys*: “[...] given *At Swim*'s metafictional awareness of historical appropriations, I do not read it as purporting to full historical authenticity; instead, it knowingly 'ransacks' the past to transmit an emotionally engaging fiction to imagine or inspire queer futures” (Medd, 2011, web). Readers of queer historical fiction therefore do not read these stories to find historical accuracy, but instead, there is emotional engagement in the reading experience.

The point of queer historical fiction by this account lies in its ability to benefit modern queer readers. The importance of identification and accurate representation has been proved vital for the well-being of a person, as I mentioned before. These representations, as Cover demonstrated, should be diverse – I suggest that this means that not only should a queer person feel identification with modern characters who live in the 21st century, but also to characters that existed in the past. Even if imagined, the experience of reading about a queer character who lived much before our modern day might allow the queer reader to feel a sense of belonging, and having a lineage (Medd, 2011, web). In addition to this, Medd writes that “queer historical (re)turns demonstrate an attachment to the past as a resource for negotiating the complexities of queer experience in the present, and convey the interfusion of history, desire, identity and community” (Medd, 2011, web). This suggests that queer people tend to explore the queer historical past in the interest of making sense of the difficult queer existence in their own time. It is perhaps even possible that the “homophobic history of injury” can be healed, at least to some degree, by romanticizing what the past was (Medd, 2011, web). This does not mean that modern queer people aspire to gloss over the painful past of the queer community or deny historical facts. Homophobia is still a prevailing reality in most areas of the world, and queer people are therefore still subject to erasure in their everyday life: the homophobic history of injury is therefore ongoing. By this account, queer historical fiction does not exist to rewrite history, but it has emerged as a tool for modern queer people to heal by feeling included and having a role in the history of humankind.

3.2 *The Song of Achilles* as Queer Historical Fiction

In the above section I discussed queer historical fiction and its definition. As a piece of queer historical fiction, Miller has retold a very specific, already famous story from history. Even though *The Song of Achilles* is based on mythology, I believe that the word ‘historical’ is applicable too – Homer’s *The Iliad* is a part of Greek mythology, but it is also a significant piece of literary history from ancient Greece. As I have established, Miller’s book does not attempt to rewrite Homer’s epic poem, nor does it need to be historically accurate, which becomes clear when looking at the target audience for the book. *The Song of Achilles* is written for the modern audience, and furthermore, piques the interest of young queer readers who do not necessarily know much about Greek mythology, but are introduced to it through Miller’s book. Julie Sanders emphasizes the importance of adaptations: “Yet adaptation can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts ‘relevant’ or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the process of proximation and updating” (Sanders, 2007, 19). *The Song of Achilles* can introduce younger readers to Greek mythology, or those new to the topic, in a format that is familiar and engaging to modern readers. Miller’s homepage also has resources for discovering more about Greek mythology that are easily accessible through links (“Find Out More”, madelinemiller.com, 2023). These links serve as links to the real history and mythology for *The Song of Achilles*, further emphasizing the fact that Miller’s queer retelling places queer existence in the middle of the real history of humans.

Miller’s retelling refers historically both to ancient Greek mythology, and to the historical period of classical Greece. Miller mentions Plato as the source of inspiration to reimagine Achilles and Patroclus gay: in a Q&A for *The Song of Achilles* on Miller’s website, she writes that she “stole the idea from Plato” to make Achilles and Patroclus lovers (“Q & A with Madeline Miller”, madelinemiller.com, 2023). By this account, Miller’s retelling is not only historically referring to Homer, but also to Plato. Achilles and Patroclus are mentioned in *Symposium*, Plato’s philosophical text about love, dated approximately 385-370 BC. Plato’s text discusses the gods rewarding men who do courageous acts for their lovers, and Achilles’ relationship with Patroclus is used as an example. Achilles’ strength to “stand by his lover Patroclus and to avenge him” (1994, Line 180a) is praised in Phaedrus’ speech. Referring to the two as lovers, according to the translator Waterfield’s footnote, comes from Aeschylus’ lost play *Myrmidons*, which Phaedrus calls “nonsense” (1994, Line 180a). The relationship

between Achilles and Patroclus is debated in Phaedrus' speech, which simultaneously refers to them as lovers, but also questions the dynamic of the relationship. This is because Achilles is younger than Patroclus, which would not make sense for the pederastic model, where the younger party has something to gain from the older party: Patroclus is seen as the servant with something to gain, not Achilles. Only a few lines later in *Symposium*, relationships between boys and men are encouraged, when the younger counterpart wants to increase his knowledge and the older counterpart wants sexual gratification from the younger (1994, Line 184d-e). By this account, Plato's model of love is not what we see in Miller's novel, only the suggestion of, and discussion about, Achilles and Patroclus being lovers. It seems that each generation is therefore prone to interpret their relationship through the context of their own time.

