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A New Voice for an Ancient Story: Speaking from the Margins of Homer's *Iliad* in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*

Abstract: Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011) is an imaginative rewriting of Homer's *Iliad*. The writer uses the strategy of transfocalization and enters the text from the point of view of Patroclus. His fresh look offers a new critical perspective both on the moral world of the epic and on Achilles, the great Greek hero whose complex personality and tragic *hubris* Patroclus observes with emotional understanding. Miller transforms the Homeric sparing narrative of the friendship between Patroclus and Achilles into a touching love story built on their mutual devotion, and locates this narrative at the heart of a world of ruthless violence. This paper will consider the writer's use of hypertextual adaptation in the novel from the perspective of the change in the narrative focus of the source, and discuss her objectives and methodology.

Keywords: Madeline Miller, Achilles, Patroclus, Homer, hypertextuality, *Iliad*, re-writing, trauma, love, death

1. Introduction

In the story of Patroclus
no one survives, not even Achilles
who was nearly a god.
Patroclus resembled him; they wore
the same armour.

(Louise Glück *The Triumph of Achilles*)

Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011) is an imaginative recasting of Homer's *Iliad*, one of the most powerful myths in the Western tradition. This article will consider the writer's use of hypertextual adaptation in her novel from the

perspective of the change in the narrative focus of the hypotext and discuss her choice and methodology. In order to do so, the paper will make use of Gerard Genette's theory of hypertextuality, which he discusses in *Palimpsests* (1997), and that he describes as follows: "By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted" (5). Indeed, he adds, "there is no literary work that does not evoke (to some extent and according to how it is read) some other literary work, and in this sense all works are hypertextual" (9). The analysis will argue that Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is a "re-vision" of Homer's epic poem from the writer's female perspective; it is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Wittig 35). Miller engages in a sustained dialogue with the hypotext and re-reads it with different objectives in mind: first, she questions and deconstructs the hierarchy and morality of the epic, by entering the *Iliad* through the text's 'unconscious' and exploring its silences, textual spaces that allow for a problematization of the narrative's moral world. She reconfigures it by installing a different set of values and priorities, and offers an anti-war reading of the epic. Second, she rethinks the gender dynamics of the source text, and flouts its categorization of gender roles and construction of masculinity and sexuality resting on the traditional phallogocentric paradigms of patriarchal society. Her novel moves center stage a homoerotic relationship barely hinted at in the *Iliad*, a reconfiguration that is relevant to our socio-cultural landscape and contemporary debates on gender and sexuality. Furthermore, she valorizes male vulnerability, which in the classical epic world is disparaged as something pertaining to the feminine sphere, thus inscribing a more fluid role model of masculinity.

Miller's representation of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship opens the possibility of a critical engagement with two sets of theoretical frameworks: gender studies and psychoanalysis. As for the first group, particularly useful are those gender theorists who interrogate the way that systems of power construct certain gendered subjectivities along the disjunctive axis of the normative and the deviant, with this latter to be morally censured because subversive of the status quo. To this end, a precious critical insight is offered by Judith Butler's ideas. Key to her argument is that gender is not an essential, biologically determined quality or an inherent identity, but is *performed*, based on, and reinforced by, societal norms. Butler rejects the view that there might be "intelligible" genders, "which in some sense institute and maintain relations of continuity and coherence among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire," and that those "who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility" are "incoherent" gendered beings (23). This insight sweeps away any possibility of pathologizing sexuality that deviates from such "coherence" and "intelligibility," as in the case of the novel's two heroes. Psychoanalysis, in particular Julia Kristeva, will help decode some psychological traits of Patroclus' personality.

Miller achieves the objectives she has in mind in two major ways. First, by the strategy of transfocalization: she enters the story from its margins and adopts the point of view of Patroclus, an exiled young prince. Though close to Achilles, the *Iliad*'s central figure, Patroclus occupies a marginal position in Homer's poem when alive, moving in the shadow of the Greek hero; yet, paradoxically, he becomes crucial in the plot's development once he dies. Miller foregrounds Patroclus' pivotal role as his death is the spring for Achilles' reaction and activates a chain of events that will have momentous consequences in the Iliadic narrative, leading to Achilles' own death in the end. "Minor-character elaboration," as this contemporary literary form is defined by Jeremy Rosen, has been quite popular over the last decades. It is a genre in which a minor character from a canonical text is transformed into the narrator-protagonist of a new text. This choice allows a writer "to simultaneously exploit both the timeless value of the classics and ostensibly oppositional political energies" (Rosen 144). Miller's oppositional strategies aim to deconstruct traditional gender representation, freely explore same-sex desire, and take a clear anti-war stance.

Indeed, Patroclus' fresh perspective captures the tangled amorality of politics and takes a critical view of a materialistic, acquisitive war which he condemns for the devastation that it wreaks on communities and on households; for its waste of life and senseless cruelty; for the plight of the female victims of war. At the same time, he contrasts the different motivations – more or less noble and idealistic – behind the warriors' choice of going to war and underscores what warrior values signify a true hero.

Second, Miller establishes an ongoing interaction also with other classical authors to complement her narrative in those episodes excluded from the *Iliad* that are functional to complete her own re-reading of the story. In her re-visioning of Homer's text, the paper claims, she introduces significant transformations: first, her new "song" is both a celebration of Achilles the warrior, the quintessential hero of epic poetry, and of Achilles the private man scrutinized in the intimacy of his affections. What is more, this narrative perspective allows Patroclus to emerge from the partial obscurity where the epic poem had confined him and to take center stage; from this textual position, he can voice his most personal feelings and take a critical stance on the power dynamics between characters and the ongoing struggle for dominance based on a strategy of aggressive arrogation of roles. Miller empowers her narrator with agency and invests him with "a more significant [...] role in the value system of the hypertext" (Sanders 50), a shift that opens alternative contending perspectives on the world of the *Iliad* and maps a new psychic geography to be explored.

