

Examining Patroclus' role in Homer's *The Iliad*, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and Miller's *The Song of Achilles*

J. S. Champion, University of Warwick

Abstract

This paper argues that Patroclus plays a significant part in developing themes of war and nuancing the presentation of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* and works that it inspired – namely William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1604) and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011). Although much analysis of these texts focuses on Achilles, Patroclus' death is central to both themes and plot in each, and his changing characterisation and role within each narrative heavily impact the exploration of war and heroes. His presence nuances the characterisation of Achilles in each text, particularly when we adopt queer readings, and his death enables poignant explorations of grief and revenge. This paper will therefore reinvestigate these aspects of Patroclus' importance in the *Iliad*, and examine the way in which his character has been received and utilised in a selection of more modern works.

Keywords: Patroclus' importance in the *Iliad*, Achilles and Patroclus, queerness in the *Iliad*, Patroclus in *Troilus and Cressida*, Patroclus' death

Introduction

Patroclus is not quite so well-known as many other figures in the *Iliad*, nor is his name as widely recognised as that of Achilles. Despite this, his narrative role and characterisation have a large bearing on Homer's epic poem, the *Iliad* – a work that inspired William Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida* (1604) and Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles* (2011). In each text, Patroclus enables a deeper exploration of the themes of war and grief, and significantly nuances the presentation of Achilles. This paper will reinvestigate these notable aspects of Patroclus' involvement in the epic, and the way the two more modern works have utilised his character to explore both war and the character of Achilles in differing, but equally significant, ways. I will analyse each text in

chronological order and trace the development of Patroclus' characterisation and role: from a powerful soldier in the *Iliad* to Achilles' sidekick in *Troilus and Cressida* to a healer figure and Achilles' lover in *The Song of Achilles*.

While I will discuss Patroclus' impact on the presentation of war and loss within each text in his own right, a great deal of my analysis will nonetheless remain focused on Patroclus' relationship with Achilles; the two are tied together closely by personal and military bonds, and Patroclus is part of what makes Achilles' grief so tangible, even to an audience reading the *Iliad* over 2700 years after its composition.

The *Iliad* was composed in a tradition that had previously been shaped by centuries of oral storytelling (Nagy, 2015: 59), and Margalit Finkelberg argues that it was a 'foundational text' (2019: 353) in Ancient Greek society. The *Iliad* provides rich source material for deeply compelling retellings that can speak to more modern audiences, as demonstrated by Shakespeare and Miller's works, which are culturally significant in their own right.

Given that the three central texts of this paper consist of an epic poem likely composed in the eighth century bc (Burgess, 2015: 51), a Renaissance play first performed in 1604 and a contemporary novel published in 2011, I will be using a range of narratological tools to analyse each one appropriately. To minimise the effects of anachronisms, I will examine each text alongside research into the time period in which it was written, as well as using secondary sources analysing the original text of the *Iliad*. Finally, I will use Latinised names throughout the paper (i.e. Achilles rather than Achilleus and Patroclus rather than Patroklos), although when directly quoting from Martin Hammond's translation of the *Iliad*, I will keep his spelling of names.

Best of the Myrmidons: Patroclus in the Iliad

Amid the heroes of the *Iliad*, Patroclus is hardly the most well-known, but he is nonetheless largely the reason that Achilles' grief and desire for vengeance are so compelling and central to the epic. His presence in the narrative also provides an illuminating contrast to the often cruel and arrogant figure of Achilles, thus further enabling the text's exploration of

war. While Homer's society celebrated militaristic prowess and glory in battle, Homer nonetheless expresses sympathy for the plight of soldiers. The epic engages with human suffering, and presents war with nuance alongside themes of vulnerability, loss and revenge, exploring each of these through Patroclus.

Patroclus' thematic and narrative significance becomes particularly apparent through his death. He saves the Argive army and progresses the narrative of the epic, first when his appearance in battle (following his successful appeal to Achilles) drives the Trojans away from the Argive camp, despite this leading to his own death, and then, more importantly, when his death is the only event capable of spurring Achilles into fighting in later Books. The importance of Patroclus' death is highlighted by Homer's use of *apostrophe*, a technique used infrequently throughout the *Iliad* in moments of gravity, such as the narrator's warning in Book 16 that 'Patroklos, the ending of your life was revealed' (Homer 1987: 16.787).^[1] This *metalepsis* creates a tone of pity for Patroclus, particularly as it is used so disproportionately towards Patroclus when compared to other characters. Patroclus is apostrophised to a total of eight times, all in Book 16, making him the most frequent recipient of Homer's apostrophes (Allen-Hornblower, 2016: 46). Through this, Homer creates a scene in which 'the real world recedes as the past becomes present' in the audience's minds (Strauss Clay, 2011: 26). This temporal blurring conveys Patroclus' death as inescapable, thus imbuing his downfall with a sense of inevitability and gravitas.