3.2.1 Achilles, Patroclus, and Modern Views on Love

The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is, at its core, alike in both *The Song of Achilles* and *The Iliad* – passionate and affectionate. There are many storylines in *The Iliad* that have been applied to *The Song of Achilles* as they are, with one example being Achilles' request to be buried with Patroclus. There are also many additional storylines that Miller has either created herself or adapted from other stories of Achilles, with a large amount of the material taking place before Achilles and Patroclus arrive at Troy. The youth of Achilles and Patroclus, how they meet, and the kind of relationship they develop during their adolescent years are all, in *The Song of Achilles*' case, essential to providing a reason for the passion at the end of the novel. The important change is seen in the *essence* of the story – *The Iliad*, with all its descriptions of battle, is at its essence a war story, whereas *The Song of Achilles* is a romance novel. This means that the stories are framed differently. The things that are deemed important to tell in *The Iliad* are not all essential for Miller's reimagination, and likewise many parts of Miller's narrative do not make a difference in the narrative arc of *The Iliad*. *The Song of Achilles*' story arc builds up to the confession of love between Achilles and Patroclus, and from there on plays with the will-they-won't-they question all the way to the dramatic ending of the story and, with it, the relationship. *The Song of Achilles* has therefore let go of the constraints of the story arc in *The Iliad* and made its own narrative that fits the romantic reimagination, portraying the complexities of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship.

Previously, in chapter two, I established how *The Song of Achilles* has changed the characters of Achilles and Patroclus, as well as how it has added elements of erotica to their

story. Connecting to these, I also discussed themes such as femininity, shame, and power. In this section, I discuss an aspect of *The Song of Achilles* that I have yet to cover, romance. I discuss this theme here and not earlier, as I analyze the romance in *The Song of Achilles* as specifically catered to a modern audience, with modern views on love. *The Song of Achilles* is a romance novel, and therefore has an abundance of examples where it has taken something from *The Iliad*, and reimagined them for its own, modern version of the story. I look at these examples from two angles: how they cater to the modern audience, and how they represent queer love. At this point, I find it imperative to point out that although there are aspects of queer relationships that do not translate to heterosexual relationships, in most ways queer and heterosexual relationships are no different from each other. In fact, I suggest that accurate queer representation utilizes similar tropes and plots as heterosexual representation does but lets go of the need for a clear binary division between the ‘man and the woman in the relationship.’ Therefore, in some of the examples below the romance is not exclusively ‘queer’ in any other sense besides the fact that both counterparts are of the same sex.

I will first look at romance in *The Song of Achilles* by utilizing two examples from Lynne Pierce’s article, “Romance and Repetition: Testing the Limits of Love,” which explores how authors have managed to ensure that their characters seem fitting partners for *only* each other, and that they only want to be with each other. The first example from Pierce that I will apply to Miller’s reimagination is the idea of a ‘discredited former relationship’ (Pierce, 2011, web). This refers to the idea that if one, or both, of the people in the main relationship have prior relationships, they need to be discredited. This is done to convince the reader that the current relationship with the main characters is the right one. Achilles has two romantic relationships in *The Iliad* that Miller has had to acknowledge in her novel. The first one is the relationship between Achilles and his bed-slave Briseis, which I have previously suggested is, in *The Iliad*, defined deeply by the fact that Achilles sees Briseis as his property. Although the relationship between the two is shadowed by Achilles’ ego, it is still a somewhat central relationship in the original mythology. As I have established, in *The Song of Achilles*, this relationship has simply been erased and replaced by a friendship between Briseis and Patroclus and is not in any way romantic between her and Achilles. However, in addition to Achilles’ relationship with Briseis, there is another relationship from Greek mythology that has had to be acknowledged in *The Song of Achilles*, because this relationship leads to Achilles’ son Neoptolemus being born. *The Song of Achilles* has therefore had to come up with a way for Achilles to have a son, while also convincing the reader that Achilles does not love anyone but Patroclus.