2. A New Voice for a Different Story

The Song of Achilles is a first-person intradiegetic narrative told by Patroclus, a change of perspective that gives the reader a closer view of this character and his

psychology, and offers a modern take on an ancient epic. Miller departs in a number of crucial aspects from Homer, using also other literary sources, palimpsestic presences that are incorporated in the life trajectory of the two protagonists. Patroclus' gentle voice first weaves his own story, starting from childhood to adolescence when, at the age of ten, he is introduced to Achilles, a meeting that will change their future forever. Miller gives an overview of these early years in the first two chapters without dwelling on them, and soon shifts to their growth and education, a period to which the writer devotes a substantial section (chapters three – ten). Then she moves to their participation in the Trojan War, which unfolds from the text's margins, and ends with their death. Their relationship, and not the War of Troy, is the main focus of *The Song of Achilles*, and the process of their physical and psychological growth, as well as the transformation of their friendship into intense love.

As Miller herself states in an interview published on her website, the central inspiration behind her book was the need to understand *why* the great half-god Achilles had a “reaction so shocking in its intensity,” so incommensurate, when hearing about Patroclus' death and, consequently, to inquire into “what it was about Patroclus and their relationship that could create that kind of crisis” (2014). Patroclus charts the whole arch of his short life, and his voice continues to relate events taking place even after his death and cremation, when also Achilles falls and they are reunited forever, a structural choice that adds an uncanny atmosphere to this final section.

The title, however, is slightly deceptive as, for most of its length, the novel does not focus exclusively on Achilles, being above all a sort of *Bildungsroman* that plots Patroclus' growth into adulthood, side by side with the Greek hero, and explores from inside the couple the beginning of their acquaintance and the blossoming of their profound emotional bond. Yet, Patroclus' story is deep down a song to extol the man he loves and to disclose the lover beneath Achilles' bloodshed and fury, in order to reveal the ‘other’ Achilles: the young man who honors and respects the value of warrior brotherhood and is ready to die to defend it. Achilles and Patroclus epitomize the perfect bond of unconditional loyalty and allegiance between human beings, and care for each other, so theirs is a model of human relationships at large.

The Song of Achilles starts much earlier than the episodes at the heart of Homer's epic; besides, whereas the *Iliad* ends with Hector's funeral rites, the novel covers also Achilles' death, the fall of Troy and the departure of the Greek fleet. Miller does not change the accepted events of the epic poem but takes a freer approach to some characters. The central questions at the core of Miller's re-reading concern two aspects that, in the *Iliad*, are rather shadowy: the first hinges on the characterization of Patroclus who, though central to the action of the *Iliad*, has little textual space and lacks depth. The second issue is the nature of his relationship with Achilles, as mentioned before. The article will discuss the reason why Miller

makes of Patroclus the voice and critical conscience of the novel, what she achieves through this shift of perspective, and what agenda she pursues in portraying the relationship between the two young men in explicitly erotic terms.

To answer these questions, Miller looks beyond the *Iliad*. As for the relationship between the two young men, the interpretation she provides is not actually to be found in the poem. However, she believes otherwise and maintains that “there is a lot of support for their relationship in the text of the *Iliad*,” but then she also adds, “though Homer never makes it explicit” (2014). The additional sources Miller blends in her novel can be found in Plato’s *Symposium*, as she herself acknowledges: “I stole it from Plato!” (2014), and in a lost play by Aeschylus, the *Myrmidons*. Both authors – Plato and Aeschylus – assume that the two characters were lovers, a view Miller subscribes to because, she argues, *how* Achilles grieves Patroclus’ death, his “sense of physical devastation spoke deeply to [her] of a true and total intimacy between the two men” (2014). Furthermore, in the *Iliad* there is no mention of Achilles staying with Chiron or of his cross-dressing and love affair with Deidameia, described at length by Statius in his *Achilleid*. In *The Song of Achilles*, instead, a considerable section, from chapter eight to chapter fourteen, is devoted to these two episodes.

3. In the Shadow of the Hero

Miller’s novel foregrounds the individual differences between Achilles and Patroclus from the beginning. A similar distinction can be observed in their fathers too, whose attitude towards their sons affects the boys’ psychological and emotional growth and contributes to throw light on their personalities. Menoitius, Patroclus’ father, lacks any feelings of fondness for his son and is interested only in “scrabbling to keep his kingdom” (2012, 17). When Patroclus accidentally kills a boy, Menoitius does not hesitate to exile him to Phthia, leaving his dejected son to reflect: “This was how I came to be ten, and an orphan” (17). Unlike him, King Peleus, Achilles’ father, adores his son and has “a reputation for charity towards exiles” (21); so he welcomes Patroclus at court as a foster child, one of the many cast-off sons he gives refuge to.

Miller introduces both Achilles and Patroclus as *others*, though their otherness has very different roots. Achilles’ is the singularity of a demi-god; he outshines the rest of the boys at court for his charisma, his striking beauty and, above all, his exceptional skills as a warrior. The narrator constantly reminds the reader of his unquestioned supremacy, a quality Achilles is fully aware of and that is also responsible for his boundless *hubris* and thirst for renown that become his predominant features. Unlike Achilles, Patroclus is “negligible” (20), unappealing, bullied by the other boys and unloved by his father who always scowls at him and, from a very early age, makes him doubt: “Was I a changeling, inhuman?” (2). Patroclus

underscores his alterity using mostly negatives to introduce himself: “I was not fast. I was not strong. I could not sing” (1), all attributes that, instead, belong to Achilles and are acknowledged by both friends and enemies. In time, Patroclus is so affected by his father’s disregard and scorn that he persuades himself that he is “unsightly, unpromising, uninterested” (6).

