



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **When Epic Becomes Popular Fiction: Modern Retelling of Myth in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles***

Batenburg, Farida

### **Citation**

Batenburg, F. (2022). *When Epic Becomes Popular Fiction: Modern Retelling of Myth in Madeline Miller's The Song of Achilles*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master thesis in the Leiden University Student Repository](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3275182>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# ***When Epic Becomes Popular Fiction***

*Modern Retelling of Myth in Madeline Miller's*

The Song of Achilles

**Master Thesis Classics and Ancient Civilizations: Classics**  
Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University

Farida Wilhelmina Batenburg  
Supervisor: dr. T.A. van Berkel  
Second reader: dr. J. Soerink  
20-01-2022  
Word count: 16.201



**Universiteit  
Leiden**

# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Achilles' life before the Iliad .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 <i>Through Patroclus' eyes</i> .....	8
1.2 <i>Education by Chiron</i> .....	11
1.3 <i>Achilles and Patroclus on Scyros</i> .....	13
1.4 <i>The sacrifice of Iphigenia</i> .....	16
1.5 <i>Conclusion</i> .....	21
<b>2. The price of war: The Iliad in TSoA.....</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1 <i>Achilles, Briseis, Patroclus</i> .....	23
2.2 <i>Patroclus' death</i> .....	28
2.3 <i>Achilles versus Phyrus</i> .....	32
2.4 <i>Conclusion</i> .....	35
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>38</b>

## Introduction

This thesis explores modern retelling of myth in popular fiction, particularly Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (*TSoA*). This novel is a retelling of the *Iliad* and the events leading up to and shortly after the narrative scope of Homer's epic, with a special focus on the character of Achilles, as the title suggests. As a work of reception, it is interesting to consider "the intellectual process involved in selecting, imitating or adapting ancient works" – in other words, the relationship between the later work and the source – and the purpose of the reception.<sup>1</sup> In an interview with the author of *TSoA*, called *Q&A with Madeline Miller*, Miller clarifies what her aim was by writing this novel.<sup>2</sup> First, it is written in such a manner that someone with no mythological background of the *Iliad* could still understand the narratological events of the epic. Secondly, it is written for entertainment purposes. For this reason, Miller's novel is rightfully marked as popular fiction since she intends to reach many readers.<sup>3</sup>

But is the abovementioned audience the only one Miller had in mind while writing her novel? *The Song of Achilles* is the first indication that she does something different with the ancient material. "Song" may very well be a reference to epic, which was performed through song.<sup>4</sup> Other examples that hint at the grandeur of epic reborn in Miller's novel is the vast amount of time – ten years – it took for her to compose *TSoA* and the covers of the various editions that are all hinting at the severity of the subject typical for epic: "kings and battles" (*reges et proelia*, Verg. *Ecl.* 6.3).<sup>5</sup> Most covers illustrate armoury (such as a breastplate or helmet) or Achilles in his armour. However, there is a cover that contains an illustration of a lyre, emphasising the "song" of epic that is suggested by the title. Aside from these examples, the biography of Miller intends to convince the reader that she possesses the skills that are needed when one takes up the challenge of writing epic material.<sup>6</sup> Miller's knowledge of the ancient sources becomes apparent in the text itself.

As we will see in chapter 1 of this thesis, some examples are subtle, but others are more prominent. For instance, in chapter 28 of *TSoA*, Patroclus and Briseis discuss her fate if the Trojans defeat the Greeks. Briseis says she will try to find Aeneas and surrender to him because he is a "pious man". This is quite obviously a reference to *Pius Aeneas* from Vergil's *Aeneid*.<sup>7</sup> Another example of Miller's skill is her knowledge of interpretative discussion surrounding the *Iliad*. The most prominent illustration is the supposed love between Achilles

---

<sup>1</sup> Hardwick (2003:5).

<sup>2</sup> See *Q&A with Madeline Miller* (<http://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/>).

<sup>3</sup> Gelder (2004:22).

<sup>4</sup> Sinha (2017:157).

<sup>5</sup> Simms (2018:1).

<sup>6</sup> Sinha (2017:158).

<sup>7</sup> Williams (1996:158).

and Patroclus, about which Homer never really is explicit.<sup>8</sup> This interpretative debate was already present in antiquity and is still going on today.<sup>9</sup> In Miller's novel, Patroclus and Achilles are very much in love and passages from the *Iliad* that are topics for the debate of the presence of their love are used by Miller and reworked into the love story between Achilles and Patroclus.

At the same time, Miller subverts the martial values of epic in her novel. The "song" that the title refers to is not composed by Achilles, but as it turns out by the end of the book, by Patroclus about Achilles.<sup>10</sup> As I will illustrate in this thesis, Patroclus does not believe the great deeds of Achilles, for which he is known from the *Iliad*, should be valued more than other aspects of his character: his gift with the lyre, his beauty, and his love for Patroclus, to name a few. As a result, the events of the *Iliad* are put into a more negative light. Contrastingly with Miller's aim to appeal to a general audience, this reading and analysis of her novel are only possible when one *does* possess the knowledge of the mythological background of the *Iliad*, as well as other texts, and has an awareness of the interpretative discussions about Homer's epic, as I would like to argue.

Could we then call this part of Miller's novel a fanfiction of the *Iliad* and its surrounding mythology, aimed at a community that possesses the abovementioned background knowledge? The definition of fan fiction is posed by Leavenworth (2015:40) as follows: "Fanfictions, or fanfics, are online-published, most often pseudonymously authored stories which take a pre-existing fiction, a *canon* in fanfic vernacular, as a starting point. Fanfic authors comment and transform the canon through switched narrative perspective, altered romantic combinations of characters, expansions of minor characters or scenes, or a play with temporal boundaries in prequels and sequels." Fanfiction may take the canon in a different direction through reduction, amplification and transmotivation, whereby a character is giving motivations lacking in the canon.<sup>11</sup> As a result, fan fiction often subverts the canon's message.

---

<sup>8</sup> Aeschines observed this in his speech *Against Timarchus* (140-142). According to him, only a select, intelligent few were able to read between the lines and see the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles for what it was – romantic. While some classical authors, like Aeschines, argued for a romantic interpretation of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, such as Aesch. *Myrmidons* 135-136 or Pl. *Symp.* 179d-180b, others argued Achilles and Patroclus were nothing more than friends, such as Xen. *Symp.* 8.31.

<sup>9</sup> See previous note. Clarke's (1978) article is a modern example of a romantic reading of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, which Davidson (2007:256) follows. A more critical reading of this homoerotic interpretation is offered by Barret (1980). A non-romantic interpretation can be found in Fantuzzi (2012). The studies by Sanz-Morales & Laguna-Mariscal (2003) and Laguna-Mariscal & Sanz-Morales (2005) are examples of research conducted by ancient authors who were unclear about their stance in the debate but subtly wove it into their works.

<sup>10</sup> Sinha (2017:171).

<sup>11</sup> Leavenworth (2015:43).

In most cases, fan fiction can only be understood by someone familiar with the canon. Because of this hierarchal relationship, fan fiction is written for and within a specific community that all know the canon.<sup>12</sup> This is where fanfiction differs from other forms of reception. Although other forms of reception can also be marked as transformative works that “transform the source text to express a particular interpretation of it”,<sup>13</sup> they do not possess the same hierarchal relationship as fan fiction has with the canon.

Another trait of fan fiction is ‘shipping’: “the desire to see two particular characters in a work of fiction engage in a romantic and/or sexual relationship”.<sup>14</sup> The shipping of characters might refer to more than the “altered romantic combinations” Leavenworth (2015:40) mentions since it might also be based on the (intended) subtext of the canon.<sup>15</sup>

There appear to be many similarities between fan fiction and what Miller seems to be doing with *TSoA*. For example, there is a *switched narrative perspective*. In the *Iliad*, there is an all-knowing narrator, while in *TSoA*, there is a first-person perspective in the form of Patroclus. Secondly, because Patroclus and Achilles are lovers in her novel, Miller appears to be *shipping* them or speaking in terms of fan fiction: ‘Patrochilles’.<sup>16</sup>

At this point, however, it must be made clear that Madeline Miller’s novel is not fan fiction. While there are similarities between the genre and what Miller seems to be doing, it is also true that *TSoA* is not online published, one of the essential traits of fan fiction. Because the canon is often under copyright, it is not allowed to re-use material in print format. This is a problem Miller does not have to deal with, for there is no copyright on Homer’s *Iliad*. Furthermore, suppose we argue Miller’s retelling of myth is a work of fanfiction. In that case, we might also start arguing that Vergil’s *Aeneid* or Statius’ *Achilleid* are fanfictions on the *Iliad*. We might say Vergil expands on a Homeric character, Aeneas, and Statius plans to fill up the silences Homer leaves in his epic. That brings us to an important question: are fan fiction and mythology really the same?

Keen (2016:§3.4) argues that myth retellings do not suppose the same hierarchic relationship as fanfiction has with the canon, since there were multiple versions of myth. There can be some dominant versions discerned, to which succeeding versions react. According to Keen (2016:§6.2), mythology can be best described as part of the family of transformative works, which, in the case of mythology, is the “taking of the stories of mythology and reinventing them in new forms”. However, it must be pointed out that Homer’s *Iliad* does have a unique position because retellings of the Trojan War are often compared to

---

<sup>12</sup> Leavenworth (2015:42-43).

<sup>13</sup> Farley (2016:§1.3).

<sup>14</sup> Harrisson (2016:§1.3).

<sup>15</sup> Harrisson (2016:§1.4).

<sup>16</sup> See “Achilles/Patroclus” on fanlore.org (<https://fanlore.org/wiki/Achilles/Patroclus>).

his epic. Wolfgang Petersen's movie *Troy* (2004) received much criticism because he did not follow the *Iliad* closely.<sup>17</sup>

This distinction does not appear to provide a clear answer to what Madeline Miller is doing with the material. Miller uses seven of the 34 chapters her novel contains to recount the events of the *Iliad*. The first 24 chapters of *TSoA* retell the mythology of Achilles' life before the Iliadic narrative that starts in chapter 25. Like Statius, Miller focuses on the gaps Homer leaves in his epic. Is Miller then writing a new version of myth comparable to authors from antiquity? Or, if there are many points of similarity between *TSoA* and Statius' *Achilleid*, is Miller's novel then more reception of Statius than reception of Homer's *Iliad*? Is approaching the hidden layers of Miller's novel that can be understood by students and teachers of Classics as fanfic not fruitful, or even possible?

I want to answer these questions by analysing Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*. To do so, I will use Bal's (2017) concepts of *text*, *story* and *fabula* that form the vertical structure of a narrative. A *text* is the form of the narrative we read, hear, or observe in other ways. The content of the *text* is a *story* told from the *narrator* to the *narratee*, the reader, viewer, or listener.<sup>18</sup> The *story* manifests a *fabula*, a series of *events*. Interpretation and 'colouring' of the *fabula* are provided by *the story*. The material of the *fabula* consists of *events* that happen during a specific *time*, at a particular *location*, and be described in relation to *actors*, the agents of action. These are called the *elements* of a *fabula*. Finally, the perspective from which the *elements* are viewed is called focalisation.<sup>19</sup>

In chapter 1 of this thesis, I will discuss the mythological background of Achilles' life before the narrative of the *Iliad*. The events of *TSoA* are told through Patroclus' perspective, which makes him the focalizer, thus the agent who interprets the events.<sup>20</sup> This has enormous implications for how we as an audience perceive the Iliadic events in the second part of Miller's novel, about which my second chapter will be centred. Finally, in the conclusion of this thesis, I will return to the abovementioned questions and (try to) formulate answers, if there are any.

---

<sup>17</sup> Keen (2016:§3.4) says, "commentators in the field of classics can get snooty about changes to canon made by modern creators".

<sup>18</sup> See De Jong (2014:17-46).