But the impact of his death stretches far beyond Book 16, acting as the central point in a chain of revenge. Patroclus' death mirrors that of Sarpedon, whom he kills earlier in Book 16, and is echoed by the death of Hector, killed by Achilles in Book 22 in an act of revenge for Patroclus. Allen-Hornblower positions Sarpedon's death as 'significant largely because it establishes patterns of theme and diction and a template for the two other great heroes' deaths to come: the death of Patroclus (his killer) and then that of Patroclus's killer, Hector' (2016: 35). Indeed, repetition is a common feature of epic oral poetry, as it acted as a memory aid for poets recounting the epic, although Homer frequently uses practical techniques such as repetition to develop and create skilled literary impacts (Allen-Hornblower, 2016: 22). This is especially true of the many parallels between Sarpedon, Patroclus and Hector. Each of their deaths has been

prophesied throughout the text, while their downfalls are all depicted using lion imagery, and framed with Zeus considering saving each of them before ultimately leaving them to their demise. All three characters are treated with sympathy during their deaths, which encapsulates the *Iliad's* nuanced portrayal of war as a tragic occurrence in which there is no clear-cut dichotomy between good and evil, but which incurs suffering on both sides. The cyclical representation of these three characters' deaths also embodies the repetitive nature of revenge, and Patroclus' centrality in this cycle is a testament to his narrative significance in exploring this theme of vengeance.

Having discussed the significance of Patroclus as an individual, I will highlight the ways in which his characterisation complements and contrasts Achilles, thus making the latter a more nuanced and compelling character. Jonathan Shay observes that 'the *Iliad* is the tragedy of Achilles' noble character brought to ruin' (2003: 31), and nowhere is this made more poignant and vivid than when Achilles' downfall into arrogant pride is compared with Patroclus' gentleness and role as a healer. Achilles and Patroclus are antithetical in nature, and Hammond, who translated the *Iliad*, notes that 'the Greek epithet meaning "kind" attaches to Patroklos alone in the *Iliad*' (Hammond, 1987: xxxvii). This is significant given that most heroes' Homeric epithets, such as 'swift-footed godlike Achilleus' (Homer, 1987: 2.688) or 'bronze-armoured Hektor' (Homer, 1987: 5.699), connote military prowess or abilities. The unconventional focus on Patroclus' kindness therefore sets him apart from other heroes such as Achilles. The framing of these heroes as antithetical to each other makes the 'tragedy of Achilles' noble character brought to ruin' (Shay, 2003: 31) even clearer through contrast, thus situating Patroclus as a significant figure when characterising Achilles.

To continue discussing the significance of Patroclus on Achilles' characterisation, I will argue that a queer interpretation of their relationship magnifies Homer's themes of grief. I am using 'queer' to connote a same-sex attraction and partnership rather than using it to invoke modern queer theory, which 'push[es] beyond the question of identity itself' (McCann and Monaghan, 2019: 4) and has 'situated itself as challenging normativity' (McCann and Monaghan, 2019: 11). Neither of these definitions apply to same-sex attraction in Ancient Greece, which

had a place within society and was not considered anti-normative (Morales and Mariscal, 2003: 293).

I do not mean to suggest that Achilles' grief would be made any lesser by interpreting their relationship as a non-romantic friendship. Jonathan Shay argues that a romantic reading invalidates the emotional attachment formed between friends in war and frames powerful friendship as inferior to romantic or sexual attraction (2003: 40), which is certainly not my intention. Achilles' grief is overwhelmingly powerful no matter its nature, although there is suitable evidence in the epic to argue that the pair are romantically or sexually involved. Although scholars have been debating the exact nature of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship for thousands of years, academics have observed that, in Ancient Greek texts written after the *Iliad's* composition, generally 'the view that they were lovers prevailed' (Morales and Mariscal, 2003, vol. 53: 293). Although Homer does not explicitly refer to the two as lovers, '[a]ccording to Aeschines, Homer was silent [...] about the erotic nature of the connection between Achilles and Patroclus, because he could take for granted that the erotic undertones would have been perfectly intelligible to his audience' (Fantuzzi, 2021: 188).