On his arrival at Peleus’ court, he meets Achilles for the first time, and is at a loss for words, struck by “the cold shock of his beauty” (20). Patroclus is still prey to the double trauma of his unintentional killing of the boy and his father’s rejection of him. His traumatic memories never leave him and take the shape of haunting nightmarish visions of the dead boy. Tormented by a sense of guilt, Patroclus retreats into silence as a self-defensive reaction, his “throat closing at the horror of what [he] had done” (16). He begins to look for isolated corners to sit alone by himself, seized by a growing sense of solitude, dreading that his “narrow world narrowed further” (29).

Then, unexpectedly, to the astonishment of everyone, Achilles befriends Patroclus and chooses him as his closest companion, his “*Therapon* [...] A brother-in-arms sworn to a prince by blood oaths and love” (35), thus reintegrating him fully into the community. With Achilles, Patroclus can gradually relax and open himself up to their friendship, a gift that transforms him and his life, after some time even freeing him from his nightmares. Having been separated at infancy from his mother and having no fatherly figure to identify with and build a sense of self, Patroclus is driven by an inner ‘lack’ to identify with an ideal Other to complete his sense of self and thus enter the adult Symbolic Order. Achilles fills the emptiness tearing him inside, and gives him a sense of closeness that makes him feel whole again, a complement and support that bestows meaning on his life. Patroclus is captivated by Achilles’ charm and personality and, though at first afraid to acknowledge it, he falls in love with him. Being only thirteen, he is puzzled, as yet unable to identify and name the feelings that stir him at night, at the same time fearing and desiring to cross the boundaries of the self, to stretch and meet the other.

The carefree atmosphere in which the two boys live, a bubble unaffected by what happens around them, is unexpectedly interrupted by Thetis, Achilles’ mother. She sends her son on Mount Pelion, to stay with the centaur Chiron, both to complete his training as a warrior and to separate the two boys, after having seen Patroclus clumsily kiss Achilles’ lips. Patroclus, however, is neither discouraged nor stopped by Thetis’ open hostility and sets off on a solitary journey, determined to find and join Achilles. When he arrives on Mount Pelion, both his friend and Chiron welcome him. Here, in the centaur’s cave, a sort of no man’s land, the two boys live for three years, spending all their time together under the fatherly tutorage of Chiron who watches over their growth.

Unlike the *Iliad*, *The Song of Achilles* devotes an ample section (chapters eight to ten) to this phase of Achilles’ preparation for manhood, because it is crucial for the evolution of Patroclus and Achilles’ relationship. In fact, during this period

they grow intimate and, shortly after Achilles' sixteenth birthday, the "last year of childhood" (88), they make love for the first time, thus moving into adulthood. So, it is within this privileged neutral space that they grow up together, fall in love and become a couple.

Being in love, Patroclus lives under the aegis of an ideal signifier he wishes to identify with and his self is "drawn toward the ideal Other. [It] is a love that magnifies the individual as a reflection of the unapproachable Other whom [he] loves and who causes [him] to be" (Kristeva 1987, 59). This psychic process of idealization and identification with the Other quenches Patroclus' thirst for love for the first time in his life and heals him. So he moves from the axis of rejection – by his father and the other boys – to the axis of absorption – in Achilles, thus achieving a sense of oneness with him.

Their love-making marks the crossing of a threshold, a passage not only from adolescence into manhood, but also a step towards self-awareness and recognition of their most authentic gender identity. It is a change that entails the acknowledgement and full acceptance of a newly-discovered sexuality, a realization that at first upsets Patroclus as it appears to be *other* than what patriarchal power expects of men at court: to choose as a sexual partner one of the many slave girls, as prescribed by the assumptions of normative heterosexuality whose rules, according to Butler, force subjects to conform to hegemonic, heterosexual standards for identity. They decide to follow their inner drive, and the desire for each other absorbs and exhilarates both.

This phase comes to an abrupt end when Peleus sends for his son. However, Achilles' return to normal life is only temporary and he will not have a safe homecoming, a proper *nóstos*. In fact, his father summons him to Phthia to demand him to depart again and join a war expedition to Troy, commanded by King Agamemnon, to reclaim Helen who had been abducted by Paris. Thetis tries to rescue Achilles from this moral obligation, because she knows the deadly fate in store for him at Troy, and hides him on Scyros disguised as one of king Lycomedes' daughters. It is Achilles' cross-dressing episode, a "complete type [...] of gender performance that 'hypermale' mythological heroes engage in" (Warwick 10). He is allowed to experiment with his own femininity because, on the one hand, his gender identity is never questioned by anyone and, on the other, on a number of occasions he also articulates an alternative conception of masculinity and "publicly engages in feminine-coded behaviours and practices" (Warwick 8), as happens when, like a mother, he cradles Patroclus' body in his arms at the funeral and laments his loss openly. Achilles' is an emerging new paradigm of masculinity that disrupts and transforms traditional normative forms of masculinity and gender configurations. Yet, despite Thetis' intervention, nothing can stop what the gods have decreed for the Greek hero and he cannot escape his meeting with death on the Trojan battlefield.

4. The Making of a Legend

The return to the royal palace and the war of Troy abruptly sever Achilles from the *other* world of Mount Pelion, a sort of private space, interrupting his “childish idyll” in Chiron’s “rose cave” (107), and bring him back to the reality of the moral duties and obligations attached to his public role as a prince and warrior. This fracture signals the crossing of a further threshold, from the private to the public sphere of responsibilities. It marks the necessary next step that Achilles must take in order to constitute himself as a fully realized subject within patriarchal discourse, and to achieve honor and eternal fame.