<sup>19</sup> See Bal (2017:3-10) for abovementioned theory and concepts.

<sup>20</sup> Bal (2017:10).

## 1. Achilles' life before the Iliad

"Name one hero who was happy."

(...)

"I can't."

"I know. They never let you be famous and happy." He lifted an eyebrow. "I'll tell you a secret."

"Tell me." I loved it when he was like this.

"I'm going to be the first." He took my palm and held it to his. "Swear it."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the reason. Swear it."

"I swear it," I said, lost in the high colour of his cheeks, the flame of his eyes.

Here, Achilles gives an important statement about the goal in his life: to become the first happy hero. This passage is striking because it illustrates Miller's agenda for the first part of *TSoA* about Achilles' early life. Before he sails to Troy, Achilles is not focused on gaining glory and immortality as in the *Iliad* (see 2.1 and 2.2), but simply on being happy.

There are few references to Achilles' early life with Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad*. This is not surprising since the narrative scope of the *Iliad* only focuses on the tenth year of the Trojan War. Because the *fabula* of Achilles' life before the *Iliad* is difficult to (re)construct with the references that are to be found in Homer's epic alone, Miller had to look at other sources, as we shall see below. Since Miller has a MA degree in Latin and Ancient Greek,<sup>21</sup> it is not surprising she is familiar with the many different, sometimes obscure, versions of Achilles' life. What is more, she reveals in the Q&A on her website that she had to pick between the different variations on Achilles' life which ones to add and which to omit.<sup>22</sup>

One example of her familiarity with ancient literature is the episode on Scyros, where Thetis persuades Achilles to put on female clothes to hide from the impending Trojan War. According to the standard version of the myth, Odysseus, accompanied by Diomedes, lures Achilles out of his hiding by presenting gifts to king Lycomedes.<sup>23</sup> Among the gifts are things that females desire, such as earrings, and weapons. Achilles then falls into the trap by picking up the weapons, thus exposing himself. For example, in other versions, Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* 3.13.8, Achilles' identity is revealed by the blast of a trumpet, and he immediately starts preparing for an attack. Statius' *Achilleid* was the first and only version to combine both gifts and trumpet blast as part of the ruse.<sup>24</sup> Since Miller also includes both items in the scene

---

<sup>21</sup> See the biography of Miller in *TSoA*.

<sup>22</sup> See Q&A with Madeline Miller (<http://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/>)

<sup>23</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:30).

<sup>24</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:79).



where Achilles is discovered, it is therefore likely she was familiar with Statius' epic. This is perhaps unsurprising because Statius was planning to tell the whole story of Achilles' life, as Homer left many aspects untold, according to him (*plura vacant*, Stat. *Achill.* 1.4).

Therefore, for this chapter, I will not explore the question *if* Madeline Miller was inspired by sources from ancient literature but treat that as a given. By comparing different versions of the mythology surrounding Achilles' life before the events of the *Iliad*, I will discuss the choices Miller made in her (re)construction of the *fabula* of Achilles' life and what impact they have on our interpretation of the first part of her novel and how they prepare for the second part of her novel. I will start my research by discussing the effect of Patroclus as a focalizer of the events that make up his and Achilles' lives (1.1). Next, I will turn to all the events and meaningful moments that colour Achilles' life before the events of the *Iliad*, from the education Achilles and Patroclus receive from Chiron (1.2) to Achilles' cross-dressing on Scyros (1.3) and Iphigenia's sacrifice in Aulis (1.4). Finally, I will evaluate my findings and return to Achilles' statement about his desire to become the first happy hero.

### **1.1 Through Patroclus' eyes**

Since focalisation is the perspective from which the elements of the *fabula* are perceived, Bal (2017:10) describes focalizers as "the agents of perception and interpretation". Focalization then colours the narrative with subjectivity. Therefore, it is fruitful to discuss Patroclus as the focalizer of *TSoA* and analyse how he, and by extent, we perceive Achilles' life through his eyes.

In Chapter 1 of *TSoA*, Patroclus narrates his early years as a baby. Soon after his birth, he became a disappointment in his father's eyes. He describes how he did not have any quality a father could wish for in a son. Besides being small and slight, he was not fast, strong, or able to sing.<sup>25</sup> Patroclus' weakness and lack of any of the abovementioned qualities become more apparent when Menoetius, his father, organises games in which a boy, Achilles, participates. Though he is shorter than the other boys his age, he is the fastest and makes his father proud – something Patroclus does explicitly not since he is too slow to race in even the youngest age group.<sup>26</sup> At last, his father, having witnessed Achilles' victory and the pride of his father Peleus, turns to Patroclus and tells him: "That is what a son should be."<sup>27</sup>

Turning to the next chapter in *TSoA*, Patroclus and his father Menoetius travel to Sparta and its king Tyndareus to present Patroclus as a potential suitor for the king's

---

<sup>25</sup> *TSoA*, ch.1, p.1. This is further underscored by Patroclus' mom's stupidity, of which there is no indication in the *Iliad* nor anywhere else in the *Epic Cycle*.

<sup>26</sup> *TSoA*, ch.1, p.3.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*.

daughter Helen.<sup>28</sup> There is no mention or reference to the oath Helen's suitors swore that bound them to the Trojan War in the *Iliad*. Although this is to be expected, as this event is not part of the narrative scope of the *Iliad*, it is unclear whether Homer was aware of this myth.<sup>29</sup> The oath was a solution to prevent a fight among the suitors at the Spartan court that were not chosen as Helen's husband-to-be. In *TSoA*, This solution was presented by Odysseus, to whom Tyndareus had promised the hand of Penelope as the price for his help.<sup>30</sup> When Patroclus notices Menelaus' attempt to woo Helen, he already observes the potential he has to win:

Menelaus' hair was a startling red, the colour of fire-forged bronze. His body was strong, stocky with muscles, vital. The gift he gave was a rich one, beautifully dyed cloth. "Though the lady needs no adornment," he added, smiling. This was a pretty bit of speech. I wished I had something clever to say. I was the only one under twenty, and I was not descended from a god. **Perhaps Peleus' blond-haired son would be equal to this, I thought. But his father had kept him home.**<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, Patroclus does not know anything interesting to say, and while he is the son of a king, he is not descended from a god. He does not stand a chance against a man like Menelaus, but someone like Achilles would have since he embodies what a son should be.

Interestingly, this scene seems to be inspired by pseudo-Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, which also hints at Achilles' potential to win. In F204.85-93, Menelaus is described as the winner of Helen's hand, for he provided the most (πλεῖ[στ]α πορών, 87).<sup>32</sup> Only Achilles, if he had been present, would have stood a chance against him. He would have won the contest for Helen (οὐ γάρ μιν ἀρηίφιλος Μενέλαος νίκησ', 89-90) a detail Miller omits since Patroclus is not an all-knowing narrator. This scene hints at Achilles' greatness and perhaps the relatively obscure tradition surrounding Helen and Achilles in pseudo-Hesiod.<sup>33</sup> The oath-taking scene in Madeline Miller's novel clearly had another function besides

---

<sup>28</sup> *TSoA*, ch.2, p.5. Tyndareus was not Helen's biological father. See also West (2013:79) for this tradition. F10 of the *Cypria* tells a similar story.

<sup>29</sup> See West (2013:101-102) for an analysis of the origin of this myth. See also note 35 in West's (2013) chapter about the *Cypria*. There he mentions the following references to the oath-taking of Helen's suitors: [Hes.] fr. 204. 78-85; Stes. *PMGF* 190; Soph. *Aj.* 1113, fr. 144, cf. *Phil.* 72; Eur. *IA* 57-65, 78, 391f.; Thuc. 1.9.1; Isoc. *Hel.* 39.

<sup>30</sup> Here Miller based herself on Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.10.9, which is the first and only attestation of Odysseus as the one who offers the solution.

<sup>31</sup> *TSoA*, ch.2, p.8.

<sup>32</sup> Compare with *TSoA*, ch.2, p.8: "The gift he gave was a rich one."

<sup>33</sup> In the *Cypria*, Helen and Achilles meet secretly, according to F11b. See West (2013:118-119): Davies (1989:48) even goes as far as to suppose that Achilles wanted to meet Helen in the *Cypria* because of his sexual desire for her, since it was Aphrodite (and Thetis) who brought the two together.

explaining some of the prehistories of the Trojan war. Patroclus' observations regarding his lack of anything praiseworthy is strengthened by the contrast between him and Achilles, who may have been equal to a man like Menelaus. Patroclus suffers, therefore, yet another blow. He not only is the opposite of what a son should be, but he also brings shame and disgrace to his family by losing.

The first two chapters of *TSoA* lead up to the climax in chapter 3, where Patroclus suffers exile from his home because he killed a boy by accident. We are familiar with this scene through Hom. *Il.* 23.84-90, where Patroclus recounts the early moments of his life with Achilles in a dream appearance.

Patroclus has just run away from his fighting drills, a theme that will return later in the book, to be alone.<sup>34</sup> In *Iliad* 23.84-90, Patroclus does not tell very much about the details of how he murdered Amfidamas' son. It was an unfortunate event that happened over a game of dice.<sup>35</sup> In *TSoA*, a fight breaks out between Patroclus and the boy, called Clysonymus,<sup>36</sup> because Patroclus does not want to hand over his dice to him. Clysonymus begins to taunt him, saying that Menoetius thinks of him as a coward. Even though this is no news for Patroclus, he shoves the boy in frustration, who lands with his head on a rock and is killed instantly. Miller has thus given more depth to Clysonymus' murder in *TSoA* because the previous chapters explain the reason for Patroclus' anger and frustration. These chapters also dramatise Patroclus' exile: in his eagerness to be rid of his good-for-nothing son, exiling him was cheaper for Menoetius than executing him as retribution for Clysonymus' family and organising the funeral that accompanied it.<sup>37</sup>

The first chapters of *TSoA* illustrate the hardships Patroclus had to endure in the first ten years of his childhood. This makes him the ideal character to retell the events of the *Iliad* from. Since Patroclus is not an "epic" person and has been belittled by his father since his birth, he is the opposite of Achilles, who, besides the fact he is everything a son should be, has also never endured any hardships. Secondly, Patroclus is the opposite of Achilles' mother, Thetis. When Patroclus arrives at Peleus' court in ch.5, he and Achilles slowly become friends, and Patroclus becomes Achilles' *θεράπων*.<sup>38</sup> This relationship does not go unnoticed by Thetis. She demands a meeting with Patroclus because she wants to explain that her son will become a god while Patroclus will remain mortal.<sup>39</sup> Miller expands here on

---

<sup>34</sup> While he does hide again to avoid participating in the fighting drills in ch.4, 29, this also precludes his stance in the war, where he does not want to join in the fighting. See *TSoA*, ch.19, p.199.

<sup>35</sup> Hom. *Il.* 23.87-88.

<sup>36</sup> He is not called as such in Hom. *Il.* 23.84-90. According to Ψ bA 23.88 the boy's name is Κλεισώνυμος., as attested in Pherec., FGrHist 3.65. In Apoll. *Bibl.* 3.13.8 he is called Κλειτώνυμος.

<sup>37</sup> *TSoA*, ch.3, p.17.

<sup>38</sup> Based on *Il.* 23.89-90.

<sup>39</sup> *TSoA*, ch.6, p.51.

Thetis' obsession in the mythology surrounding Achilles' mortality.<sup>40</sup> In the *Iliad*, Thetis often reminds Achilles of his destiny to die young.<sup>41</sup> The best-known example is, of course, the myth of Thetis dipping Achilles' in the Styx, causing him to become immortal except for his heel.<sup>42</sup> Although Miller did not include this story in *TSoA*, she did include Thetis' obsession with Achilles' mortality. In Miller's novel, Thetis' goal is for Achilles to become a god, which he might if he were to become famous enough.<sup>43</sup> She believes Patroclus' presence in Achilles' life only might detain him from becoming a god and considers him unworthy of Achilles.<sup>44</sup> As a result, Thetis becomes the antagonist in *TSoA*, as she tries to keep Patroclus and Achilles apart on multiple occasions. She sends Achilles to Chiron to keep him away from Patroclus, and she hides her son on Scyros without telling Patroclus (see 1.3).

