

To what extent are interpretations of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's 'Iliad' reflective of the attitudes towards sexuality in the cultures in which they originate?

Achilles and Patroclus are comrades in the Homer's Iliad, an epic poem detailing the ten year siege of the city of Troy by an Achaean coalition of military forces. Although their relationship is a key theme in the epic, its exact nature has been the subject of dispute for both modern audiences as well as for those in classical antiquity. Due to Homer's equivocal depiction of their relationship, many take the view that Achilles and Patroclus were indeed lovers; some commentators however, opt to interpret their relationship as one of profound and meaningful friendship. Arguably then, the interpretations of the bond shared by these characters are affected directly by the socially accepted views on homosexuality during the commentator's lifetime. In effect, this assessment argues the existence of a 'cultural lens', an outlook gained by the social attitude towards this type of sexual relationship. As a result of both this 'cultural lens' and the ambiguity of their bond, there has been a disparity in the way this subject has been approached over time.

Based on the Iliad alone, it is clear to see that the relationship Achilles has with Patroclus is unlike any of his other ones. The way Achilles treats Patroclus differs from his treatment of all other characters in the epic, extending a more considerate and thoughtful treatment to him than the rest. In his poem, Homer depicts a deep bond between the two, characterised by the intensity of that link stemming from their childhood. When Achilles refuses to save the Greek armies because King Agamemnon has dishonoured him, it is Patroclus who convinces him to lend any sort of aid when his other friends have failed in their attempts. Although Achilles doesn't actually agree to fight, he agrees to a plan in which Patroclus would don Achilles' armour in order to push back the Trojan forces. When this plan tragically fails and Patroclus is killed by the Trojan Prince Hector, Achilles is grief-stricken. This is what eventually elicits his return to the battlefield, the sole aim of avenging Patroclus' death by killing Hector, even though he had been warned by the immortals that it would cost him his life.

Based on Homer's version of the Iliad alone, we have no definite answer in regards to whether or not Achilles and Patroclus were in a romantic or sexual relationship. What we do see in his version of the text is the intensity of the loyalty between the two that exceeds the social norm. In order to exact revenge, Achilles withdrew his life. Given this aspect of the plot, it is easy to understand why some commentators have viewed their relationship as transcending the platonic. In the war epic, Achilles laments the death of Patroclus publicly, stating that it is more painful than he imagines suffering the death of his son or father would be. "There is nothing worse than this I could suffer, not even if I were to hear of the death of my father [...] or the death of my dear son, who is raised for my sake in Skyros". Whilst this statement does not imply that their relationship isn't platonic, it suggests that he valued Patroclus above members of his own family. The god Apollo even suggests that the level of grief Achilles was showing exceeded what was appropriate for a friend, or even the aforementioned members of his family. Achilles' 'love' for Patroclus is indubitable, whether it is of a platonic or of a sexual nature. The question posed however, is to do with the link between the individual interpretations of their relationship and the cultural attitudes towards same sex relationships in their societies of origin, not the authenticity of the interpretations themselves.

Homosexuality in ancient Greece in the 4th and 5th centuries BCE did not exist as the same concept that we have in the 21st century. Rather, in certain areas of Greece, there existed a form of

pederasty common in the Athenian upper classes. This type of relationship included an older and dominant 'erastes' as well as a younger, submissive partner referred to as the 'eromenos'. The age gap was expected to be significantly large, with the role of eromenos being filled by an adolescent boy and the role of erastes being filled by an adult. Because this type of relationship involved a sexual dominance on behalf of the erastes, it reflected his social dominance, due to the association between the two qualities. As a result, there was no conception of a reciprocal male sexual desire between equals. A relationship in which a younger male acted as the erastes would have been considered perverse by the ancient Greek society.