Yet, the glory Achilles quests after has to be paid for with death, as his mother reveals to him: “If you go to Troy, you will never return. You will die a young man there” (157). On the other hand, if he does not take part in the war, he will miss his “chance at immortality. [He] will stay behind, unknown [and] grow old, and older in obscurity” (155), as Odysseus slyly adds to secure the hero’s participation in the expedition. Achilles, then, will not have a smooth transition into normal adulthood. By accepting to leave for Troy and embrace his inevitable fate, he knowingly submits to descend and disappear into the cold night-womb of the grave before he has lived half of his life cycle. Achilles’ announcement that he will lead the expedition to Troy, entails accepting the hard demands of the reality principle for the two friends. Patroclus understands that this is only the beginning of a phase that will transform their life forever and that Achilles has already begun to change. He is being transformed into “*Aristos Achaion.*’ *Best of the Greeks*” (166; original emphasis).

Moving in Achilles’ shadow, loath to push himself forward, yet unwilling to escape, Patroclus understands that Achilles “*no longer belongs to [him] alone*” (175; original emphasis). So, while Achilles is engaged in preparation for departure, Patroclus tends to slip away and isolate himself more and more as he used to do in the past before meeting his companion. His mind obsessively lingers on the prophecy concerning Achilles’ death at Troy, dreading that moment and trying to imagine “how it would end – spear-tip or sword point, or smashed by a chariot” (176). Totally absorbed by his intense feelings of love for Achilles, Patroclus cannot even contemplate life without him. He does not know that he will be the first to die, and even be the indirect cause of his friend’s death.

Patroclus craves for dissolution without him: “I did not plan to live after he was gone” (177). These words might hint at either his desire to look for death in battle after losing Achilles or at his intention to commit suicide. It is a wish for death that recalls one of the figures of Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (1978), “*s’abîmer* / to be engulfed” (10), which he defines as “the crisis of engulfment” provoked either by a wound or “a fusion: we die together [...] an open death by dilution into the ether, a closed death of the shared grave” (11). It is a death that liberates the lover from living a life-in-death without the beloved,

in the void left by his absence. Once they reach the battlefield of Troy, Patroclus sees that the brutality of war, as well as the weight of responsibilities Achilles has to bear, gradually transform his companion in such a way that, despite his love for him, he struggles to understand and accept some of his actions or decisions. On some occasions, he has to silence his own conscience not to voice his open disapproval. Sometimes, the vision of Achilles coming back from battle drenched with the blood of his victims, and the thought of all the people grieving because of his deeds, overwhelm him. At such moments, Patroclus can only associate Achilles with a flood, “gush[ing] down from the mountain tops, gathering strength to sweep away what stood in its path: animals and houses and men” (240).

In her dialogue with the hypotext, Miller frequently underscores Patroclus' ethically complex and tormented awareness of the problematic aspects of heroic self-assertion, and his perception of the harsh reality of war stripped of the heroic stereotypes that underlie it. Patroclus' view problematizes war and the warrior values that motivate men to fight, and voices Miller's anti-war reading of the *Iliad*. When Patroclus himself must join the battle, the individual differences with Achilles surface even more. He shows none of the attributes of the traditional warrior, like the other Myrmidons, all glory-hungry, and does not refrain from pitiless self-criticism: “Fear was twisting inside me, a wobbling cup of panic that threatened each moment to spill” (225). When they clash against the opposing army, he feels no excitement but only terror. His vision registers “a burst of spraying splinters of bronze and blood. A writhing mass of men and screams, [...] the crash of shields, [...] a jumble of bodies” (225), actually “just body parts” (229). He is seized by nausea, almost vomits, and does not even attempt to kill anyone. This might appear as a paradoxical behavior for a young man brought up at court, in a patriarchal culture that cultivates and encourages warlike ideals and trains men to fight; yet, it can be decoded as a consequence of the adolescent trauma of having unintentionally killed the boy who was bullying him. The incident provoked very similar reactions in him: at the sight of the boy's blood he escaped in horror and was found soaked in his own vomit.

In both circumstances, the psychological mechanism that appears to be unconsciously activated is that of the Kristevan *abject*, a “being opposed to *P*” (1982, 1), someone that disturbs his identity, his sense of a system and order, and generates “a terror that disassembles” (1982, 4). Patroclus' physical and psychological reactions signifies his profound rejection of the image of a violent and cruel *other* – be it the adolescent bully who persecuted him, or the warriors ruthlessly killing their enemies – someone who, being so unlike himself, is alien to him. In such figures he sees mirrored the potential violent man he himself might become, a presence that swallows him, thus threatening the integrity of his self. He rejects this *other* with disgust, thus opting out of the Symbolic modality and the patriarchal Law of the Father with its rigid, oppressive gender roles and rules. The figure of the *abject* is signalled both by the images he summons up and the linguistic choices: after

wounding the boy mortally, he escapes close to “the gnarled ankles of an olive tree [...] surrounded by [his] own vomit” (17). On the battlefield, “fear was twisting inside [him], a wobbling cup of panic that threatened each moment to spill” (225); he can only see “a jumble of bodies” (225) and, at the sight of a dying Spartan, he “almost vomited” among a “nauseating chaos” (226). In recording these moments, the text mirrors the protagonist’s psychological condition: sentences are shorter, occasionally only phrases or even single words, with repetitions and the frequent use of -ing forms, formal features that accelerate the narrative rhythm and evoke the sense of a dislocated, fragmented psyche.