The relationship between Thetis, a goddess, and Patroclus, the mortal, regarding the relationship between him and Achilles defines the course of events, as we shall see below.

## **1.2 Education by Chiron**

According to Hom. *Il.* 11.828-832 Achilles was educated by the centaur Chiron in the art of medicine, and Achilles himself then taught Patroclus this subject. However, this does not necessarily mean that Achilles stayed on mount Pelion during these lessons, while Patroclus stayed behind in Phthia. The first attestations of Achilles' stay at Chiron are from a much later period.<sup>45</sup> It is unclear when Achilles was educated by the centaur since we may assume, according to *Il.* 828-832, Achilles and Patroclus were not together at this point. However, in *Il.* 23.85 Patroclus says he was transferred to Peleus' palace in Phthia when he was still young (εὔτέ με τυτθὸν ἔόντα). And, since he was older than Achilles, it is unlikely to assume Achilles received his education by Chiron before Patroclus' arrival.<sup>46</sup> In sum, the *Iliad* leaves many gaps about this period and sometimes even seems to contradict itself.

A source that does retell the abovementioned period between Patroclus' arrival and the recruitment of him and Achilles to join the war is Statius' *Achilleid*. He describes both Patroclus and Achilles' stay at Chiron and Achilles' crossdressing at Scyros, a scene that is left unmentioned in the *Iliad* (see 1.3). There are some significant parallels and differences in

---

<sup>40</sup> Burgess (2009:9).

<sup>41</sup> See for example 1.415-418; 18.95-96; 24.131-132. She also calls him ὠκύμορος in 1.417 and 18.95. twice. Other characters also discuss Achilles' mortality. See Edwards (1991:158) or Horn (2019:9-10).

<sup>42</sup> This myth is probably part of a later tradition since it is first attested in Stat. *Achill.* 1.133-134. See Burgess (2009:15).

<sup>43</sup> *TSoA*, ch.6, p.53.

<sup>44</sup> *TSoA*, ch.24, p.251.

<sup>45</sup> Kürschner (1907:23-24). Perhaps a version of this story was included in the *Cypria*. See also West (2013:104).

<sup>46</sup> Hom. *Il.* 11.786.

Miller's novel with Statius' *Achilleid* for the development of the characteristics of Patroclus and Achilles.

**Statius, *Achilleid* 1.174-177**

insequitur magno iam tunc connexus amore  
Patroclus tantisque extenditur aemulus actis,  
**par studiis aevique modis**, sed robore longe,  
et tamen aequali visurus Pergama fato.

Patroclus follows, already joined then by a great love, and he is straining, rivalling in such deeds, equal in eagerness and age, but far behind in strength. And yet he was bound to see Troy with a similar fate.<sup>47</sup>

In this scene, Thetis has just arrived at Chiron's cave to retrieve her son and to hide him on Scyros. Upon her arrival, Thetis is first greeted by Achilles and then by Patroclus, as is expressed by *insequitur* (174). He is of a similar age as Achilles (*par aevique modis*, 176) and equally interested in learning (*par studiis*, 176).<sup>48</sup> In *TSoA*, Patroclus also has the same age as Achilles, and they are both eager to learn every piece of knowledge Chiron has to offer.<sup>49</sup> Another similarity is Patroclus' lack of strength (*sed robore longe*, 176), which we have already seen in the first three chapters of *TSoA*.<sup>50</sup> However, in the *Achilleid*, Patroclus tries to keep up with Achilles' greatness (*tantisque extenditur aemulus actis*, 174). In *TSoA*, he does the complete opposite. When Achilles asks Chiron to teach them to fight in ch.8, Chiron has nothing new to teach Achilles since he already is the best the centaur has ever seen. Patroclus, however, is told he will never gain fame from fighting. This does not disturb him. He does not wish to learn to gain enough skill to become a competent soldier.<sup>51</sup> This is yet another example of Patroclus' unwillingness to fight, which, as was already mentioned, will become important in chapter 2. Instead, Patroclus' skills lie elsewhere. In *Achilleid* 1.116-

---

<sup>47</sup> All translations of Latin and Greek texts are my own, except if mentioned otherwise.

<sup>48</sup> According to Kürschner (1907:29), Statius was also familiar with Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, who briefly addressed Patroclus' and Achilles' stay at Chiron's care. Compare *pariter ... pariter* (Val. Fl. *Arg.* 1.408-409) with *par studiis aevique modis* (Stat. *Achill.* 1.176).

<sup>49</sup> *TSoA*, ch.7, p.55 for the first attestation that Patroclus and Achilles have the same age. See *TSoA*, ch.9, p.87-90 for Miller's description of their happy days at Chiron's.

<sup>50</sup> Another similarity between Statius' *Achilleid* and Miller's *TSoA* may very well be there interpretation of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, since Statius mentions they were linked by a great love (*magno amore*). An interpretation of *amor* as a romantic notion could only perhaps make sense if we presume that Statius was planning to pay closer attention to the relationship at a later point. Fantuzzi (2012:264-266).

<sup>51</sup> *TSoA*, ch.8, p.84-85.



Achilles is described here in very feminine terms. His features are sweet to look at (*dulcis adhuc visu*, 161), and his hair shines more pleasing than tawny gold (*fulvoque nitet coma gratior auro*, 162).<sup>54</sup> According to Dilke (2005:xii), Achilles' appearance emphasises the transitory period of his transformation from a boy into a man. During the episode on Scyros, this transition takes place where Achilles cross-dresses himself as a female to fulfil his mother wishes to hide from the war. His maturity is established after raping Deidamia and shedding his female clothing, donning armour instead when Odysseus and Diomedes discover him.<sup>55</sup>

There is no reference to Achilles' crossdressing on Scyros in the *Iliad*.<sup>56</sup> Most probably, the episode was not featured in the *Epic Cycle*, though there may have been a story included about the relationship between Achilles and Deidamia.<sup>57</sup> In contrast with Achilles donning himself with female attire in the later tradition, *Il.* 9.668 tells of his conquest of Scyros.<sup>58</sup> This association of Achilles with Scyros fits more into the topos of him being the archetypal hero and, by extent, the archetypal male.<sup>59</sup> However, particularly in the first century CE, Achilles' transvestism became one of the most famous scenes in the iconography of Achilles' youth.<sup>60</sup> This interest was also reflected in literature, where there was also more attention for scenes where gender boundaries were tested.<sup>61</sup> Achilles' crossdressing on Scyros in Statius' *Achilleid* therefore fits in this pattern.

The episode of Achilles' crossdressing on Scyros has a different outcome in *TSoA* than in Statius' *Achilleid*. Achilles does not rape Deidamia but is persuaded by Thetis to sleep with her. What is more, Achilles only slept with her because his mother promised him that she would tell Patroclus of Achilles' whereabouts so that he would be able to come to Scyros.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, Achilles' discovery by Odysseus and Diomedes marks an important turning point. Up until this moment, Achilles was not thinking about joining the Trojan war. He is certain he will never be persuaded to join this war.<sup>63</sup> He is still very much the boy who enjoyed life under Chiron's tutelage since he wishes for a lyre – specifically the lyre Patroclus

---

<sup>54</sup> Dilke (2005:x).

<sup>55</sup> Dilke (2005:xii).

<sup>56</sup> Odysseus went to Scyros to recruit Achilles' son Neoptolemus to join the war (Hom. *Od.* 11.506-509). In *Il.* 19.326, Neoptolemus is growing up on Scyros, though no reference to his recruitment is made. See Fantuzzi (2012:21-22).

<sup>57</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:24-26).

<sup>58</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:22).

<sup>59</sup> Dilke (2005:ix).

<sup>60</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:93).

<sup>61</sup> Dilke (2005:ix).

<sup>62</sup> *TSoA*, ch.12, p.126-127.

<sup>63</sup> *TSoA*, ch.11, p.111.

inherited from his mom and took with him to Phthia after his exile – during his stay on Scyros.<sup>64</sup>

As I have already illustrated before, Miller modelled Achilles' discovery on Statius' *Achilleid*. But there are essential points during which Miller decided to differ from Statius' version of the episode on Scyros. These differences are tell-tale signs of the direction Miller is taking with her novel and the function of this scene in the grander scale of her narrative, as I would like to discuss below.

In the *Achilleid*, Achilles' discovery starts when Odysseus and Diomedes arrive. He is immediately intrigued by the arrival of the two heroes and their weapons (*novos heroas et arma*, 1.754). When Odysseus and Diomedes set the ruse for Achilles' discovery by presenting gifts to Lycomedes, the king of Scyros, he immediately moves towards the weapons. At the same time, the women are busy trying on new earrings (1.856). This causes him to be an easy target, and Odysseus immediately recognises him. Odysseus tries to persuade Achilles to take off his female attire and reveal himself by calling upon the glory that awaits in Troy, and he almost succeeds. Achilles is about to oblige Odysseus' request and is already taking off his female clothes (*iam pectus amictu laxabat*, 1.874-875), when a trumpet blasts and Achilles discards his clothes and takes up the weapons without thinking.<sup>65</sup>

In *TSoA*, on the contrary, Achilles seems to be immune to the first stage of Odysseus' and Diomedes' ruse. He does not seem interested in the weapons at all, taking up earrings himself to try on.<sup>66</sup> He only reveals himself at the sound of the trumpet, though he does not shed his female clothing when he grabs the weapons. Armed with a sword and a spear, he looks every bit the greatest warrior of his generation.<sup>67</sup>

The most crucial difference between the *Achilleid* and *TSoA* is Achilles' interest or lack thereof in warfare. In Statius' epic, the trumpet blast is unnecessary for Achilles' discovery because he was already taking off his female clothes. In *TSoA*, he reveals himself without thinking, immediately taking up the weapons at the sound of imminent danger. Even though Achilles' destiny promises he will become *aristos achaiôn*, he has not actively chosen to act upon this other side of him, his warrior side. In the *Achilleid*, Achilles is already being persuaded by Odysseus before the blast of the trumpet. What is more, his heart was already full of Troy (*totoque in pectore Troia est*, 1.857), before Odysseus started speaking to him. When Achilles picks up the weapons, the exposure of his identity that follows is as much his own choice as the trumpet causes it. In *TSoA*, Achilles is only persuaded by Odysseus after he is exposed. Besides, the promise of glory in Troy is not enough: Achilles believes there

---

<sup>64</sup> *TSoA*, ch.14, p.143. Achilles' interest in music is also emphasised in Stat. *Achill.* 1.187-189.

<sup>65</sup> Stat. *Achill.* 1.874-884.

<sup>66</sup> *TSoA*, ch.14, p.151-152.

<sup>67</sup> *TSoA*, ch.14, p.152.



will come other wars to become famous by. Odysseus must point out that he has heard a prophecy that going to Troy is the only chance Achilles' has of gaining glory before he decides to come.<sup>68</sup> Miller thus emphasises that up until this point, at least, there was a discrepancy between Achilles' destiny and what he wanted at that time.

Therefore, the episode on Scyros has a different outcome in *TSoA* than in Statius' *Achilleid*. In Statius' epic, this episode marks the transition for Achilles from a boy to a man and prepares for his role as the archetypal hero in the *Iliad*. In *TSoA*, the focus lies on Achilles' need to be persuaded to join the war. In Miller's novel, Achilles must make a choice himself to join the Greek cause, which is emphasised by the fact he would have declined Odysseus' offer were it not for the prophecy. His decision is the first step towards maturity, even though he has not witnessed any death before. This innocence and its loss will become the subject of the scene where Iphigenia gets sacrificed. Therefore, the fact that Achilles does not turn from a boy into a man in this episode, as in Statius' *Achilleid*, is a deliberate move on Miller's part. The fact that Achilles still has the innocence of a boy will only dramatise the events at Aulis, to which I will turn to now.