Pierce suggests, “Discrediting previous relationships through the implication that they were (for example) predicated upon lust, or convenience, rather than love is clearly a neat way of solving the repetition problem. In other words, the characters (and especially the male characters) can be permitted more than one relationship, providing that only the current one is ‘the real thing’” (2011, web). This technique is also used by Miller to solve the issue of Achilles’ lineage, all the while ensuring Achilles’ devotion for Patroclus. When Achilles is hiding from the war in Scyros, he is separated from Patroclus, who is trying to find Achilles. When they finally reunite, Patroclus discovers that Achilles has slept with, and married, the princess Deidameia, who is pregnant with Achilles’ son. This relationship is discredited by Achilles saying to Patroclus, “Please, let me explain. I did not want to do it. My mother [...] said that if I did as she said, she would tell you where I was” (Miller, 2011, 126). Achilles also says “I did not want it. It was not you. I did not – I did not like it” (Miller, 2011, 127). These two statements indicate that not only did Achilles sleep with Deidameia because he believed that by doing so, he could reunite with Patroclus, but that he also did not enjoy it. Pierce’s example is applicable here, because Achilles’ former relationship with Deidameia is discredited by the fact that he did it for reasons besides love (Pierce, 2011, web). By doing so, *The Song of Achilles* assures the reader that Achilles and Patroclus do not have desire for other people, making their relationship closer to how a monogamous relationship is defined today.

The second romantic example that I introduce is a combination of two of Pierce’s ideas: ‘definitive death’ and ‘duplicitous afterlife’ (Pierce, 2011, web). The notion behind ‘definitive death’ is quite simply that by making the main characters die by the end of the novel, the reader can be assured that there never *will* be anyone else for the couple (Pierce, 2011, web). In *The Song of Achilles*, both Achilles and Patroclus die by the end of the novel, meaning that the reader does not need to wonder how their relationship would have developed after the ending of the book. They die as lovers, and that is assurance to the reader that their relationship was *the* relationship for both parties, because there can never be another. This point is further developed through Miller’s choice to make the two of them reunite in the afterlife. The very last passage in *The Song of Achilles* lets the reader know that they have reunited: “*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*” (Miller, 2011, 352; emphasis original). Pierce describes an author’s choice to do this as ‘duplicitous afterlife,’ which has its roots in Gothic romance (Pierce, 2011, web). The reunion of Achilles and Patroclus after both have died is a conclusive statement that even in death,

they cannot be parted. In *The Iliad*, Achilles wants to be buried with Patroclus, but the reunion in afterlife is only described in *The Song of Achilles*. Miller has therefore used this romantic trope to cater to the modern audience.

The third way in which I suggest Miller makes *The Song of Achilles* an appealing read for the modern audience is the way it plays between ordinary and epic love. This notion is particularly interesting in terms of queer historical fiction, because it simultaneously hooks the reader in by showing how ordinary and relatable the romance is, but at the same time it allows the reader to fantasize on the idea of an ancient epic love story. The idea of identifiability with fictional characters and the mimetic aspect of literature is significant here. By making some of the interactions between Achilles and Patroclus ordinary, *The Song of Achilles* gives the reader the opportunity to identify themselves in the relationship. I suggest that this, in turn, grants the reader the option to explore the more epic romantic plots in the novel, such as those mentioned above. Rita Felski argues that readers can identify with one aspect of a character, but also feel drawn to the more alien aspects of that character (Felski, 2019, 81). Felski writes, “And while something shared is key, the nature of this ‘something’ cannot be predicted ahead of time. Is it [...] who one is or who one would like to be?” (Felski, 2019, 81). By this notion, the reader can identify both with the aspects of Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship that they feel they share, but also perhaps the aspects that are unfamiliar but fascinating to the reader.

The ordinary interactions between Achilles and Patroclus are the invitation to explore. There are small moments between the two that are simple: “This morning he had leaped on to my bed and pressed his nose against mine. ‘Good morning,’ he’d said” (Miller, 2011, 57). This is a simple interaction which perhaps feels quite ordinary to the reader. These small and gentle interactions surpass time, and the modern reader can find identification in them. However, particularly Patroclus also makes epic declarations which I suggest are more romanticized and not as ordinary:

He was outlined against the painted stars; **Polaris** sat on his shoulder. (Miller, 2011, 94; emphasis added)

I could recognize him by touch alone, by smell, I would know him blind, by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth. I would know him in death, at the end of the world. (Miller, 2011, 126)