Once more, through Patroclus’ moral vision Miller articulates her own position on war, its brutalities, its traumatic effects, and the human toll it demands. She engages critically with her source, returning the readers a ‘modern’ Homer who can still speak forcefully to our “fractured and shifting historical moment” (2014). In dealing with this issue, she is certainly thinking of the enormous psychological impact on the human psyche of the wars of the last century, among them, closer to us in time, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Bosnian War in Europe. The shocking images of soldiers coming back home from the battlefields and their testimonies are widely documented in books, research, and psychiatric history, studies that have addressed the effects of war on mental health, with soldiers suffering from depression, anxiety, nightmares, some of the symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Instead, war is Achilles’ natural psychological territory; when fighting, aware of his own strength and of Patroclus’ weakness, Achilles keeps a constant protective eye on him, seeing that, in his clumsiness, Patroclus is an easy target for the enemy. Yet, despite all the horror, at the end of a day of battle, Patroclus no longer sees “the ugliness of the deaths” but remembers only what “a marvel” Achilles is on the battlefield, moving with “his beauty, his singing limbs, the quick flickering of his feet” (227). Achilles’ stature as a hero “lies in his capacity for action in the full knowledge of its fatal consequences to himself, his questioning of the system of values or reward informing his martial culture, his understanding of the personal price of fame, his devotion to a friend or partner, his discovery of empathy” (Hedreen 39). These are the qualities that explain his enduring fascination for generations of readers, aspects that Patroclus constantly underscores with admiration. He contrasts them with other warriors whose dubious moral stature and arrogance are openly exposed, a position that invites the reader’s active critical engagement with – and assessment of – the text and the hierarchies of power described in it.

During the long hours of Achilles’ absence, Patroclus befriends Briseis, a war prisoner, and finds some comfort in her company. Above all, he decides to offer his help to Machaon, who is in charge of the physicians’ tent, and to use there the medical skills he learned from Chiron to heal men wounded in battle. It is a task that makes him feel helpful to alleviate, at least in part, the suffering of so many soldiers, and that earns him a reputation and everybody’s appreciation.

As already mentioned in the previous section, Miller's novel clearly delineates the role and personality differences between Patroclus and Achilles from the beginning, a diversity that is noticeable especially at climactic moments. It is a distinction that is not extraneous to the *Iliad*, and that has been variously interpreted. Some scholars maintain that "Achilles and Patroclus constitute a sort of social microstructure of two alter-egos, or better, 'second-selves' of each other" (Fantuzzi 251), and that Patroclus is an expression of the human nature of the godlike hero, the human side Achilles has lost touch with. It will resurface both when he saves some girls held captive in the camp and, even more, towards the end during his last touching meeting with Priam, when he shows a surprisingly empathetic compassion, pity, shared suffering, and the search for mutual connection. It is a turning point as his true atonement is complete and he returns to the world of normal human feelings.

Robert Finlay objects to seeing Patroclus as a reflection of Achilles; he argues that Patroclus' significance in the emotional pattern of the epic poem is as a representative of the communal values of fellowship and responsibility upheld by Peleus. I personally believe that these critical views specifically referred to Homer's presentation of the two protagonists are not mutually exclusive, and indeed complement each other, as regards their characterization in the novel.

In Miller's text, Achilles disregards these communal values in two crucial circumstances. The first time, when he does nothing to help Briseis, claimed by Agamemnon who has to return his own concubine, Chryseis. Achilles feels offended by the arrogant, predator behavior of a warrior that he considers morally inferior to him. The hero's silence and lack of action on this occasion hurt Patroclus profoundly because they disclose a side of Achilles that is stranger to him: "I do not know this man, I think. He is no one I have ever seen before." Hardly repressing his anger, Patroclus dares voice his innermost wish only to himself: "I want to see his face broken with grief and regret. I want to shatter the cold mask of stone that has slipped down over the boy I knew" (274). It is a climactic episode that upsets and lays bare a precariously balanced relation between warrior comrades and their competing demands for 'possession' of a woman. It is a struggle that creates tension at the heart of the epic social structure and alerts the reader to the close intersection between the institution of war and gender: "disputes among men [...] entail disputed traffic in women" (Felson and Slatkin 95), a cynical principle that offends Patroclus' moral values. However, there is an important qualitative difference here: Agamemnon lays his claim to yet another prize appealing to the overriding principle of his privileged power position. Achilles places himself on a higher ground and argues for the legitimacy of his claim to Briseis appealing to his personal heroic worth and value system, implicitly voicing a critique of "the broader exchange-logic animating war and a meditation on its apparent cause – traffic in women as a medium of contended honour among men" (Felson and Slatkin 96).

The second time, when Achilles shows no compassion for the suffering of the Achaeans and refuses to aid them by resuming fighting, thus subordinating the

needs of the social group to his personal grief and offended pride. Driven by the selfsame communal values of fellowship and responsibility towards the army that Achilles temporarily neglects, Patroclus begs his friend to let him don his famous divinely crafted armor and take his place on the battlefield, a fatal error that leads to his death at the hands of Hector. Patroclus' death is "both a sacrifice that brings Achilles back into the war after his withdrawal [...] and a ritual substitution that previews Achilles' own coming death" (Nagy 1), an act of altruism that is unique in the typically high competitive world of the *Iliad*, but that sets the Greek hero on the path to his untimely death. In fact, even knowing that he himself will die after killing Hector to avenge Patroclus' death, Achilles returns to the battlefield to meet his fate. In this case, it is Achilles who has to bear the definitive loss of the companion he loves most. The hero's intense grief and anger over his dead friend drives him to thoughts of self-destruction, similar to those Patroclus cherishes when he imagines that Achilles will die before him. When he sees Patroclus' blood-smeared, limping body being carried by Menelaus, "he snatches for his sword to slash his throat" (321), stopped by Antilochus who seizes his wrists, unable however to prevent him from yanking his hair and screaming out Patroclus' name over and over again, as if by doing so he might summon him back to life. Patroclus' narration of his own final moments is profoundly touching as it voices his thoughts while the last drops of life seep away from his body in Achilles' arms: "He holds me so tightly I can feel the faint beat of his chest, like the wings of a moth. An echo, the last bit of spirit still tethered to my body. A torment" (321). No longer a living being, he can neither wipe away the tears Achilles sheds nor console him.