### **1.4 The sacrifice of Iphigenia**

After Achilles decides to join the war, he and Patroclus first sail home to Phthia, where the Myrmidons are prepared for battle. There, Achilles receives an ash-spear, a gift from Chiron.<sup>69</sup> It is an important weapon in the *Iliad*, for in 16.140-144 this spear, the one that brings death upon heroes (φόνον ἔμμεναι ἡρώεσσιν, *Il.* 16.144), is the one weapon Patroclus does not take along with him when he is donning himself with Achilles' armour. He is unable to since Achilles was the only one to wield it. Therefore, the ash spear defines the contrast between Patroclus' and Achilles' capabilities as a warrior and dramatically foreshadows Patroclus' death.<sup>70</sup> The difference between both men is further underscored by the fact that in a similar scene, Achilles is donning himself with his new armour and the spear that only he can handle (*Il.* 19.387-391).<sup>71</sup> While Patroclus could not take up the weapon, Achilles would do so to avenge him.<sup>72</sup> Finally, it is this spear that ends Hector's life, the killer of Patroclus in *Il.* 22.328.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> *TSoA*, ch.15, p.155-157.

<sup>69</sup> According to *Cypria* F3, the ash spear was given to Peleus as a wedding gift by Cheiron. Athena and Hephaistos fashioned it. See Davies (1989:36). Interestingly, in Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.13.5 the horses Xanthios and Balios are a wedding gift for Peleus. This tradition is also followed by Miller in *TSoA* ch.16, p.177.

<sup>70</sup> Janko (1994:333). Patroclus impending death is further emphasised by the mortal horse that is attached beside the immortal steeds of Achilles, since both the horse and Patroclus are slain.

<sup>71</sup> Even the wording is very similar. Compare for example Πηλίου ἐκ κορυφῆς, φόνον ἔμμεναι ἡρώεσσιν (*Il.* 16.144 and *Il.* 19.391).

<sup>72</sup> Edwards (1991:280).

<sup>73</sup> See Shannon (1975:31-86) for a detailed chapter on Achilles' spear.

In *TSoA*, the spear of Achilles is described as follows:

Such a fine gift would have taken weeks of Chiron's deft shaping; he must have begun it almost the day that we left. Did he know, or only guess at Achilles' destiny? As he lay alone in his rose-coloured cave, had some glimmer of prophecy come to him? Perhaps he simply assumed: **a bitterness of habit, of boy after boy trained for music and medicine, and unleashed for murder.**<sup>74</sup>

Comparable to the weapon of Achilles in the *Iliad*, only he can wield it. However, in *TSoA*, the spear is not mentioned during the scene when Patroclus dons himself with Achilles' armour,<sup>75</sup> nor is it said when Achilles armours himself.<sup>76</sup> It is only mentioned as the weapon that kills Hector.<sup>77</sup> The ashen spear in *TSoA* has a different function because it symbolises the two different sides of Achilles; the softer side, "trained for music and medicine," and his warrior side, the side that will be "unleashed for murder". The description of the wood emphasises this, that seemed to "slip under their fingers like the slender oiled strut of a lyre."<sup>78</sup> What is more, from the same material Patroclus fashioned a gift for him in ch.10 for Achilles' sixteenth birthday, a figurine of Achilles playing the lyre. Therefore, the spear not only is a weapon for Achilles to wield, but it is also a reminder of who he was before he came to Troy, which is emphasised by the gift from Patroclus that is carved from the same type of wood.

However, as we discussed in section 1.3, Achilles still possesses the innocence of a boy, unaware of what he chose when he decided to sail to Troy. While he turned seventeen before he arrived at Aulis, he may physically be a man, he is mentally not ready to grasp the full scope of what he signed up for.<sup>79</sup> This will change when Achilles witnesses Iphigenia's death, as we shall discuss below.

Analogous with the previous cases, the *Iliad* does not refer to the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter. While his three daughters are mentioned in the *Iliad*, none is called Iphigenia.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> *TSoA* ch.16, p.177-178.

<sup>75</sup> *TSoA*, ch.30, p.309-310.

<sup>76</sup> *TSoA*, ch.31, p.324.

<sup>77</sup> *TSoA*, ch.31, p.328.

<sup>78</sup> *TSoA*, ch.16, p.177-178.

<sup>79</sup> *TSoA*, ch.17, p.181-182.

<sup>80</sup> See Hom. *Il.* 9.144-145. Agamemnon's daughters here are called Chrysothemis, Laodike and Iphianassa. While the similarity between the names Iphigenia and Iphianassa is striking, it is unclear whether we may assume Iphianassa and Iphigenia are the same person. Consequently, it is dangerous to suppose, according to Gantz (1993:582) to conclude from the similarity between their names that Homer is deliberately denying the myth of the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter by giving Iphigenia a different name. See also Hainsworth (1993:77).

The only allusion to the events on Aulis might be found in Hom. *Il.* 1.106-108, where Agamemnon blames Calchas for making evil prophecies. These lines might refer to Calchas' interpretation of Artemis' wrath that the only way to appease the goddess is for Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter.<sup>81</sup>

Although there is a reference in Homer to the gathering of the fleet in Aulis, this meeting is considered the first mobilization at Aulis, Iphigenia's sacrifice supposedly happens during the second mobilization at Aulis.<sup>82</sup> The first accounts of the myth surrounding Iphigenia are the *Cypria* and Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*. In the *Cypria*, Artemis is angry because Agamemnon boasts of having slain a deer. The fleet of the Greek army is stranded on Aulis because of stormy winds. After Calchas reveals the goddess can be appeased by the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Agamemnon's daughter is lured to Aulis under the pretext she is to be married to Achilles. At the last moment, Artemis prevents the sacrifice from happening, by substituting Iphigenia by a deer and bringing her to the land of the Taurians.<sup>83</sup> In the *Catalogue of Women*, an εἶδωλον of Iphigenia is sacrificed, while she herself is rescued and immortalized.<sup>84</sup>

There are some accounts following the *Cypria* and the *Catalogue of Women*, namely Pindar's *Py.* 11.17-25 and in Aesch. *Ag.* 1412-1425, where Iphigenia is not rescued, but killed. Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia among the Tauri*, however, follows the account of the *Cypria*.<sup>85</sup> In Euripides' variant, the ruse of a marriage to Achilles is also used by Agamemnon to lure Iphigenia, accompanied by her mother Clytemnestra, to Aulis. We learn from *IT* that it is Odysseus who is dispatched to Argos to retrieve the girl and his role in the myth of Iphigenia's sacrifice becomes from that moment on standard.<sup>86</sup>

Euripides' other play, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, narrates the events starting from Agamemnon's message to Clytemnestra, his wife, to lure his daughter to Aulis under the pretext she is to be married to Achilles. Achilles is kept out of the loop and only discovers his

---

<sup>81</sup> Kirk (1985:65). Agamemnon might also be referring to the prophecy regarding the length of the war, the prospect of ten years being bad rather than good. Collard and Morwood (2017:3) If we may assume, according to these verses, that Homer was at least aware of the myth, it does not explain the absence of Iphigenia's name in book 9.

<sup>82</sup> West (2014:110) and Gantz (1993:576-588). During the first mobilization at Aulis, we see an omen of snake devouring nine sparrows before it is miraculously turned to stone. From this omen, Calchas draws the conclusion that the Greeks will wage for war for nine years, before they will become successful in the tenth. The reference to Calchas' evil prophecies in Hom. *Il.* 106-108 may therefore concern this prophecy of Calchas and not a reference to Iphigenia's sacrifice at all.

<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, the *Cypria* adds Iphigenia to the list of Agamemnon's daughters in *Il.* 9.144-145. See Davies (1989:45-46) and West (2014:110) on the *Cypria*'s account.

<sup>84</sup> Hes. *Cat.* Fr.23a. See Gantz (1993:583-584) for an analysis.

<sup>85</sup> In both Pindar's and Aeschylus' account the sacrifice of Iphigenia is the reason for Clytemnestra's anger against Agamemnon, because of which she will kill him. Iphigenia's death is in both accounts essential for understanding the murder of Agamemnon.

<sup>86</sup> Gantz (1993:586). Perhaps as earlier still, but Proclus' summary of the *Cypria* remains unclear. Apollod. *Epit.* 3.21-22 follows Euripides' account, adding Talthylus as a companion of Odysseus.

supposed involvement when he accidentally encounters Clytemnestra, who has travelled along with Iphigenia. They decide and try to stop the sacrifice from happening. The struggle between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon is resolved by Iphigenia's voluntary sacrifice, a twist that is probably Euripides' invention.<sup>87</sup>

Another twist of Euripides is to be found in *IT*, where Iphigenia is not taken to the land of the Tauroi, immortalised, but as a sacrificial priestess. After she escapes, she becomes a priestess of Artemis at Halai and Brauron in Attica.<sup>88</sup> In *IT*, there is also a different motive for Artemis' wrath. Here, Agamemnon did not boast of a slain deer, but instead, he had once promised the goddess to sacrifice the most beautiful thing the year had produced, and the fulfilment of his promise was long overdue.<sup>89</sup>

Though not all accounts have been discussed, it is clear the myth concerning Iphigenia's sacrifice has many different versions, and there is no detail on which all the accounts seem to agree.<sup>90</sup> The general motifs seem to be Artemis' wrath, the marriage to Achilles as a ruse to lure Iphigenia to Aulis and her rescue from the altar.

In *TSoA*, Artemis is angry with the Greeks because of the blood the army intends to shed. Iphigenia's sacrifice is therefore considered as a payment, "human blood for human blood".<sup>91</sup> Since this motive cannot be found in any of the versions, this seems to be Miller's own invention. Agamemnon's decision to follow through with the sacrifice anyway, emphasises his greed. This scene therefore precludes the quarrel between him and Achilles during ch.25, based on the first book of the *Iliad*.

Another invention of Miller is that she used Iphigenia's function as a priestess of Artemis differently. While there is no reference of her future as a priestess in Euripides' *IA*, Iphigenia is, as we have seen, a priestess of Artemis in *IT* after her rescue from the sacrificial altar. In *TSoA*, Iphigenia already is a priestess before her death and is summoned to Aulis to help preside over the rites Calchas instructed to perform.<sup>92</sup> This is the pretext under which Iphigenia is lured to Aulis, but the marriage to Achilles is what will make her go to the altar without a struggle. In contrast to Euripides' account, where Achilles plays no part in the ruse, he is here asked to take the girl as his bride. It is therefore his own choice that contributes to Iphigenia's death.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Collard and Morwood (2017:4).

<sup>88</sup> Eur. *IT*. 28-41 and *IT*. 1449-1463.

<sup>89</sup> Eur. *IT*. 18-21.

<sup>90</sup> See Gantz (1993:582-588) for a more detailed account on the different versions. Sop. *El*. 563-576; Ovid. *Met*. 12.1-31.

<sup>91</sup> *TSoA*, ch.18, p.193.

<sup>92</sup> *TSoA*, ch.18, 189.

<sup>93</sup> *TSoA*, ch.18, p.189-190.

These twists and inventions by Miller all dramatise the events that will follow. Since Achilles does not know what fate Iphigenia truly awaits because he also believes they will marry, he is unable to save her when she is suddenly killed:

“I could have stopped them,” he said; the skin of his face was very pale; his voice was hoarse. “I was close enough. I could have saved her.”<sup>94</sup>

Not only is this the first death he has witnessed, but Achilles also failed to save her *despite* being the *aristos achaiôn*.<sup>95</sup> This has the following effects. First, Achilles’ failure to save someone, despite being the best of the Greeks, is a prolepsis to ch.30, where he will fail to protect Patroclus. The reaction to Iphigenia’s death is only a fraction of the grief he will experience when Patroclus dies. Secondly, Achilles loses his childhood innocence because he realises the full weight of what he must do in Troy: kill men.