Interpreting the pair as lovers using this evidence and context can therefore imbue their dynamic with more complexity and establish a sense of loss for Achilles' lover as well as loss for a friend, counsellor and trusted second in command. In many eras and regional areas throughout Ancient Greek history, societies fostered an entirely different understanding of homosexuality; in same-sex relationships between men, it was expected that one would be the 'lover (*erastês*) [and one would be] the beloved (*erômenos*)' (Morales and Mariscal, 2003: 293). Aeschylus presented Achilles as the *erastês*, or lover, in their relationship, which would magnify his sense of authority as Patroclus' commander (Fantuzzi, 2021: 190). However, Plato's argument, presented by the fictionalised figure of Phaedrus in *Symposium*, is that Achilles was the *erômenos*, or beloved, and Patroclus the *erastês*, or lover (Plato, 1925: 107). Although it is worth considering that both writers were adapting the myth for their own literary or philosophical ends, I find Plato's presentation to be the more convincing and grounded in evidence from the *Iliad*, as Patroclus is 'the older' of the two (Homer, 1987: 11.786), whose 'proper task is to give [Achilles] words of wisdom and advise him and guide him' (11.787–788), as

the character Nestor observes. In light of this, a queer reading of the characters' intimacy and love adds another dimension of loss to Achilles' grief, as it positions him as having lost not only his closest friend and ally but also his romantic and sexual partner. If we take Patroclus to be the *erastês*, or lover, then Achilles has lost the man whose role includes being Achilles' guide and source of reason and emotional grounding, which amplifies the sense of loss.

One can also draw parallels between Achilles and Patroclus and different romantic relationships within the epic, thus deepening the epic's portrayal of love and grief. The most significant of these is the parallel between Achilles as he mourns for Patroclus, and Andromache as she mourns for Hector, which adds to the poignancy of the similarities between Hector and Patroclus' deaths. This once again elevates the audience's sympathies for the victims of war, and situates Patroclus as a pivotal character in Homer's exploration of loss. Allen-Hornblower writes of Andromache that 'The phraseology used to describe her reaction suggests that, poetically and emotionally speaking, she too has died; that is, that Hector's death amounts to her own' (2016: 41). Andromache's collapse, wherein 'the spirit breathed out of her' (Homer, 1987: 22.467), mirrors Achilles' reaction to learning of Patroclus' death; he lies in the dust, 'huge and hugely fallen' (18.26). This phrase is used elsewhere in the epic to describe characters' deaths, such as that of Kebriones, felled by Patroclus in Book 16 (16.776). By depicting characters' mourning as a form of death, Homer illustrates the overwhelming sense of grief faced by both characters. Achilles' reaction to Patroclus' death makes him significantly more humanised and compelling; 'He's at his most moving when he's at his most human, prostrate, weeping, knowing he's done the wrong thing' (Jordison, 2016). Through the parallels between Achilles and Andromache, Homer prompts our sympathies for the lovers or companions of both Greek and Trojan soldiers, conveying the horrors faced not only by the fallen but also by those who are left to grieve them. Patroclus, as the object of Achilles' grief, is therefore a pivotal character in conveying this sense of loss.

Through Patroclus, Achilles' grief becomes painfully tangible, revealing a more human, vulnerable and nuanced individual who is 'huge and hugely fallen' (Homer, 1987: 18.26). Achilles' trauma and sense of loss surrounding Patroclus encapsulate Homer's presentation of heroes as flawed soldiers whose struggles are poignant and deserving of sympathy.

As an individual, Patroclus is also central to Homer's exploration of war through themes of revenge, vulnerability and helplessness against fate, particularly at the moment of his death. Therefore, while Patroclus remains in the shadow of Achilles, he should be acknowledged as a pivotal figure in the *Iliad* whose presence makes Achilles such a compellingly complicated and vulnerable character, and whose struggles encapsulate Homer's portrayal of war.

Achilles' brach: Patroclus in *Troilus and Cressida*

By the time William Shakespeare wrote *Troilus and Cressida*, which was first performed in 1604, the events of the *Iliad* had been retold by many different authors. Renaissance England, much like Ancient Greece with its frequently warring city states, was no stranger to the idea of warfare due to the multiple European and Anglo-Spanish wars, and 'early modern cultural imagination and practices [...] were deeply rooted in all things military' (Daems and Nelson, 2019: 14). Although the Renaissance play and Homeric epics both rely on oral performance, Shakespeare's work does not engage with characters' interiority so much as Homer's epic does; nor does it have the omniscience of an external narrator. Patroclus' significance in *Troilus and Cressida* is not quite so noteworthy as it is in the *Iliad*, partially because his role has little stage time. However, his narrative role also continues to mobilise Achilles and further the plot, while the narrative and thematic implications of his death situate him as an important character despite his apparent insignificance. A queer reading of his relationship with Achilles also nuances both characters.