The description of Achilles' death, at the hands of Paris with Apollo's help, is one of the many differences between the poem and the novel. In the *Iliad* his death, though implicit in virtually every scene depicting the hero, is the poem's absent centre, as it does not take place within the confines of the poem itself, but is evoked laterally and enacted in the sacrificial death of Patroclus, which comes about as a result of his resemblance to Achilles. In the novel, Achilles' death is movingly narrated by dead Patroclus. Paris' arrow, driven by Apollo's decisive intervention, "flies, straight and silent [...] towards Achilles' back," worms its way towards his ribs and pierces "at last, [...] his heart;" then, "Achilles smiles as his face strikes the earth" (336–337). It is a moment that he knows is inevitable after Hector's death; so, the invocation he addresses to his dead friend shortly after he kills the Trojan hero is: "Patroclus! Wait! I am here!" (329). Achilles' wish to join his dead friend underlines the concept of passionate friendship, "a union of two persons in life and death" (Krass 157), which is reciprocal in *The Song of Achilles*. It is a union and fusion that not even death can sever. In fact, after Patroclus' cremation and before re-entering the battlefield for the last time, Achilles asks his men: "When I am dead, I charge you to mingle our ashes and bury us together" (334), thus fulfilling the wish that Patroclus' ghost had expressed to be with him forever. Their souls as one, still united in a companionship that began in childhood and survives death.

5. Other Voices, Other Presences

The patriarchal male world of the *Iliad* resonates with female voices which, however, most of the time can utter only laments, both individually and in chorus, either to voice their own plight as war prisoners, enslaved and sexually violated, and in such instances the lament is also an outlet for emotions that are otherwise barred; or to wail for the loss of their warrior men, i.e. husbands, fathers, sons, friends, who fall in battle. Then women are permitted to cry, indeed expected to do so, and what they articulate is a powerful, first-person form of speech in which they can also narrate episodes of their own past life.

When women appear on the scene, they are not allowed authentic autonomous choice or action; their personalities are little articulated in narrative-psychological terms, mostly through the referential possibilities conjured up by distinctive epithets and phrases used to refer to them that have the potential to evoke either the past they come from or some traits of their character. They are a presence overshadowed by males, turned into an object through force, thus “denied agency, and the freedom to express [their] will, thoughts, and emotions” (Dué 2007, 246).

In *The Song of Achilles*, two female characters are delineated with greater attention: Briseis, whose condition in many ways epitomizes that of all captive women, and the goddess Thetis. However, their portrait in the novel differs quite substantially from the epic poem. In the *Iliad*, Briseis is a woman of royal birth, widowed and captured by Achilles; she becomes his war prisoner and concubine, a slave subjected to the force and will of her Greek captor. In the epic poem she does not even have a name, being simply the “daughter of Brises,” despite her important role in the *Iliad*'s plot. She appears few times and speaks only when lamenting Patroclus' death. However, in her lament's compressed narrative of the crucial episodes of her life prior to her capture, she “both alludes to other parts of the *Iliad* and refers to events that take place outside the confines of the poem” (Dué 2002, Introduction). Her powerfully evocative micronarrative summons up a whole range of events and experiences of great emotional impact, and her grief resonates with paradigmatic significance as it both echoes and foreshadows the grief of every Trojan wife.

Having chosen to make the love story between Achilles and Patroclus the central nucleus of her novel, Miller constructs a whole new story line for her. She reinvents Briseis' position and role, and makes her fully visible by adopting the sympathetic and close power of observation of Patroclus. He also proves to be a precious ally for a vulnerable woman who has no protection, and is lonely, as he himself had been before meeting Achilles. She is not Achilles' concubine and never does she sleep or have sex with him who is completely indifferent to her, a clear departure from the Homeric text. Indeed, it is Patroclus' attention that she attracts first, when he sees her after a raid, among other war spoils. He is moved by the girl's beauty and delicacy, as well as by the evident traces of violence on her face and the wounded expression in her eyes. Sensing that Agamemnon, who is known

“for his appetites” (214) in bed, is observing the girl with interest, Patroclus asks Achilles to claim her as his prize, before Agamemnon does, in order to save the girl from becoming one of the many “bed slaves” (214) on the camp. Though his request puzzles Achilles, he grants his wish, a decision that, unbeknownst to them, will have momentous consequences for their future.

At first, Briseis is quite suspicious and fearful but, once she realizes that Patroclus is not going to hurt her and she is not meant to be Achilles’ concubine, she calms down and gradually begins to trust him. When Patroclus gets to know her and the war trauma she has had to bear, he becomes even more sensitively aware also of the conditions of the many other girls around the camp, whose faces are blotched with “large smears of grief that kept their eyes [...] wobbling and sloppy [...]. And bruises too, from fists or elbows, and sometimes perfect circles- spear-butts, to the forehead or temple” (219). Whenever he can, he exerts his influence on Achilles pressing him to use his power to protect someone in difficulty, as he does both with Briseis and some other captive girls.

It is a clear and important rethinking of, and departure from, the source text as it shows Patroclus distancing himself from a masculine realm predicated on the exchange or trafficking of women, their bodies used as sexual objects. In the epic poem’s moral world there is “the confluence of desire, strife and gender signalled [by] the competition between men conducted through women” (Felson and Slatkin 95). It is a competition that continues to be repeatedly enacted over women’s body even in our ‘civilized’ society by morally squalid Lilliputian beings. By granting Patroclus’ wish, Achilles proves once more his difference from – and moral superiority to – Agamemnon. True honour for Achilles is predicated on different ethical paradigms, where fame and glory are not disjunct from pity, justice and compassion. Briseis’ kindness and intelligence earn her more and more space in Achilles’ and Patroclus’ tent, gradually making of her “a member of [their] circle, for life” (238). She entertains them with strange and dreamlike tales, in an atmosphere of domestic tranquillity that balances and contrasts the brutal world of war inside the camp. Miller creates for the two heroes a kind of “near-normative existence as a monogamous couple” (Cox-Wilmott), whose natural intimacy is certainly one of the aspects that has undergone a major rethinking in the sphere of masculinity and sexuality, and signals a clear revision of the hypotext.