When the Greeks set sail to Troy, after the winds have returned due to the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Achilles asks Patroclus what it was like when he killed the boy when he was a child. He remembers the advice from his father that he must think of the men he kills as animals.<sup>96</sup> When he does kill his first victims, he tells Patroclus he did not think at all.<sup>97</sup> What is more, after his first kills, he slowly learns to enjoy the full potential of his skills.<sup>98</sup> The scene where Iphigenia is sacrificed is, therefore, necessary for Achilles to fully become *aristos achaiôn* and embrace his destiny, leaving behind his soft side trained for music and medicine.

This lesson also needs to be learned by Patroclus. He cannot preserve Achilles’ innocence as he would have liked and needs to let it go. Odysseus advises him to do so as well, at the end of ch.19, where he tells him that Achilles is “going to Troy to kill men, not rescue them” and that he is “a weapon, a killer”.<sup>99</sup>

Iphigenia’s sacrifice only marks the beginning of all that is to follow. Because Achilles embraces his destiny, he loses the innocence of boyhood and starts growing into the male we are familiar with from the *Iliad* that stops fighting to preserve his honour, unaffected by the rising toil of fallen Greek soldiers he could have prevented. It leads to Patroclus’ plan to fight in Achilles’ place that will end in his death. Therefore, the chapters on Iphigenia’s death anticipates the negative consequences of Achilles’ choices in the second part of *TSoA*.

---

<sup>94</sup> *TSoA*, ch.18, p.193.

<sup>95</sup> *TSoA*, ch.18, p.193-194.

<sup>96</sup> *TSoA*, ch.19, p.198.

<sup>97</sup> *TSoA*, ch.20, p.208-209.

<sup>98</sup> *TSoA*, ch.20, p.211-212,

<sup>99</sup> *TSoA*, ch.19, p.195-196.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This chapter started with a quote from *TSoA*, where Achilles tells his intentions to become the first happy hero. Patroclus is the reason for his happiness, but he will also become the reason for his utter despair, as we shall see in chapter 2. For an audience familiar with the *Iliad*, Patroclus' death comes as no surprise, and this scene is one of the many moments that foreshadow what is to come, as we have seen. For those of Miller's readers who have never read the *Iliad* and/or are not familiar with Homer's epic, Miller carefully builds up her story towards those events during the first part of her novel that focuses on Achilles' life before he sails to Troy. This is caused, to begin with, by the fact that Patroclus is the point of focalisation of *TSoA*. He is the opposite of Achilles, who is everything a son should be, and he has already endured much at a young age. As a result of the death he witnessed, he does not want to become a soldier. This is, for example, illustrated by the fact he wanted to learn the art of medicine by Chiron, while he did not have any interest in how he would become a better fighter. The second consequence of Patroclus' early years in life is that he wants to preserve Achilles' innocence. However, Achilles' own decisions – to go to Troy and to partake unknowingly in Iphigenia's murder – cause him to lose his innocence, nevertheless. These decisions are partly driven by Thetis' ambitions for Achilles – for him to become a god.

Though we might suppose Achilles' destiny as *aristos achaiôn* is put into a negative perspective in the first 24 chapters of *TSoA*, the question we need to ask is whether the price of war Achilles needs to pay is worth the sacrifices he must make. He already seems to have answered this question in the passage I quoted at the beginning of the chapter, that "they let you never be famous *and* happy". As whispered by his mother, he must choose between his happiness with Patroclus or the fame that might bring him immortality. Therefore, the first part of *TSoA* prepares for a more pessimistic reading of the Iliadic events, to which I will turn to now.

## 2. *The price of war: The Iliad in TSoA*

In the Q&A on Miller's website, she answers the question where she took her inspiration from for Achilles' and Patroclus' romantic relationship.<sup>100</sup> Unsurprisingly, it was not the *Iliad*, which does not make the nature of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles explicit.<sup>101</sup> For Miller, her inspiration came from Plato's *Symposium*, which discusses in 179d-180b the kind of love the gods praise. Achilles heard from his mother that he would die if he killed Hector (πεπυσμένος παρὰ τῆς μητρὸς ὡς ἀποθανοῖτο ἀποκτείνας Ἴκτορα, 179e). Still, he chose to save his lover Patroclus anyway (ἐτόλμησεν ἐλέσθαι βοηθήσας τῷ ἔραστῇ Πατρόκλῳ, 180a) not only because he wished to avenge him (τιμωρήσας, 180a), but also so that he could join Patroclus in death (ἐπαποθανεῖν, 180a). However, in *TSoA*, Miller questions whether Achilles' actions are as praiseworthy as Plato assumes. As we saw earlier, Miller focused in the first part of her novel on the two sides of Achilles. The warrior side evolves in the second part of *TSoA* into a version of Achilles that has a lot in common with Homer's. As we shall see below, Miller puts this side in a negative light, often by opposing Achilles' growing obsession with his reputation and his role as *aristos achaiôn* with Patroclus' kindness.

In the previous chapter, we have seen how Miller used different mythological sources to shape Achilles' life through the eyes of Patroclus up until the events based on the *Iliad*. In the Q&A on her website, Miller reveals that she followed the narrative of the *Iliad* closely to recount the tenth year of the Trojan war. For this chapter, I will focus on how the story of *TSoA*, told through the eyes of Patroclus, shaped and interpreted the *fabula* of the *Iliad*. Where does Miller expand on scenes or details? What parts does she emphasise? How does she fill in the gaps of the Iliadic narrative?

Since the *Iliad* starts with Achilles' decision to stop fighting over the girl Briseis, this is where I shall begin in section 2.1. As a character, Briseis does not play an important role in the *Iliad*.<sup>102</sup> In fact, the only time we hear her speak is in book 19, when she mourns Patroclus.<sup>103</sup> In Miller's *TSoA*, the few available details from the *Iliad* about her character and feelings are expanded on in such a way that Patroclus will play an active role in the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon over Briseis, as we shall see below. Next, we will turn to the chapters that build up towards Patroclus' death in section 2.2 and how he becomes "Best of the Myrmidons" through his actions. In section 2.3, Patroclus cannot find peace as an unburied spirit and witnesses the final events of the Trojan war, outside of the narrative

---

<sup>100</sup> See Q&A with Madeline Miller (<http://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/>).

<sup>101</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:187)

<sup>102</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:99).

<sup>103</sup> Hom. *Il.* 19.287-300. De Jong (1987:113) therefore calls her a 'semi-silent' character. See also Dué (2002:122-150).

scope of the *Iliad*. Here, Patroclus asks what exactly is praiseworthy of Achilles' character by comparing him to his son Pyrrhus, who has come to sack Troy as the new *aristos achaiôn*. In the conclusion of this chapter, we will look back on the previous sections and how they all contribute to a more negative reading of the events of the *Iliad*.

## 2.1 Achilles, Briseis, Patroclus

When Briseis gets abducted by Agamemnon in *Il.* 1.298-299, Achilles stops fighting. As a result, the question of whether there were any romantic feelings between them has been a topic for debate since antiquity.<sup>104</sup> Some passages indeed suggest there are some feelings between them. Achilles is in tears in 1.357 when he speaks to his mother about the fact that she has been taken away from him. Next, he refers to Briseis as wife (ἄλοχον θυμαρέα) in 9.336, and he goes on to ask the rhetorical question whether it is only allowed for the Atrides to love their women (ἦ μοῦνοι φιλέουσ' ἄλόχους μερόπων ἀνθρώπων Ἀτρεΐδαι, 9.340-341).<sup>105</sup> Curiously, Achilles uses here the verb φιλεῖν, which suggests, according to Konstan (2018:33) mutual love or affection.<sup>106</sup>

However, Achilles' tearful speech to his mother is not focused on Briseis as an object of love, but as his γέρας (1.356): a 'war-prize of honour'.<sup>107</sup> In this speech, he seems to be more focused on the implications of Briseis' abduction for his reputation than on his feelings of affection for her.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, when Achilles calls Briseis his 'wife' in 9.336, he might very well be employing a rhetorical manoeuvre that has nothing to do with his feelings for her.<sup>109</sup> For Briseis' part, very little can be said about her possible feelings for Achilles. As De Jong (1987:111) puts it: "Just as in the case of Chryseis, we are constantly confronted with the opinions and feelings of others concerning Briseis, not with her own. In other words, she is an object of focalisation, not a subject." Nevertheless, there are two instances where we may learn something of Briseis' feelings. In 1.348, she is mentioned to follow the two heralds unwillingly (ἄεκουσα, 348) from Achilles' hut to Agamemnon's. While Kirk (1985:87) proposes Briseis' reluctance says something about the "attachment to her captor", the speech given by

---

<sup>104</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:99).

<sup>105</sup> Hainsworth (1993:106). The term ἄλοχος denotes a wife. It is in sharp contrast with the description of her as δούλη in 3.409. See also Dué (2002:122). This sentence in particular invites us to think of Briseis as a wife, since here she is compared directly to Helen and Clytemnestra.

<sup>106</sup> For the mutuality of friendship, see also Van Berkel (2019:1-68).

<sup>107</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:99-103). I have used the definition of γέρας as Fantuzzi puts it, related to concept of τιμή, which I will discuss below.

<sup>108</sup> See Hom. *Il.* 1.356 (ἠτίμησεν).

<sup>109</sup> See Hainsworth (1993:106), but also Fantuzzi (2012:108-109). Achilles compares himself to a husband who is deprived of his wife and, to Menelaus. Therefore, Briseis is compared to Helen. Undermining Achilles' determination to wait until Agamemnon's apology over Briseis is thus, according to this line of rhetoric, undermining the Trojan War itself.



Briseis is a lament for Patroclus' death does not suggest any warmth between Achilles and Briseis.<sup>110</sup>

**Hom. II. 19.287-300**

«Πάτροκλέ μοι δειλῆ πλεῖστον **κεχαρισμένε** θυμῷ  
ζῶν μὲν σε ἔλειπον ἐγὼ κλισίηθεν ἰοῦσα,  
**νῦν δέ** σε τεθνηῶτα κιχάνομαι ὄρχαμε λαῶν  
ἄψ ἀνιοῦσ'· ὥς μοι δέχεται κακὸν ἐκ κακοῦ αἰεῖ. 290  
ἄνδρα μὲν ᾧ ἔδοσάν με πατήρ καὶ πότνια μήτηρ  
εἶδον πρὸ πτόλιος δεδαϊγμένον ὀξεῖ χαλκῷ,  
τρῆς τε κασιγνήτους, τοὺς μοι μία γείνατο μήτηρ,  
κηδείους, οἳ πάντες ὀλέθριον ἦμαρ ἐπέσπον.  
οὐδὲ μὲν οὐδέ μ' ἔασκες, ὄτ' ἄνδρ' ἐμὸν ὠκύς Ἀχιλλεύς 295  
ἔκτεινεν, πέρσεν δὲ πόλιν θείοιο Μύνητος,  
κλαίειν, ἀλλὰ μ' ἔφασκες Ἀχιλλῆος θείοιο  
κουριδίην ἄλοχον θήσειν, ἄξειν τ' ἐνὶ νηυσὶν  
ἔς Φθίην, δαίσειν δὲ γάμον μετὰ Μυρμιδόνεσσι.  
τὼ σ' ἄμοτον κλαίω τεθνηῶτα, **μείλιχον** αἰεῖ.» 300

“Patroclus, **most pleasing to me**, the unlucky one, in my heart, I left you while you were still alive when I went out of the hut, **but now** that I have come back, I meet you, leader of men, dead: how disaster for me always follows upon disaster. I saw the man, to whom my father and revered mother gave me, slain, in front of city by the sharp bronze, and I saw my three brothers, beloved, whom the same mother had brought forth to me: all of them encountered their day of death. You insisted not to let me cry, when swift Achilles killed my husband and sacked the city of godlike Mynes, but you told me that you would make me the wedded wife of godlike Achilles, that you would take me to Phthia on the ships, and that you would give a wedding banquet among the Myrmidons. Therefore, I incessantly lament you because you are dead, you who were always **gentle**.”