In his 'Symposium', Plato's Phaedrus gives a speech offering an interpretation of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship which would adhere to a pederastic nature. However, Plato argues that Aeschylus was mistaken to portray Achilles as the erastes of the relationship in his play 'the Myrmidons', as Achilles was younger and more beautiful than Patroclus. During his speech, Phaedrus states his disagreement to Aeschylus' take on their sexual dynamic, stating that Patroclus was '[Achilles'] lover and not his love (the notion that Patroclus was the beloved one is a foolish error into which Aeschylus has fallen, for Achilles was surely the fairer of the two...and younger far)'. However, while we can definitely use this to learn directly about the attitudes towards a pederastic homoerotic relationship; we do not have any evidence to support the existence of pederasty as a construct during the 8th Century BCE. It is useful to see that both Plato and Aeschylus took it for granted that the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus was pederastic and sexual in nature as it shows the ease with which they not only accepted but praised such a relationship in their shared society. Despite this however, there is no guarantee of the authenticity of their interpretations. There is little evidence to support the existence of pederastic relationships in Homer's time, and therefore there isn't any proof to suggest that Achilles and Patroclus were in a relationship of this nature.

What these interpretations may suggest in relation to the factual non-existence of pederasty in the 8th century BCE is that perhaps the redefinition of their relationship has been undertaken in order to further the understanding of the complexity of their bond. It is a possibility that this attempt to define the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles as pederastic could be in order to adhere to a possible cultural change. A change like this would namely have to do with a new way in which Greek society characterized strong relationships between men. Possibly, men like Plato and Aeschylus were attempting to define their relationship in order to provide an explanation by which they could label it. Plato and Aeschylus were both attempting to use Achilles and Patroclus to praise a type of male bond by holding their relationship up as the paragon, whilst some individuals such as Xenophon denied the existence of a sexual relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, clarifying that he considered non-sexual friendship superior to a pederastic relationship based on sexual desire in his own 'Symposium'. Essentially, it is possible that their arguments and accounts were perhaps based less in an attempt to capture the factual essence of the original Homeric epic, but more in an attempt to usefully interpret their relationship to support the type of relationship they wished to praise.

In modern forms of media the reception to the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles has been mixed. Some commentators lean towards a sexual explanation for their relationship whereas others believe that it wasn't more than friendship, just as the commentators in classical antiquity did. After a long period of censorship on homoerotic relationships tracing its roots back to even medieval

periods (where homosexuality would not have been depicted positively given the Christian influences), many have continued trying to interpret Achilles' relationship with Patroclus in their own view. The recent past has seen a shift in attitudes towards same sex relationships, allowing for other types of analysis to thrive. The way a contemporary 21st century audience would perceive sexuality is different to an ancient Athenian audience, even removed from the question at hand. One such re-evaluation of their relationship is that of the 2011 historical fiction novel 'The Song of Achilles' by Madeline Miller, which retells the events of the Iliad through the perspective of Patroclus. This evaluation of the relationship sees Achilles and Patroclus as exclusively homosexual in a predominantly monogamous relationship. Neither Aeschylus, nor Plato, nor Xenophon could have imagined Achilles and Patroclus as simply 'gay', however Miller takes liberties in order to creatively re-interpret the details of the Iliad just as they did in their own works. In her novel, Patroclus and Achilles both engage in sexual behaviour outside of the confines of their relationship (as they did in the original Iliad), however, these instances are not portrayed as pleasurable to either. Achilles was tricked by his mother Thetis into impregnating Deidamia on Skyros while she hid him on the island, and Patroclus appeases Deidamia out of pity for her unfortunate situation. If anything, Deidamia's character can be seen as having been used by Miller as a plot device to characterise both Achilles and Patroclus as homosexual (based on the fact that both characters disliked that sexual encounter). Unlike the Classical writers mentioned beforehand however, Miller's intentions for portraying Achilles and Patroclus this way are not necessarily as clear.

Patroclus is characterized very differently in Miller's novel than in the Homeric epic poem, giving leeway to several plot inconsistencies. Patroclus refuses combat training from Chiron whilst he is staying with him and Achilles on Mount Pelion, and is generally characterised as a pacifist despite later effectively killing during the war. Not only this, but Patroclus seems to feel shame at his sexual relationship with Achilles, experiencing conflicting thoughts on whether or not to tell Thetis or Chiron. Both of these features seem to be modern ideas applied to the Homeric text. Peleus and Thetis would likely not have been disturbed by the nature of their relationship, especially given their young age at the time of its development. Patroclus was written in the Iliad to have killed Sarpedon, the leader of a Trojan allied force, and was supposed to have almost taken Troy had Apollo not interfered. So why has Miller included these changes to her reimagining of Homer's epic?