Briseis enjoys spending quite a lot of time with Patroclus in the woods during the hours of Achilles’ absence and, on one of these walks, she kisses his lips shyly, something that surprises him and leaves him speechless. She perceives his embarrassment: “I know that you love him” (253); then she adds, “But I thought that – some men have wives and lovers both” (253), and hints at her wish to have a child with him. As delicately as possible, avoiding to hurt her, he rules out any such possibility. Things are a bit strange between them for some time after this episode, but then they resume their walks and conversations, as they both cherish the preciousness of each other’s company.

The depth of their reciprocal affection surfaces in the novel at two key moments. The first is when Agamemnon demands to have Briseis, the episode that originates Achilles' wrath and his decision to withdraw from battle until she is restored back to him. Patroclus knows that Achilles is unwilling to do anything to prevent Agamemnon's men from seizing the girl away because the hero considers the king's claim a threat to the ethos of structural equality. So he walks to Agamemnon's tent and, cutting his wrist as a blood oath, he warns him that Achilles has given him "a sword to fall upon" (277) and is waiting for him to rape the girl. In that case both the men and the gods would turn against the Greek king and Achilles would be justified in revenging himself on him. Patroclus leaves knowing that Agamemnon will not dare touch Briseis now and the girl is safe, though he also has to face the disappointment and anger of Achilles who considers his action a form of betrayal. They have a bitter exchange, yet soon after Patroclus is ready to forgive his friend, convinced that Achilles has only temporarily forgotten his best true self which, however, is still there at heart. The second moment is when Patroclus is killed in battle and Briseis' strong feelings of affection for him are fully revealed. On this occasion, her powerful voice turns angrily against Achilles, telling him that he did not deserve Patroclus' devotion and holding him accountable for having "sent him to his death" to save himself and his "darling reputation" (323–324).

Briseis' personality shows interesting psychological traits that call for a close critical analysis. She is a young woman, a traumatized prisoner who moves within the limited, rigid confines of the male dominated patriarchal world of the enemy camp, at the beginning with no knowledge of the language spoken by the conqueror and no social role in that world except the degraded one allotted to her of being a war concubine. In the course of the novel, she gradually evolves: from being a sweet shy girl at first, she grows into a strong, courageous woman. She learns the conquerors' language from Patroclus and uses it to speak out the unpleasant truth even in the face of Achilles, ready to bear the possible consequences of his fury. She deconstructs and exposes the Greek hero's hierarchy of values and flouts them from within, exposing his self-centeredness, blind even to the altruistic offer of Patroclus to take his place in battle, a gesture of pure self-sacrifice dictated by love.

Briseis' new strength will prove decisive for her at the end when Phyrus threatens to rape her: she tries to kill him but, failing this as she only wounds him, she escapes by diving into the sea. Refusing to become an object in the hands of the grinding mechanisms of the Symbolic order, she chooses to be swallowed whole by "the gulp of black water" (344), embracing the amniotic-like liquid darkness of the sea, a return to the semiotic fluidity of the maternal womb where "she will find rest" (344). Her final gesture is the only alternative she is left with to take the narrative of her life in her own hands and assert her personal freedom. With her final refusal to see her body appropriated and brutalized, helpless to defend herself, she subverts the rape script waiting for her – for any woman – taken prisoner. In her portrait, Miller has created the image of a woman that acts and speaks for the

many women who continue to fall prey to male violence and brutality, and die at the hands of men even in our contemporary society, a theme that strongly appeals to the modern sensibility of all those who, regardless of their gender, speak out against rape culture.

The other female character who is a commanding presence in the novel, because of her powerful and strong personality, is the sea nymph Thetis, Achilles' mother. In the *Iliad* she is very fond of, and caring for, her semi-divine son, having to come to terms with the knowledge that her son must die young, certain that it will happen soon and that she can do nothing to save him. As with Briseis, Miller attributes her a different personality and behavior. As in the *Iliad*, she is truly concerned about her son's early death but, unlike the epic poem, she is a frightening figure, a controlling mother who tries to direct her son's life and hates Patroclus for being such an important part of it. On meeting her, Patroclus sees distaste for him on her face and he cannot bring himself to look at her cold eyes. When Achilles and Patroclus kiss for the first time, she sees to it that they are immediately separated. She will do the same when she hides Achilles at Lycomedes' court among his daughters and tricks Achilles into marrying Deidameia in secret and getting her pregnant, promising her son that she will disclose his whereabouts to Patroclus, a promise she does not intend to keep.

The most dramatic clash between Thetis and her son comes when, after having killed Hector to avenge Patroclus' death and dragged his body around the walls of Troy for days, she demands him to return Hector's body to the family because Apollo is angry with him. He refuses to obey her, reminding her of how she hated Patroclus and blaming her for his death. She leaves him saying: "I am done. There is no more I can do to save you" (331), ignoring that it is the last time she sees him and those are her last words addressed to him alive. The next time she is anywhere close to her son is after his death, near the pyre on which Achilles has been cremated, no evident emotion or feeling emanating from her.