Briseis' speech illustrates how her feelings for Patroclus contrast with her feelings for Achilles. The contrast between the situation before Patroclus' death and the one after is emphasised by νῦν δέ in 290. His death is linked to all the bad things that have happened to her, to start with the murder of her loved ones by Achilles. Patroclus, on the contrary, was always gentle (μείλιχον αἰεῖ, 300) towards her and is most pleasing to her (κεχαρισμένε,

---

<sup>110</sup> Edwards (1991:268).

287).<sup>111</sup> With his demise, the promise of a better future for Briseis dies with him.<sup>112</sup> He would have made her Achilles' wife (κουριδίην ἄλοχον, 298), which would have meant an improvement of her position as a slave.<sup>113</sup> Briseis' speech, therefore, suggests there were more feelings of warmth between her and Patroclus than between her and the murderer of her family.<sup>114</sup>

The details known of Briseis' feelings from her perspective are expanded on by Madeline Miller. Ch.21 and 24 build up towards the start of the Iliadic narrative in ch.25 and interpret Briseis' reason to call Patroclus gentle in the *Iliad*. In chapter 21, she appears on the *dais* to be distributed among the men as a spoil of war. Agamemnon, who "was known (...) for his appetites", would undoubtedly have taken her and raped her, had Patroclus not urged Achilles to choose her as his war prize.<sup>115</sup> In chapters 21-24, the bond between Patroclus and Briseis grows, especially on Briseis' part. In ch.24, there is a suggestion of romantic feelings from Briseis towards Patroclus, for she wishes to become his wife.<sup>116</sup> In *TSoA*, Patroclus cannot make the promise Homer let him make to Briseis to ascertain her position at Achilles' side as his wife, for he knows Achilles will die soon. A future between Patroclus and Briseis is a possibility since he does not know yet he will die as well.

But while the relationship between Patroclus and Briseis grows, she rarely speaks with Achilles, whom she can see as nothing more than the man who plundered her village and slain her loved ones.<sup>117</sup> As there are no feelings between Briseis and Achilles, he does not care for her safety when Agamemnon decides to take her away from him in ch.25.<sup>118</sup> Patroclus then rushes to her tent, telling her of her fate – to be raped by Agamemnon – and that Achilles will do nothing.<sup>119</sup> When she is whisked away by the heralds Talthibius and Eurybates, whom Agamemnon sent to retrieve her, Briseis is fully aware of what will happen to her *because* of her relationship with Patroclus. When the heralds grab her, "she is forced to move, or fall".<sup>120</sup> The unwillingness (ἀέκουσα, 348) with which Briseis leaves Achilles' tent in the *Iliad* thus has nothing to do with fondness of him in *TSoA*, but with her fear for Agamemnon's plans with her. However, we know from *Il.* 9.128-134 Agamemnon never touched Briseis.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> Besides Briseis is Patroclus, also called gentle by Menelaus in Hom. *Il.* 17.669-672. Patroclus is the only character to whom the term μείλιχος is applied. See Edwards (1991:127).

<sup>112</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:118-119).

<sup>113</sup> De Jong (1987:112).

<sup>114</sup> Fantuzzi (2012:119).

<sup>115</sup> *TSoA*, ch.21, p.214-215.

<sup>116</sup> *TSoA*, ch.21, p.253.

<sup>117</sup> *TSoA*, ch.21, p.215 and ch.23, p.239.

<sup>118</sup> *TSoA*, ch.25, p.270.

<sup>119</sup> *TSoA*, ch.25, p.271.

<sup>120</sup> *TSoA*, ch.25, p.274.

<sup>121</sup> This message is repeated by Odysseus in 9.273-276.

**Hom. // 9.128-134**

δώσω δ' ἑπτὰ γυναῖκας ἀμύμονα ἔργ' εἰδυίας  
Λεσβίδας, ἃς ὄτε Λέσβον εὐκτιμένην ἔλεν αὐτὸς  
ἐξελόμην, αἱ κάλλει ἐνίκων φύλα γυναικῶν. 130  
τὰς μὲν οἱ δώσω, μετὰ δ' ἔσσειται ἦν τότε ἄπηύρων  
κούρη Βρισῆος, καὶ ἐπὶ μέγαν ὄρκον ὁμοῦμαι  
**μὴ ποτε τῆς εὐνῆς ἐπιβήμεναι ἠδὲ μιγῆναι,**  
**ἢ θέμις ἀνθρώπων πέλει ἀνδρῶν ἠδὲ γυναικῶν.**

I will give seven women from Lesbos, skilled in noble tasks, whom I carried off as booty myself when I took well-built Lesbos: they surpass the race of women in beauty. I will give them to him and among those will be the one that I took from him: Briseis. **And besides I will swear a great oath that I never set foot on her bed and had sex with her, which is the custom of men for men and women.**

According to Hainsworth (1993:76) It would have been perfectly normal for Agamemnon to have slept with Briseis, but “it is part of his consistent characterisation as βασιλεύτατος that he cannot admit any degree of culpability (...).” In *TSoA*, Agamemnon also never touches Briseis, but that is not because he does not want to. When Patroclus sees “the desperate hope in her eyes” in *TSoA*, ch.25 (p.274), he rushes to Agamemnon’s tent. To save her from Agamemnon’s “appetites”, Patroclus cuts open his arm and swears an oath that he speaks the truth and reveals Achilles’ intentions: to let Agamemnon rape Briseis so that Achilles has a good reason to dethrone him.<sup>122</sup> Patroclus is successful and convinces Agamemnon to refrain from touching Briseis. This scene in *TSoA* therefore, is a perfect example of transmotation. Patroclus convinces Agamemnon not to rape Briseis, while there is no indication that he has any involvement with keeping Briseis safe from Agamemnon’s urges in the *Iliad*.

Upon Patroclus’ return, Achilles sees the wound on Patroclus’ left arm and immediately starts to tend to it. This scene is, I believe, inspired by this terracotta drinking-cup (see image 1), on which a scene is depicted where Achilles is tending to a wound on, also, Patroclus’ left arm:

---

<sup>122</sup> *TSoA*, ch.26, p.275-278.



Figure 1 - Kylix: Achilles bandaging Patroclus

According to Junker (2012:5), it is noteworthy that both the names of Patroclus and Achilles are inscribed on the kylix. This is probably done because the scene depicted here is not familiar from the *Iliad*, and no other text tells us anything about a wounded Patroclus.<sup>123</sup> The inclusion of this scene in *TSoA* that fits into Miller's narrative, therefore, seems to be another illustration of her knowledge on the existing sources surrounding the Trojan War, as well as a reference to the education in the art of medicine Achilles and Patroclus received by Chiron (see 1.2).

After Patroclus' arm has been bandaged, he tells Achilles what he has done. They fight over Patroclus' decision to regard Briseis' safety as more important than Achilles' reputation:

---

<sup>123</sup> Junker (2012:5). In his discussion of this kylix, Junker illustrates how this scene could be interpreted, in combination with the other images displayed on the kylix. According to him, there may be some hints of prolepsis to Patroclus' upcoming death. For example, when Patroclus dies in *Il.* 16.698-867, his helmet is knocked off by Apollo, his shield falls to the ground and, finally, his cuirass is undone. These elements are also present on the kylix. For a closer analysis, see Junker (2012:1-18). Though there is no explicit reference to the erotic nature of their relationship, one could argue that the distinction between Achilles' and Patroclus' age as suggested by their (or lack of) facial hair, suggests a homoerotic relationship according to the custom of pederasty. See Lear et al. (2008:220-226).

**“My life is my reputation,”** he says. His breath sounds ragged. “It is all I have. I will not live much longer. Memory is all I can hope for.” He swallows, thickly. “You know this. And would you let Agamemnon destroy it? Would you help him take it from me?” “I would not,” I say. **“But I would have the memory be worthy of the man. I would have you be yourself, not some tyrant remembered for his cruelty.** There are other ways to make Agamemnon pay. We will do it. I will help you, I swear. But not like this. No fame is worth what you did today.”<sup>124</sup>

At the beginning of this section, I briefly mentioned Briseis as Achilles’ ‘war-prize of honour’, his γέρας. Homer’s Achilles is very much focused on his τιμή (honour) because this is a direct acknowledgement of his status.<sup>125</sup> When Briseis gets taken away from him, he tells his mother he has been deprived of his τιμή (ἠτίμησεν, 1.356). In both the *Iliad* and *TSoA*, Thetis shares Achilles’ obsession with his honour.<sup>126</sup> Patroclus taught Achilles how to love, Thetis taught him how to become a god. As a result, Achilles has become so focused on safeguarding his honour, that he does things that do not deserve to be honoured in our sense of the word, according to Patroclus, who wants the memory of Achilles to “be worthy of the man”. Therefore, the person Patroclus wants Achilles to be, a man worthy of being remembered because of his actions, stands opposed to what Thetis wants Achilles to become, a god.

Miller thus uses the relationship between Patroclus and Briseis to offer a different take on the events of book 1 of the *Iliad*. Achilles’ obsession with his reputation has negative consequences for Briseis. Gentle Patroclus saves her himself when he fails to persuade Achilles to help her. These events anticipate Patroclus’ death. When Achilles chooses to safeguard his reputation *again* and Patroclus *again* undertakes the necessary actions to save everyone, including Achilles’ reputation, it ends with his demise, as we shall see below.

## **2.2 Patroclus’ death**

In *Iliad* 18, Achilles reveals he has already received a prophecy once by Thetis about Patroclus’ death, though he did not know it at the time he received it:

---

<sup>124</sup> *TSoA*, ch.26, p.279-280.

<sup>125</sup> When Briseis gets taken away from him, Achilles tells his mother he has been deprived of his τιμή (ἠτίμησεν, 1.356). This is the true reason Achilles stops fighting. See *BK* (2009:129-130). Van Wees (1991:69) points out that honour (τιμή) in the Homeric society is a recognition of someone’s excellence (ἀρετή) and results in a good reputation (κλέος). See also Adkins’ (1960a) article about the problematics of translating τιμή with honour. For the reciprocity concerning τιμή, see Cairns (2019:77).

<sup>126</sup> See Thetis’ speech to Zeus in 1.503-510. See also ch.6, p.51, where Thetis tells Patroclus Achilles will become a god, and ch.15, p.160 of *TSoA*.

### Hom. // 18.8-11

μη δὴ μοι τελέσωσι θεοὶ κακὰ κήδεα θυμῶ,

ὥς ποτέ μοι μήτηρ διεπέφραδε καὶ μοι ἔειπε

**Μυρμιδόνων τὸν ἄριστον** ἔτι ζώντος ἐμεῖο 10

χερσὶν ὑπὸ Τρώων λείψειν φάος ἡελίοιο.

May the gods not have executed the sorrows for my heart that my mother once showed plainly to me and told me, that **the best of the Myrmidons** would leave the sunlight by the hands of the Trojans while I was still alive.

Thetis told Achilles that the best of the Myrmidons (Μυρμιδόνων τὸν ἄριστον, 10) would die while he was still alive (ζώντος ἐμεῖο, 10). Because this prophecy could not refer to him, he concludes in 18.12-13 it must be Patroclus that had died, who had been fighting in his place. As a substitute of Achilles on the battlefield, “he has taken upon himself not only the armour but also the heroic identity of Achilles”.<sup>127</sup> Patroclus can be regarded as a doublet of Achilles since Patroclus’ death anticipates Achilles’ by using similar motifs and action sequences that are thematically significant.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, one could understand why Patroclus is referred to in the prophecy as ‘the best of the Myrmidons’: as a doublet of Achilles, he was the best soldier fighting at the time Achilles himself did not.