Due to his more limited role within the military and events of the war, Patroclus' bearing on the characterisation of Achilles is considerably more subtle in *Troilus and Cressida* than in the *Iliad*. In Shakespeare's play, he does not fulfil a military role as a healer or soldier, nor does he display the same selflessness as in Miller or Homer's versions of Patroclus. Instead, he remains idle by Achilles' side and is labelled as 'Achilles' brach' (Shakespeare, 2015: 2.1.111)^[2] by Thersites, a derogatory term meaning fawning hanger-on or bitch hound, and which was changed to 'bitch' in Gregory Doran's 2018 RSC production (00.40.30–00.40.32). Indeed, Patroclus seems to answer to Achilles' every whim and appears to be little more than his obedient subordinate. However, Patroclus' role as Achilles' faithful companion has a subtle – but significant – bearing on the power

dynamics within the Greek army. J. S. Garrison argues that ‘the fact that the king must speak with Achilles through Patroclus arguably shifts power to the pair of friends’ (2014: 30). Indeed, Patroclus loyally recounts Achilles’ messages verbatim, whereas Ulysses rephrases Agamemnon’s messages when relaying them. Alternatively, Patroclus’ relatively unseen significance as a negotiator could be interpreted as amplifying Achilles’ sense of dishonour in avoiding warfare, as he appears to hide behind Patroclus rather than facing his fellow commanders in person. Under this interpretation, Patroclus becomes the barrier that separates Achilles from the direct appeals which beg him to fight, thus enabling Achilles’ neglect of his military role and contributing to the play’s theme of deromanticising heroes. Whichever interpretation one takes, Patroclus’ role, although subtle, influences Achilles’ place within the power dynamics within the Greek army.

Patroclus’ death is afforded significantly less narrative focus in *Troilus and Cressida* than in the *Iliad*, although it still causes Achilles’ return to war and highlights the play’s cynical outlook on heroism. In line with the events of the *Iliad*, Patroclus’ death is what motivates Achilles to join the fighting; Ulysses reports that ‘Patroclus’ wounds have roused [Achilles’] drowsy blood’ (Shakespeare, 2015: 5.5.32). However, Patroclus’ death occurs offstage; we only see the aftermath as Nestor enters ‘with soldiers bearing Patroclus’ body’ (5.5.16). The brevity of this moment contrasts the emotional attention afforded to Patroclus’ downfall in the *Iliad*, and contributes to Shakespeare’s presentation of war without glory, heroism or meaning. Furthermore, Patroclus is treated as little more than a tool to bring Achilles into the fight; no soldier besides Achilles mourns him, and Ulysses simply commands his soldiers to ‘bear Patroclus’ body to Achilles’ (5.5.17). The impersonal treatment of Patroclus’ death amplifies Shakespeare’s presentation of the Greek heroes as cruel individuals. Ulysses’ order to take Patroclus’ body to Achilles also highlights the importance of Patroclus’ death: the other Greeks are fully aware that his downfall will spur Achilles into action. This demonstrates Patroclus’ significance for Achilles and the war in death, which contrasts with the little attention he himself is paid in life.

Achilles’ initial reaction to Patroclus’ death also occurs offstage; the audience is told second-hand that ‘Great Achilles / Is arming, weeping, cursing, vowing vengeance’ (5.5.30–31). By having this moment reported

through Ulysses' dialogue rather than shown directly to the audience, Shakespeare hides a moment of grief that could have humanised the arrogant and unheroic figure of Achilles. Furthermore, 'weeping' and 'cursing' are both placed between 'arming' and 'vowing vengeance' (5.5.30–31), which places the emphasis of the dialogue on Achilles' violence rather than his grief. When Achilles next appears onstage, he is battle-ready, portrayed only in his rage as he declares that Hector will 'Know what it is to meet Achilles angry' (5.5.48). By exploring Achilles' bloodthirsty anger rather than his loss and vulnerability, Shakespeare builds into his subversion of heroic ideals within the play.