He is half of my soul, as the poets say. (Miller, 2011, 284)

In the first quotation, Patroclus is sleeping with Achilles for the first time. As he looks up at Achilles, he sees Polaris behind Achilles' shoulder. Polaris is often thought of as a star that is a focal point as it shines brighter than other stars. The use of such a symbolic reference is romantic, as is claiming to know another "at the end of the world," as seen in the second quotation. Patroclus saying that Achilles is half of his soul, and thus half of him, is poetic, as seen in the third quotation. These kinds of statements might fall into the category of what the reader would like to be and experience, rather than what the reader is and does experience. I suggest that this is the third element in the novel that hooks the modern reader. *The Song of Achilles* plays with the idea that Achilles and Patroclus are ordinary, just as the reader is, but they also share an epic love, as the reader could. By doing so, *The Song of Achilles* invites the modern reader to imagine how they also might have experienced a legendary love like Achilles and Patroclus did thousands of years ago, and the queer reader does not need to adapt to heteronormative tropes to do so.

3.2.2 Homophobia in *The Song of Achilles*

The analysis above suggests that Miller has used our modern conception of love stories to create a romantic novel out of an ancient mythical war story. However, the modern view on queer love is difficult to imagine without its undesirable counterpart, homophobia. An integral part of queer existence today is defined by the homophobic structures both on a social and constitutional level. Due to this, there exists a homophobic presence in Miller's novel, despite the lack of homophobia in the real ancient Greece. The word homophobia, or homophobic slurs for that matter, are not said in the novel, and the homophobia in *The Song of Achilles* is in many ways ambiguous, which keeps the illusion of ancient dialogue alive. When analyzing *The Song of Achilles* as queer historical fiction, however, it makes sense that the novel has added all kinds of elements that the modern queer reader can identify with, including the uncomfortable things.

Considering this, to read Achilles' mother Thetis as homophobic is not ambitious. From the very start, Thetis shows adamant dislike towards Patroclus. In the novel, this disapproval is based on Patroclus being a mortal, and Thetis is said to have a look of distaste whenever she sees Patroclus. When Patroclus and Achilles have kissed for the first time, Thetis grabs Patroclus off the earth and says to him: "I have seen. [...] He is leaving.' Her eyes were black now, dark as sea-wet rocks, and as jagged. 'I should have sent him long ago.

Do not try to follow” (Miller, 2011, 61). Thetis sends Achilles to Pelion to separate him from Patroclus, but Patroclus does not stay away from Achilles. Instead, they live in Pelion together, and are happy. There is a clear contrast between the times Achilles and Patroclus are alone, to when Thetis appears in Pelion. After Achilles and Patroclus have been in Pelion for a while, they seem calm and content together. Patroclus wakes up one morning and describes all the lovely things he sees and feels in the nature. Suddenly, he begins to feel anxious for no apparent reason, and soon after this, Thetis emerges. The nature around Patroclus is all at once different: “First the quail went silent, then the dove. The leaves stilled, and the breeze died, and no animals moved in the brush” (Miller, 2011, 81). Thetis says to Patroclus, ““You were not to be here,”” (Miller, 2011, 81) and reminds him that she warned him not to follow Achilles. This change in Patroclus’ spirit, and how it is mirrored in the nature surrounding him, clearly suggests that Thetis’ presence does not allow for the existence of Patroclus and Achilles’ happiness or natural emotions. Patroclus describes the sudden emergence of Thetis at their safe haven: “A loss, or **lessening**, that I feared her presence might bring” (Miller, 2011, 82; emphasis added). The word *lessening* suggests that Thetis’ appearance takes something away from Patroclus’ relationship with Achilles. The queer reader can recognize this emotion as the inability to be completely relaxed in settings where there is a homophobic presence. Thetis is this homophobic presence for Achilles and Patroclus, making the natural interactions between Patroclus and Achilles suddenly feel unsafe and uncomfortable.

In addition to Thetis, there are also remarks by other characters about the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus that suggest homophobia and heteronormativity. In passing, there are comments, such as Agamemnon saying to Achilles, ““We should have left you where we found you, hiding behind your mother’s skirts. **In a skirt yourself**”” (Miller, 2011, 266; emphasis added). This remark about Achilles wearing women’s clothing is meant as an insult and is followed by the men around Agamemnon to “frown” and “whisper to each other” (Miller, 2011, 266). Patroclus describes Achilles’ reaction to this: “Achilles’ hands were fisted at his sides; he hung on to his composure, barely” (Miller, 2011, 266). In this interaction, Agamemnon clearly uses Achilles’ femininity as a weapon against him and it is implied that Achilles is hurt by this exchange. I suggest that this is another instance where the queer reader can identify with the feeling of someone using your sexuality and gender expression as a means to hurt you.