Similarly, Thetis tells the same prophecy in *TSoA* ch. 24. However, Achilles here does not yet know to whom the prophecy might refer. Miller does not explicitly refer to the prophecy again, though Patroclus is called “Best of the Myrmidons” by Briseis just before he joins the battlefield to take Achilles’ place.<sup>129</sup> However, Miller adds a different interpretation of “Best of the Myrmidons” than the connotation of what being the best (τὸν ἄριστον, 10) entails, as we shall see below.

Just as Patroclus wanted to save Briseis from Agamemnon’s urges, so he too wants to keep the men who are dying because Achilles decides to stop fighting. Miller expanded on the relationship between Patroclus and Briseis, and similarly, she expands on the sympathy Patroclus feels for the men. In *TSoA*, he is helping the medic Machaon in the medical tent quite often while in // 11.842-848 he is only mentioned once as tending to someone’s

---

<sup>127</sup> Nagy (1999:68). See also Horn (2019:12-17), who offers a summary of the motifs of Achilles’ death that are transposed within the ‘Patroclea’.

<sup>128</sup> Horn (2019:16). For example, Patroclus’s death follows after killing Sarpedon, while Achilles’s death follows after killing Memnon. At the same time, Euphorbus can be seen as a doublet of Paris. See also Nickel (2002:221-225) for the classification of a Homeric character as a doublet.

<sup>129</sup> See below.

wounds. This wounded man, Eurypylus, only comes to Patroclus because Machaon himself is injured, and he has heard Patroclus learnt some medical skills from Achilles.<sup>130</sup> As a result of Patroclus' involvement in the medical tent, he starts to recognise many men. According to him, Achilles does not and has no desire to, since it is more important that the men should remember *him*.<sup>131</sup>

Patroclus' connection with the men prepares for his reaction to the embassy that arrives in ch.28 of *TSoA* to try and persuade Achilles to return to the battlefield. Corresponding with this scene in book 9 of the *Iliad*, Odysseus is the first to attempt to persuade Achilles to start fighting again in *TSoA*. His speech contains some of the elements from the one in *Il.* 9.225-306, though it differs in an important aspect.<sup>132</sup> Somehow, Odysseus knew of the prophecy about Achilles' impending death after Hector's. Therefore, in his speech, Odysseus appeals to the deaths of the Greek soldiers Achilles has caused and the length of the war, which could have been shorter if Achilles had killed Hector.<sup>133</sup> As a result, Achilles' negative, egoistic side is even more amplified because it is suggested by Odysseus Achilles is personally responsible for the misery ten years of war have caused.

Then Phoinix tells the story of Meleager in *TSoA*, modelled on *Il.* 9.524-605. In the *Iliad*, this story is a variation within the tradition, as it expands on and adds new details that make a comparison between Meleager and Achilles possible.<sup>134</sup> For example, in his speech, Phoinix interjects the motif of a hero who withdraws from battle in anger.<sup>135</sup> While Miller follows a similar outline of the story of Meleager as the *Iliad*, the focus in her novel is not so much on the parallel between Achilles and Meleager, but the parallel between Patroclus and Cleopatra. This is first indicated by the fact that Phoinix's eyes flicker to Patroclus when he mentions Cleopatra. Patroclus himself sees the resemblance in their names, which is built from the same stem: "father" (πατήρ) and "fame" (κλέος).<sup>136</sup> He also sees Phoinix's message in his story. After Meleager stopped fighting, there was nothing or no one who was able to convince him to return to the battlefield, except for Cleopatra:

---

<sup>130</sup> Hom. *Il.* 11.830-834.

<sup>131</sup> *TSoA*, ch.24, p.248.

<sup>132</sup> Hainsworth (1993:93) describes Odysseus argument. The common features with his speech in *TSoA* are the current position of the Greek soldiers, who are all dying, and the compensation Agamemnon is willing to pay for his actions.

<sup>133</sup> *TSoA*, ch.28, p.292-293.

<sup>134</sup> Burgess (2017:53-59) argues that we must not see Phoinix's version of the story of Meleager as an "invention" but rather as a variation within the tradition of the myth.

<sup>135</sup> Burgess (2017:59-62): "It looks like Phoenix has manipulated the traditional tale so that it better correlates to the current situation, the embassy's attempt to persuade Achilles to return to battle.

<sup>136</sup> Burgess (2017:66). The invention of the name Cleopatra to correlate with Patroclus in the *Iliad* has been accepted by many.

“At last, when her city was falling and her friends dying, Cleopatra could bear it no longer. She went to her husband to fight again. **He loved her above all things so agreed**, and won victory for his people (...).”

(...) It was not honor that made Meleager fight, or his friends, or victory, or revenge, or even his own life. It was Cleopatra, on her knees before him, **her face streaked with tears**. Here is Phoinix’s craft: Cleopatra, Patroclus. Her name built from the same pieces as mine, only reversed.<sup>137</sup>

While Burgess (2017:66) finds it hard to believe that Phoinix in *Iliad* 9.225-306 was trying to inspire Patroclus to try influence Achilles, it is evident in *TSoA* that Phoinix’ intends his speech to mean something for Patroclus. But while Cleopatra was able to convince her husband because “he loved her above all things”, Patroclus is not when he tries to convince Achilles to pick up his sword again, even when he asks him to do it, if not for the sake of the men, then for Patroclus’:

I looked at the stone of his beautiful face, and despaired. “**If you love me –**”  
“No!” His face was stiff with tension. “I cannot.”<sup>138</sup>

When Patroclus suggests fighting in his place, he is doing it to save both the men and Achilles’ reputation. Patroclus’ kindness causes Briseis to call him “best of men. Best of the Myrmidons” at the end of ch.28. This a modern twist on the meaning of what τὸν ἄριστον (18.10) in reference to Patroclus means in Homeric society. Someone who is ἀγαθός is someone who is “well-armed, strong, fleet of foot and skilled in war, counsel and strategy”.<sup>139</sup> In Homeric society then, being ἀγαθός is the same as being a good warrior. In *TSoA*, the focus of “best” lies on who Patroclus is as a person. This is further emphasised by the fact that he was a lousy soldier before becoming Achilles’ doublet. Thus Briseis’ words can only be applied to Patroclus’ actions resulting from his gentleness.

In 2.1 and 2.2, we have seen how Miller’s story in *TSoA* interprets the events of the *fabula* of the *Iliad* by 1) adding details that emphasise Patroclus’ involvement in the events based on the *Iliad*, such as his role in keeping Briseis safe from Agamemnon’s urges, and 2) by taking (intentionally or not) a stance in the scholarly debate on the interpretation of passages, such as the story of Meleager told by Phoinix and his intent for Patroclus to associate himself with Cleopatra. As a result, Patroclus’ kindness is emphasised and contrasted with Achilles’ egoism caused by his obsession with his reputation. This

---

<sup>137</sup> *TSoA*, ch.28, p.294.

<sup>138</sup> *TSoA*, ch.30, p.304.

<sup>139</sup> Adkins (1960b:36).





him council. This causes him to pick up his sword again and reconcile with Agamemnon in *Il.* 19.56-73.

In *TSoA*, Achilles does not reconcile with Agamemnon. He does not come to the same conclusions as Homer's Achilles in 18.97-106. Although Agamemnon and Achilles talk, the conversation ends with his wish that Patroclus had let everyone die.<sup>141</sup> With Patroclus dead, Achilles has lost all interest in safeguarding his reputation and wishes for his own death – so he tells Briseis<sup>142</sup>. In the *Iliad*, on the contrary, Achilles realises returning to the battlefield is not only necessary if he wants to avenge Patroclus,<sup>143</sup> but that it is also a good thing, for he now will go on and win great glory (νῦν δὲ κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἀροίμην, 18.121). As Edwards (1991:162) puts it: “This verse sums up the Homeric warrior code”. Glory can only be achieved by dying. While all Homeric heroes will eventually die, “glory is said to be forever, and undying (..) and the only form of immortality humans can ever hope to obtain”.<sup>144</sup>

As an unburied spirit, Patroclus witnesses the last moments of Achilles' life leading up to his death in *TSoA*. Although Achilles' death is technically not part of the narrative scope of the *Iliad*, it can be argued that the series of motifs in the *fabula* of his death established by Burgess (2009:29-42) are mirrored symbolically using motif transference to Patroclus' death.<sup>145</sup>

In the moments leading up to his death, Achilles is compared to the new *aristos achaiôn*, his son Pyrrhus, by Thetis. She argues Pyrrhus is a better man than Achilles because mortal things, such as love, do not taint him.<sup>146</sup> This explains why Achilles cannot reconcile with Agamemnon in *TSoA* or feel any sympathy for the death of many men he caused. His love for Patroclus makes it impossible for him to wish for anything else than the mercy of death so that he may be reconciled with him (ἐπαπροθανεῖν, Pl. *Symp.* 180a). He dies with a smile on his face in *TSoA*.<sup>147</sup>

After Achilles dies, we see through Patroclus' eyes what he could have been if he only focused on becoming a god through fame, as is the case with his son Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus' only quality is cruelty, as is also pointed out by Priam, who tells him in *Aen.* 2.540 that he is lying when he claims to be Achilles' son (*satum quo te mentiris*) because he does not possess any of the good qualities of Achilles.<sup>148</sup> That Pyrrhus only possesses the terrible qualities of

---

<sup>141</sup> *TSoA*, ch.31, p.323.

<sup>142</sup> *TSoA*, ch.31, p.324.

<sup>143</sup> Hom. *Il.* 18.114-115.

<sup>144</sup> Horn (2019:7).

<sup>145</sup> Horn (2019:16).

<sup>146</sup> *TSoA*, ch.31, p.330. Thetis does not say so explicitly, but she does say Achilles' time on mount Pelion ruined him, during which the relationship between him and Patroclus bloomed into something more.

<sup>147</sup> *TSoA*, ch.32, p.337.

<sup>148</sup> Williams (1972:249). Priam here refers to the kindness Achilles showed him when he came to beg for the body of his son Hector.

Achilles, is also pointed out by Patroclus, who observes the following about Achilles' tomb that only speaks of the death caused by him:<sup>149</sup>

Nothing but death. This is how Pyrrhus' tomb might look. Is this how he will be remembered?<sup>150</sup>

Because Pyrrhus does not allow Patroclus' name to be added to the tomb, he still lingers after the Greeks have left, not able to join Achilles.<sup>151</sup> It is then Thetis visits Achilles' tomb and she and Patroclus talk. As Thetis blamed Patroclus for keeping Achilles occupied with mortality and his love for Patroclus, he blames Thetis for the fact Achilles became a bad person because of his strife to become a god. He then asks her:

Would you make him another Pyrrhus? Let the stories of him be something more.<sup>152</sup>

Then, Patroclus tells Thetis all the memories that should be remembered, *his* memories of Achilles. This is, in my opinion, the true *Song of Achilles*.

---

<sup>149</sup> *TSoA*, ch.34, p.348.

<sup>150</sup> *TSoA*, ch.34, p.348.

<sup>151</sup> *TSoA*, ch.33, p.341.