By characterising Achilles and Patroclus as homosexuals, Miller has imposed on them a fixed sexual identity, something foreign to the Greeks at the time. In the same way the aforementioned Greek writers made theirs, her decision could have been made to provide an explanation where one is not available for her intended audience. Plato, Aeschylus and Xenophon each interpreted the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in a way acceptable to their culture and the way sexuality was viewed in their societies, and Miller has imposed a modern understanding of sexuality unto Homer's characters likewise. By attaching a pacifistic, healing nature onto Patroclus, Miller has (perhaps unwittingly) attached a stereotypically 'feminine' role to Patroclus in the relationship. The assigning of a role to those in homosexual relationships according to the heterosexual relationship can be considered a pre-requisite of the modern stereotype where the passive partner adheres to a feminine demeanour. The association between Patroclus' behaviour and this notion of him being the passive partner would stem from the juxtaposition of his and Achilles' traits, where our modern, western society would see the warrior as the dominant/masculine partner as a result of his virility. Undoubtedly, Miller has adapted the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles in a modern light, and given that her novel is a work of fiction meant to provide a relatable love story for her modern

day audience, she cannot be faulted for taking liberties with her accuracy. Arguably, this was a direct result of the attitudes towards sexuality in her contemporary culture.

In the midst of the argument of whether or not Patroclus and Achilles really were lovers, it is easy to forget to question the purpose of defining their relationship in the first place. Of course Plato, Aeschylus and Xenophon could have been exploiting it to praise the pederastic relationship type, and of course Miller could have been trying to label the relationship in order to make it relatable for a modern audience, but why would Homer specifically not define the nature of their relationship in the first place? One answer could possibly be that it does not matter, or on the other hand, that the ambiguity of the matter is important in its own right.

One conception that we have in western society in the 21st century is that a sexual relationship exhibits a closeness of bond that a platonic one does not. It would be unfounded to simply assume that Homer had the same cultural understanding of these relationships without further proof. However, one modern discussion of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles is in Jonathan Shay's 'Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character'. Shay compares the soldiers of the Trojan War to the combat veterans of the Vietnam War. He explores the concept of 'berserk rage' as it manifested in both Achilles and in the veterans alike, and concludes that 'Achilles' grief for Patroclus would not have been greater had they been a sexual couple, nor less if they had not been'. This is an interesting outlook into the relationship, as it questions the conventions mentioned above. Why should any audience, classical or modern, take it that sex would strengthen the bond? Alternately, Homer may have purposefully left the exact nature of the relationship ambiguous to allow for such speculation, maybe not specifically to do with whether or not it was sexual, but possibly to question the relationship as a whole (specifically, the reason for the passion with which it is characterised).

Whether or not Patroclus and Achilles were part of a sexual relationship has been disputed since the Hellenistic era and possibly will be well into the future. The way that culture affects these interpretations can be argued, but the degree to which it affects them is palpably significant. The 2004 movie 'Troy' skirted around the debate of the relationship's nature by depicting Patroclus as Achilles' younger cousin (as opposed to the older cousin once-removed that he was). This was arguably to appeal to a predominantly masculine audience which would have experienced an aversion to the movie had it portrayed Achilles as attracted to men, given the possible homophobic mind-set this audience likely had as part of its hyper masculine culture. Madeline Miller specifically characterised Achilles and Patroclus as lovers in order to make her novel appeal to an audience which would agree with her interpretation, and therefore sell copies of her novel. Just as the classical authors were perhaps exploiting the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles to praise the type of relationship they held in esteem, modern commentators can be argued to exploit the relationship in accordance with their own prospects. In conclusion, whatever the reason to interpret the relationship in any way may have been, we can get a firmer grasp on the reason behind it by analysing the individual cultures of the commentators, because this type of insight could make a world of difference.