Perhaps the most directly homophobic situation in *The Song of Achilles* happens at the very end of the novel. When Achilles dies, his son Neoptolemus comes to lead the war in his place, appearing just as the other characters are trying to decide where to bury Achilles and

Patroclus. Odysseus suggests that they bury them on the hill, to which Pyrrhus, another name for Neoptolemus, replies: ““Them?”” (Miller, 2011, 340). This is followed by an uncomfortable pause, when the men are trying to decide how to explain the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus to Pyrrhus. It is clear, that the men have grown used to the two being inseparable, but there is still hesitation towards explaining their relationship to someone new. Their hesitation proves necessary, as Pyrrhus refuses to bury the two together. Menelaus says, ““It was your father’s wish, Prince Neoptolemus, that their ashes be placed together. We cannot bury one without the other”” (Miller, 2011, 341). To this, Pyrrhus replies with ““I will not allow my father’s fame to be diminished”” (Miller, 2011, 341). After this conversation, Briseis begs Pyrrhus to bury Achilles and Patroclus together, which aggravates Pyrrhus so deeply that he kills her. Odysseus attempts the same thing as Briseis later, and once again Pyrrhus claims that burying them together would be “a blot” on his father’s honor (Miller, 2011, 347). Even though, like Thetis, Pyrrhus uses Patroclus being a commoner as the reason for his hatred, I suggest that this is another instance where the queer reader can feel identification: the belittling of queer relationships is something many queer couples unfortunately recognize. Odysseus says to Pyrrhus, ““What is admired in one generation is abhorred in another,”” (Miller, 2011, 347) which is easily mirrored to how different generations and cultures are generally more homophobic than others.

The fear of coming out and letting the people around you know of your queer relationship is not only shown through the negative interactions that Achilles and Patroclus face. There are also supportive characters in *The Song of Achilles*, who make the two feel safe and free to be themselves. When Achilles and Patroclus live in Pelion, they are trained by Chiron, a centaur whose cave the two reside in. The three have a discussion one evening, and Chiron tells them that Thetis has forbidden him to let Patroclus join Achilles in Pelion. Achilles says that Thetis is wrong in forbidding this, and Chiron wants to know why Achilles thinks so. Achilles says, ““She feels that— [...] That he is a mortal, and not a fit companion”” (Miller, 2011, 75). Chiron then asks Achilles what *he* himself thinks, to which Achilles admits that he does see Patroclus as a fit companion. Chiron says about Thetis: ““She is also young, and has the prejudices of her kind. I am older, and flatter myself that I can read a man more clearly. I have no objection to Patroclus as your companion”” (Miller, 2011, 75). Chiron’s presence as a supportive adult, who accepts the two as they are, is freeing for both: ““There was something about Chiron’s face, firm and calm and imbued with authority, that made us children again”” (Miller, 2011, 72). Chiron continues to be supportive of the two, including after the two begin their relationship a little later. To have someone who Achilles and

Patroclus looks up to, an authority figure, listen to and try to understand them and their relationship, is arguably an interaction which resonates emotionally with the queer reader.

Less obvious, but equally important, forms of support come from other characters as well. One of these supportive characters is Briseis, whom Patroclus becomes close friends with. She is aware of the nature of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship, and regardless develops a deep and loyal friendship with Patroclus. Patroclus being gay does not make a difference in her wanting to be his friend. It is also worth mentioning that characters such as Odysseus and Agamemnon, who initially are hesitant and even mocking of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship, come together to plan the burial of the two – Odysseus even personally asks Pyrrhus to bury Achilles and Patroclus' ashes together. Even Thetis, one of the main forces of negativity in Achilles and Patroclus' relationship, eventually shows compassion: at the very end of the novel, having lost her child, Thetis agrees to be the one to write Patroclus' name on Achilles' grave, enabling their souls to finally reunite. I suggest that it is important to represent this kind of progression as a valuable form of support: it shows the reader that even the people who initially do not understand queerness are able to learn and change their perspective. With these in mind, *The Song of Achilles* has altered characters, as well as the relationships between them, to show support from both authority figures and friends, and even people who warm up to the idea of the two together eventually.