<sup>152</sup> *TSoA*, ch.34, p.349.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I wanted to illustrate how Miller interpreted the *fabula* of the *Iliad* in her story of *TSoA* through Patroclus' eyes. In 2.1 and 2.2, we have seen how she adds details that amplify Patroclus' involvement in the events based on the *Iliad*. As a result, Patroclus' gentleness contrasts with Achilles' obsession with his reputation. This is emphasised, for example, by the fact that Miller adds a different meaning to "Best of the Myrmidons" than its meaning in Homeric society. We have seen above that the actual *Song of Achilles* is the song sung by Patroclus, containing the memories about him and Achilles. This explains why Miller paid so much attention to Achilles' life *before* the events of the *Iliad*. These are the memories that, according to Patroclus, are worth remembering. From the start of the Iliadic narrative in ch.25, Achilles does only bad things in his eyes. He stops fighting, and, as a result, Briseis almost gets raped by Agamemnon, while he could not care less about her safety. The same can be said for all the men that died because of this decision. Achilles does not care for them and, consequently, lets Patroclus go in his place, which results in his death. Finally, the horrible deeds Achilles performs, killing Hector, dragging his body around Troy, killing Memnon, killing Penthesilea, killing Troilus, were all a cruel product of Achilles' grief for Patroclus. Therefore, there are 24 chapters dedicated to the memories Patroclus values the most, and there are only seven that encompass the *Iliad*'s narrative scope. Even the number – 24 – does not feel like a coincidence, as it resembles the number of books that the *Iliad* contains. Secondly, ten chapters retell the events of the *Iliad*, including Achilles' death. Perhaps this number, 10, therefore symbolises the length of the Trojan War. However, since Achilles' death is not part of the narrative scope of the *Iliad*, the last two chapters of *TSoA* can, therefore almost be seen as an addition as to how the *Iliad* should have ended.

## Conclusion

Although Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is written first and foremost to be enjoyed by the general audience, in this thesis I wanted to point out and discuss the different hidden layers of her novel. In chapter 1 I illustrated how Miller (re)constructed the *fabula* of Achilles' life through her vast knowledge of mythological sources. The choices Miller made on the *fabula* level and her interpretation of these events in her *story* through Patroclus' eyes prepared for a more pessimistic reading on the chapters based on the Iliadic narrative. In chapter 2, I discussed these chapters, where Miller closely followed the Iliad's narrative. In this chapter, I, therefore, focused on what Miller emphasised, on which scenes or details she expanded, and finally, how she interpreted the *fabula* of the *Iliad* in her *story*. In both chapters, it became clear that the *focalisation* of the events of the *fabula* by Patroclus resulted in a negative interpretation of the *Iliad*. In fact, the Song of Achilles is the song that is performed by Patroclus about Achilles' life. He valued Achilles for who he was, a mortal man, more than Achilles' destiny to become *aristos achaiôn* and the implications of this destiny.

The question remains what to call these hidden layers of Miller's novel that cannot be understood without a similar background as the author has in Classics. Is *The Song of Achilles* then a fanfiction on Homer's *Iliad*? One of the key aspects of fan fiction is to subvert the canon's message. As I illustrated in this thesis and summarised above, Miller is subverting the *Iliad*. The fact that she dedicated 24 chapters, the number of books the *Iliad* contains, to tell Achilles' story *before* the events of the *Iliad* is a perfect illustration of this subversion. Because of this reason, it is difficult to say Miller's novel is reception of Homer's *Iliad*, especially since Achilles' life before he sails to Troy is not part of the narrative scope of the *Iliad*. At the same time, it is unjust to say Madeline Miller wrote fanfiction on Homer's *Iliad*, because we would therefore also seem to be implying Vergil's *Aeneid* and Statius' *Achilleid* are fanfictions on Homer, as I pointed out in my introduction. Moreover, Miller's novel distances itself (intentionally or not) from fanfiction through Miller's expertise in the field of Classics, which not only becomes apparent when one is reading her novel, but it is also pointed out in Miller's biography, included in the novel. She, therefore, seems to have much common with the writers of epic, though this conclusion is also problematic since she subverts the topic of epic: "kings and battles" (*reges et proelia*, Verg. *Ecl.* 6.3).

Is *The Song of Achilles* then reception of Statius' *Achilleid*, since her novel contains the same narrative scope as Statius intended? As we have seen in chapter 1, he also subverts Homer's Achilles, especially in the episode on Scyros. However, Achilles' role as the archetypal hero, with whom we are familiar through Homer's *Iliad*, is re-established at the end of the Scyros episode. In the *Achilleid*, Achilles wants to go to Troy himself, and almost

no persuasion by Odysseus is required. In *TSoA*, Achilles only gets persuaded because Odysseus tells him the prophecy, after which it is clear Achilles has to go to Troy if he wants his godly powers not go to waste and that he will be remembered as *aristos achaiôn*. Besides the different direction Miller's *TSoA* is going, it is because of the same expertise with mythological sources as mentioned above that it feels wrong to say Miller's novel is simply reception of Statius.

This thesis explored different ways to describe *The Song of Achilles*, but none of these descriptions seems to fit perfectly with what Miller is doing in her novel. Perhaps this thesis, therefore, raised more questions with its readers about modern retellings of myth in popular fiction and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, but I believe that would be a good thing since I hoped to have illustrated that this is a debate that is worth to have.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary literature**

- Collard, C. & Morwood, J. (2017). *Euripides. Iphigenia at Aulis*. Liverpool
- Davies, M. (1989). *The Epic Cycle*. Bristol.
- Dilke, O.A.W. (ed.) (2005). *Statius. Achilleid. Edited with Introduction, Apparatus Criticus and Notes*. Cambridge.
- Edwards, M.W. (ed.) (1991). *The Iliad: A Commentary. Vol. V: books 17-20*. Cambridge.
- Erbse, H. (ed.) (2015). *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem (Scholia vetera). Volumen V: Scholia ad libros Y – Ō continens*. Berlin.
- Hainsworth, B. (ed.) (1993). *The Iliad: A Commentary. Vol. III: books 9-12*. Cambridge.
- Janko, R. (ed.) (1994). *The Iliad: A Commentary. Vol. IV: books 13-16*. Cambridge.
- Kirk, G.S. (ed.) (1985). *The Iliad: A Commentary. Vol. I: books 1-4*. Cambridge.
- Kürschner, H. (1907). *P. Papinius Statius quibus in Achilleide componenda usus esse videatur fontibus*. Marburg.
- Lamb, W.R.M. (ed.) (1925). *Plato. Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*. Cambridge, MA.
- Latacz, J. (ed.) (2009). *Homers Ilias. Gesamtkommentar. (Basler Kommentar – BK). Band I: Erster Gesang (A). Faszikel 2: Kommentar*. Berlin.
- Miller, M. (2012). *The Song of Achilles*. New York.
- Most., G.W. (2018) (ed.). *Hesiod. The Shield. Catalogue of Women. Other Fragments*. Cambridge, MA.
- Mynors, R.A.B. (ed.) (1969). *P. Vergili Maronis. Opera*. Oxford.
- West, M.L. (2013). *The Epic Cycle: A Commentary on the Lost Troy Epics*. Oxford.
- Williams, R.D. (ed.) (1972). *Virgil. Aeneid I-VI*.

### **Secondary literature**

- Adkins, A.W.H. (1960a). "Honour" and "Punishment" in the Homeric Poems,' *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 23-32.
- Adkins, A.W.H. (1960b). *Merit and Responsibility. A Study in Greek Values*, Oxford.
- Bal, M. (2017). *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. London.
- Barner, A.J. (2017). *The Case for Fanfiction. Exploring the Pleasures and practices of a Maligned Craft*. Jefferson, North Carolina.
- Barret, D.S. (1980). 'The Friendship of Achilles and Patroclus,' *The Classical bulletin*, 57, 87-93.
- Budelmann, F. & Haubold, J. (2008). 'Reception and Tradition,' in L. Hardwick & C. Stray (eds.), *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, Oxford, 13-25.
- Burgess, J.S. (2009). *The Death and Afterlife of Achilles*. Baltimore.
- Burgess, J.S. (2017). 'The Tale of Meleager in the Iliad,' *Oral Tradition*, 31(1), 51-76.

- Cairns, D. (2019), 'Honour and Kingship in Herodotus: Status, Role and the Limits of Self-Assertion,' *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 14(1), 75-93.
- Clarke, W.M. (1978). 'Achilles and Patroclus in Love,' *Hermes*, 106(3), 381-386.
- Davidson, J. (2007). *The Greeks and Greek Love*. London.
- De Jong, I.J.F. (1987). 'Silent Characters in the Iliad,' in J.M. Bremer, I.J.F. De Jong & J. Kalff (eds.), *Homer: Beyond Oral Poetry: Recent Trends in Homeric Interpretation*. Amsterdam.
- De Jong, I.J.F. (2014). *Narratology and Classics: A Practical Guide*. Oxford.
- Du e, C. (2002). *Homeric Variations on a Lament by Briseis*. Oxford.
- Fantuzzi, M. (2012). *Achilles in Love: Intertextual Studies*. Oxford.
- Farley, S. K. (2016). 'Versions of Homer: Translation, Fan Fiction, and Other Transformative Rewriting,' *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 21.
- Gantz, T. (1993). *Early Greek Myth. A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. London.
- Gelder, K. (2004). *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*. London.
- Hardwick, L. (2003). *Reception Studies*. Oxford.
- Harrison, J. G. (2016). 'Shipping in Plato's "Symposium",' *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 21.
- Horn, F. (2019). 'The Death of Achilles in the Iliad. Motif Transference and Poetic Technique,' *Mnemosyne*, 74, 1-28.
- Junker, K. (2012). *Interpreting the Images of Greek Myths: An Introduction*. Translated by A. K unzl-Snodgrass & A. Snodgrass. Cambridge.
- Konstan, D. (2018). *In the Orbit of Love: Affection in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Oxford.
- Laguna-Mariscal, G. & Sanz-Morales, M. (2005), 'Was the Relationship between Achilles and Patroclus Homoerotic? The View of Apollonius Rhodius,' *Hermes*, 133(1), 120-123.
- Leavenworth, M.L. (2015). 'The Paratext of Fan Fiction,' *Narrative*, 23(1), 40-60.
- Nagy, G. (1979). *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Baltimore.
- Nickel, R. (2002). 'Euphorbus and the Death of Achilles,' *Phoenix*, 56(3-4), 215-233.
- Potter, A. (2017). "Atalanta Just Married": A Case Study in Greek Mythology-Based Fan Fiction,' in L. Maurice (ed.), *Rewriting the Ancient World: Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians in Modern Popular Fiction*. Leiden.
- Russel, C.M. (2014). 'The Most Unkindest Cut: Gender, Genre, and Castration in Statius' "Achilleid" and "Silvae" 3.4,' *The American Journal of Philology*, 135(1), 87-121.
- Sanz-Morales, M. & Laguna-Mariscal, G. (2003). 'The Relationship between Achilles and Patroclus according to Chariton of Aphrodisias,' *The Classical Quarterly*, 53(1), 292-295.



- Scodel, R. (2009). *Listening to Homer: Tradition, Narrative and Audience*. Ann Arbor.
- Simms, R. (2018). *Brill's Companion to Prequels, Sequels, and Retellings of Classical Epic*. Leiden.
- Sinha, A. (2017). 'The Loves of Achilles: From Epic to Popular Fiction,' In L. Maurice (ed.), *Rewriting the Ancient World: Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians in Modern Popular Fiction*. Leiden.
- Shannon, R.S. (1975). *The Arms of Achilles and Homeric Compositional Technique*. Leiden.
- Sinos, D.S. (1980). *Achilles, Patroklos and the Meaning of Philos*. Innsbruck.
- Van Berkel, T. (2019). *The Economics of Friendship: Conceptions of Reciprocity in Classical Greece*. Leiden.
- Van Wees, H. (1992). *Status Warriors. War, Violence and Society in Homer and History*. Amsterdam.

### **Websites**

Miller, M. Q&A with Madeline Miller. (online interview) <<http://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/>> 20-01-2022.

Fanlore.org <<https://fanlore.org/wiki/Achilles/Patroclus>> 20-01-2022