When assessing her portrait in the novel, quite different from the image of the tender, loving mother in the *Iliad*, it should be considered that the filter through which readers view her is Patroclus, who considers her as his powerful rival for Achilles' affection. In fact, most of the time she appears to have been "recast as the nightmare mother-in-law of all time" (Mendelsohn), suspicious of anyone who might distract her son from pursuing eternal glory or compete with her affection for him. However, her motherly feelings of affection for her son are still there, redeemed and surfacing once more through Patroclus' silent conversation with her from the otherworld at the end of the novel. Seeing her coming day after day to her son's tomb, "an eternity of stone" (351) that she cannot penetrate, he conjures up for her the boy he knew: "I want to speak of something not dead or divine. I want him to live" (350). He shares with Thetis his past tender memories and images, not of the semi-god warrior who killed so many men and women, destroyed so many families, but of the beautiful young man he loved, the one who could play the lyre

and sing beautifully, who returned Hector's body to Priam because the old king reminded him of his own father suffering for the loss of his only child. This is the Achilles they both loved and cherished, and Patroclus wants this image to continue to live in people's memories of him. The last section of the text is painfully lyrical and intensely poetical and moving: it is the moment when humans and mortals stop perceiving the *otherness* of the other and acknowledge what each of them has done for the person they most loved in life. It is out of an act that is both of love and (self)forgiveness that, at last, Thetis marks Patroclus' name on the tomb near Achilles,' thus allowing them to be finally reunited in the underworld. The last gesture of love of a mother for her beloved son.

6. Conclusion

“What were the Greek ships on fire
Compared to this loss?”

(Louise Glück *The Triumph of Achilles*)

In *The Song of Achilles* Madeline Miller enters the subtext of Homer's *Iliad* from the margins of the poem, via the introduction of the specific perspective, and bias, of Patroclus' first-person narrative. In an interview, Miller motivates the reason why she chose Patroclus as narrator: “In my mind, Patroclus was always someone who sought smaller, daily beauties over destiny, and who valued personal connection over fame and power. He was essentially lyric” (George). She liberates his lyrical voice and thus achieves different objectives: first, Patroclus approaches Achilles from a position of relative parity, emotionally if not socially his equal, and explores him “less as a hero and more as an isolated misfit” (Cox-Wilmott), just like he himself is. It is a shift of perspective that revises and reconfigures Achilles' portrayal by making him more human, so as to make him speak more forcefully to the sensibility of a more readership. Thus Patroclus discloses to the reader also the hero's existential anguish: the critical awareness of his role and the enormous personal costs he has to pay for *kleos*, his search for meaning beyond the heroic code he has been taught to follow, as well as his capacity to see to what extent war was “a masculinist tragedy inflicted on both sexes” (Felson and Slatkin 96). Even though Patroclus does not downplay the hero's excessive pride, which he openly censures at times, he foregrounds Achilles' moral integrity as a warrior, always driven by a sense of honor and justice. The hero's personal qualities are thrown into relief when juxtaposed with the greediness and materialism of king Agamemnon, or the extreme, senseless cruelty and violence of Pyrrhus, or the sly doubleness of Odysseus. Through Patroclus' honest and profoundly humane gaze, the novel problematizes the moral values and hierarchies of a fractured and violent male community, at whose heart women appear as powerless victims, objects of

exchange in men's pursuit of glory and honor, often sources of conflict for men who want to see their maleness triumphantly (re)affirmed and validated.

Second, Miller portrays gendered subjects who break with the assumptions embedded in the grammar of heterosexuality and follow their desire. The novel's focus on the intimacy, respect and deep spiritual bond between the two heroes, on the tender eroticism of their relationship should provide valuable insights into contemporary debates and perceptions of same-sex relationships. Too frequently, these relationships are "conceived within the homophobic signifying economy as *both* uncivilized and unnatural" (Butler 168), thus objects of discrimination and moral censorship in some sections of our society. Indeed, the novel speaks against any form of homophobia and points to a form of love that "transcends gender and time" and should "model the kind of relationship we all aspire to" (Miller 2014).

Third, by weaving "new material upon the surface and foundation of the literary past" (Sanders 8), Miller offers readers *other* interpretive lens to approach the text, encouraging them "to look for complexity in epic gender representation and to investigate the ideological functions of this representation" (Lesser 1), deflating the simple celebration of heroism and the trope of the hero's 'beautiful death.' At the same time, she acknowledges and reasserts the persistent power of Homer's epic poem, and its continuing relevance for our own times too, in the spheres of sexuality and power relations, and reminds us of the toll war takes on the social order, its institutions and values. In the interview published on her website, the writer argues: "Every day on the front page of the newspaper is an *Iliad* of woes – [...] from the senseless loss of life in war to the brutal treatment of the conquered. It is all there, in Homer too: our past, present and future, inspiration and condemnation both" (2014).

Lastly, in her re-vision of Patroclus, Miller portrays a young warrior who tries "to be an ethical man in a violent world" (2014), to preserve his moral integrity and pity for those who suffer even among the massacres and destruction perpetrated on the Trojan battlefield. Being enmeshed in the power dynamics of the world he is observing from inside with untainted eyes, Miller empowers him to really see it as if from the outside, thus enjoying a double view. He dares to take a critical stance also against the person he loves most, Achilles, and makes up for the latter's failure to achieve humanity by offering to enter the battle in his place to save the hero's reputation, ready to pay with his own life. In his portrait, Miller enucleates the inner conflicts of any young man, whose fresh, undefiled personal world has to hold on to his self-respect in the worst possible conditions. It is Patroclus, with his respect and care for all *others*, his unconditional dedication to the person he loves, who appeals more to a modern readership, with his extraordinary ordinariness and modesty, his ability to speak the truth convincingly in a low voice against the "sound and fury" of mediocrity, predatory violence and the arrogance of power.

The "song" Patroclus sings is at heart an antiepic that unfolds a counter-narrative of misogyny, war horrors, loss of family ties and, consequently, of the breakdown of a sense of belonging and identity, as well as fragmentation of the

self. Miller's novel inevitably reminds readers of similar crisis much closer to us in time – similar scenes of wars, massacres, and dehumanization – that belong not to a distant heroic past but to our problematic present.

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