Based on these examples, it is evident that *The Song of Achilles* has added moments of identification to the queer reader, both negative and positive. I suggest that both the instances of homophobia and support are important because they represent the real-life experience of queer existence. Thetis' cold attitude and her belittling of Patroclus, and Pyrrhus' refusal to acknowledge Achilles and Patroclus' relationship mirrors an unfortunate reality for many queer people and couples. But Chiron's devotion to listen to the two and make them feel accepted, as well as Briseis' loyal friendship, are also things that most, though unfortunately not all, queer people receive and cherish. These differing, but equally real, situations make it possible for the queer reader to read about a queer relationship that is ancient, but still be able to recognize familiar patterns from modern day queer life. *The Song of Achilles* uses romantic tropes that are familiar to all readers, and mixes these with a variety of situations where attitudes towards queer relationships are represented. These, together with the fact that the novel takes place in ancient Greece, make up a story that is an accomplished example of queer historical fiction.

4. Conclusion

The myth of Achilles and his companion Patroclus has intrigued readers, scholars, and philosophers for nearly three thousand years. Different generations have shown different interpretations and different approaches to classifying the nature of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. *The Song of Achilles*, published in the 21st century, has taken its place in the canon of retellings of *The Iliad*, with a focus on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. In this thesis, I have looked at Madeline Miller's explicitly queer retelling, and aimed to identify the novel as a piece of queer historical fiction which, in the manner of the previous retellings, also caters to the audience of its time. My interest lies in the changes that Miller has made to the characters and plot lines of the original mythology, for the purpose of writing a story that is credibly queer and engaging to the modern reader. My claim is that these changes do not make any sense in terms of historical accuracy but can be life-changing to modern queer readers.

The first analysis chapter shows that by changing the focalization, Miller has the power to alter the story of *The Iliad*, without changing the basic elements of the original mythology too much. I suggested that by making Patroclus the focalizer in *The Song of Achilles*, Miller can reveal another side to Achilles through the interactions between the two. Achilles' attitude towards others is rather comparable in *The Song of Achilles* and in *The Iliad*, which leads to the idea of the 'untold story.' The 'untold story' trope of Achilles and Patroclus allows the reader to imagine *The Song of Achilles'* narrative to be merely a hidden gem in Greek mythology. I also argued that the historical inaccuracies that *The Song of Achilles* has added to its retelling are there for the purpose of its own framework, and the reader should therefore not be discouraged by them. I suggest that the homoerotic culture of ancient Greece acts more as a source of inspiration for *The Song of Achilles*, rather than as factual basis.

Achilles is somewhat feminized in *The Song of Achilles*, both in terms of looks and in terms of demeanor. He has gained submissive features which are traditionally considered feminine, as well as being described to have feminine movements at times. I suggest this to be a natural and lifelike change: research showed that people are, more often than not, a mixture of femininity and masculinity, and not merely one or the other. The hyper-masculine war hero

caricature of Achilles in *The Iliad* has been made into a more identifiable character to modern readers in *The Song of Achilles*, by making Achilles a natural blend of feminine and masculine features. In a similar manner, Patroclus has been given more dominant features in *The Song of Achilles*, making him a more equal partner to Achilles than he appears in *The Iliad*. These changes reflect the society they have been written in, suggesting that the modern audience is less interested in gender roles, and more interested in the way gender can be experienced in many ways that differ from the binary norms.

This analysis of how gender roles and stereotypes have been altered in *The Song of Achilles* was followed by an analysis of the erotica in the novel. I suggested that the novel explores shame in queer sexual desire through Patroclus' feelings towards Achilles. I used Gayle Rubin's concept of the charmed circle to argue that the hierarchy of sex places Patroclus and Achilles' sex outside the circle of the good, and into what is deemed the bad kind of sex. This sentiment was further explored through the idea of the 'inserter-insertee' dichotomy, where traditionally the man acts as the inserter and the woman as the insertee: to deviate from this, to be a man in the role of the insertee, has in many cultures been considered to lead to a loss of masculinity. I argued that by putting a legendary soldier like Achilles into a more submissive role during the sexual acts between him and Patroclus, the idea that being a man in the role of the insertee would lessen his masculine traits or his ability to lead a war is debunked. These examples indicate that *The Song of Achilles* tackles issues of gender identity, sexuality and homophobia, topics that are relevant in the 21st century, making it more identifiable to the modern queer reader.

The identification that the modern queer reader feels in such stories, I argue, is precisely the reason for the existence of queer historical fiction. In the second analysis chapter, I took the genre of queer historical fiction into central focus and gave reasons for its existence and its importance. In the beginning of this thesis, I claimed that the purpose of queer historical fiction is to help modern readers, which was then supported by the examples on queer mental well-being and previous research on queer historical fiction. After arguing the purpose and comforting factor of the genre, I analyzed *The Song of Achilles* as queer historical fiction, with a focus on features in the novel that are engaging to today's readers. Firstly, I concluded that *The Song of Achilles* uses many tropes that are familiar from modern romance novels, such as assuring the reader that Achilles and Patroclus only want to be with each other. I suggested that by taking classic romantic tropes and putting them into a love story between two men, *The Song of Achilles* allows the modern queer reader to first identify with the characters, and subsequently imagine a coherent romance in ancient Greece. By

creating an epic ancient romance, that is also queer, *The Song of Achilles* gives the queer reader the opportunity to read a historical romance without having to adjust to heteronormativity, as is usually the case with reading romance novels from previous eras. I finished my analysis of added elements for the sake of the modern queer reader by looking at the added homophobia in the novel. Through characters such as Thetis and Pyrrhus, the reader can identify with receiving homophobic treatment – but I argue that this element merely adds to the feeling of hope, that, even in a world where homophobia exists, a queer couple can experience an epic love story. There is therefore power to gain from the homophobic elements of the novel, as they ensure that the story is not a utopia that the reader cannot relate to.

Since *The Song of Achilles*' publication in 2011, queer fiction has continued to become a more and more visible genre in literature. A recent article, published in 2022, by Elizabeth A. Harris for *The New York Times* says that according to a data provider for the publishing industry, “about 850,000 L.G.B.T.Q. romance books sold at traditional outlets in 2021 – **a 740 percent increase over a five-year period**” (Harris, 2022; emphasis added). The need and demand for books like *The Song of Achilles* has therefore not diminished since its publication, but on the contrary, the genre of queer fiction is more popular than ever. In this thesis, I have attempted to look at elements of queer fiction, with a focus on queer historical fiction, to discover reasons for its demand. It has become clear that queer youths today have begun expecting representation in all forms of media, including literature, which shows in the sales numbers. Demand is seen by publishers, resulting in supply, which is why since the release of novels like *The Song of Achilles*, not only is queer fiction bought in great quantities, but also produced in great quantities. Novels like Miller's could be seen as catalysts for this development, with *The Song of Achilles* showing courage to create an explicitly romantic queer love story, which is approachable and relatable to young queer minds.

The genre of queer historical fiction is, by this account, complex, with its various levels of socio-historical context and storyworlds, as well as its capacity to combine these levels in a way that is engaging to the modern reader. This thesis has given a foundation for research into the genre and suggested the combining of queer mental well-being with reading queer historical fiction. I suggest that further research into the effects of reading queer historical fiction is necessary in pursuance of better understanding the causes for its emergence, as well as its ability to act as a healing tool for queer readers today. Further examination of the benefits of seeing oneself as part of a lineage through literature, specifically for queer people, could develop insight into the vital components of satisfying queer mental health. In contrast, the negative effects of *not* having a visible lineage the way

heterosexual people do also warrants further investigation. The booming of queer fiction, including queer historical fiction, demonstrates the interest in the genre, and further research could examine reasons behind its popularity.

My interest in demonstrating the importance of queer historical fiction has throughout this thesis been proven worthwhile. Claims about queer historical fiction being historically inaccurate, while often being true, have been proven unimportant for the purpose of the genre. Most significantly, I have shown that the power of identification in media can convey the feeling of belonging and the feeling of having a lineage, even if it is fictional. I argue that to see oneself not only in modern characters from the 21st century, but also in characters from the past, even if imagined, is an easily overlooked but all the more important part of the mental well-being of queer people. My aim in this thesis has therefore not been to prove that Achilles and Patroclus were lovers in *The Iliad*, or that homosexual identity existed in ancient Greece as it does in today's world. Rather, as I hope it has become clear throughout this thesis, the focus in my research is the *modern audience*, specifically the queer modern audience, and how made-up stories like *The Song of Achilles*, in all its double-fictionality as a mythical retelling, *are* important literature and deserve to exist in peace.

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