The anti-climactic nature of Patroclus' death and Achilles' grief culminates with Achilles' eventual retreat against Hector, and eventually the shockingly unheroic scene in which Achilles has his men surround an unarmoured Hector and kill him. Both of these scenes demonstrate Achilles' lack of heroism, particularly as he does not even kill Hector himself; he commands his [Myrmidons](#) to 'Strike, fellows, strike!' (5.9.10) rather than fighting against Hector in an equal match. Furthermore, in Hector's moment of death, Achilles does not mention Patroclus, which subverts the audience's expectations for a narrative of revenge. Patroclus' absence feels painfully present within this moment; given that Achilles previously named Patroclus as his reason for fighting, it seems strange that a dialogue-focused form of text should not even have Achilles mention Patroclus as his Myrmidons kill Hector at his command. Compared to Achilles' mighty rage in the *Iliad*, this moment of cowardice (made all the more underwhelming by the absence of Patroclus' name) serves to characterise Achilles as an unheroic figure, which builds into the play's presentation of heroes as deeply flawed individuals.

A queer reading of *Troilus and Cressida* also adds depth to Achilles and Patroclus' characterisation, and centralises Patroclus in Achilles' decision to abstain from fighting. In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon's capturing of Briseis was Achilles' original reason for abstaining from battle, whereas Shakespeare does not include her among the cast of characters, or even mention her in dialogue. Without her, Achilles no longer has a reason to remove himself from battle, thus making him a more two-dimensional character due to his lack of motivations. However, a queer interpretation of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship can nuance Achilles by ascribing motivation to him, largely through suggesting that

his desire and affection for Patroclus is behind his refusal to fight. Although not explicit, there is a great deal of textual evidence in Shakespeare's play to imply a homoerotic relationship between the pair. Indeed, Alan Sinfield argues that, due to the characters' intimacy and dynamic together, 'Nowadays, everyone can see a homosexual couple in Achilles and Patroclus' relationship' (2011: 379). Heather James, referring to the original play, suggests that Achilles 'withdraws from war officially for reasons of honour but privately to negotiate with the enemy for a girl while he enjoys continued dalliance with his ingel [an early modern slang term for a young, male lover], the "boy" Patroclus' (2007: 14). Indeed, other Greeks such as Ulysses mock Achilles for lounging around with Patroclus in his tent. Meanwhile, Patroclus tells Achilles he is concerned that the other Greeks think 'my little stomach to the war, / And your great love to me, restrains you thus' (Shakespeare, 2015: 3.3.222–223). If we take this to be the reason why Achilles abstains from fighting, a queer interpretation therefore ascribes a motivation to Achilles that, while not making him a *noble* figure, does serve to make him more nuanced through suggesting reasoning to his refusal to fight. Furthermore, queerness in the seventeenth century was associated with stereotypical femininity and sinfulness (Garrison, 2014: 35), so a queer interpretation would have developed both characters as unheroic figures.

However, when the pair are framed as lovers in modern adaptations, the connotations of same-sex attraction become less degrading. Gregory Doran's 2018 RSC production of *Troilus and Cressida* makes Achilles and Patroclus' relationship explicitly romantic and sexual, and uses this queerness to humanise the pair. When Patroclus shares his concerns about rumours that he 'stand[s] condemned' for Achilles' inaction (Shakespeare, 2015: 3.3.221), Achilles holds Patroclus and kisses him in a display of reassurance (Doran, 2018: 1.33.35–54). This moment of affection makes the pair seem more tender and vulnerable, leading critics such as Louis Train to feel that 'James Cooney as Patroclus, the lover of Achilles, is charming and touchingly real; his relationship is the play's true romance, his death, the true tragedy' (Train, 2018). This moment demonstrates the ability of modern adaptations to add meaning within different social contexts, and builds upon the importance of Patroclus as the implied lover of Achilles, developing a layer of the narrative in which his presence causes the audience to sympathise with him and Achilles.

Overall, Patroclus' role in *Troilus and Cressida* seems minor and unimportant at surface-level. However, if one examines the play more closely, it becomes clear that Patroclus plays an important role in characterising Achilles and developing the play's presentation of Homeric heroes as deromanticised figures.

A gentle healer: Patroclus in The Song of Achilles

Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*, published in 2011, is a text told from the first-person perspective of Patroclus, and which spans Patroclus and Achilles' whole lives rather than just a short period of the Trojan war. Although it is primarily based on the *Iliad*, Miller acknowledges drawing inspiration from *Troilus and Cressida* (Miller, 2012), and she portrays Achilles and Patroclus' relationship as explicitly romantic and sexual. Patroclus' role, due to his centrality as the novel's narrator, is more prominent and significant in this novel than he is in Homer or Shakespeare's works, particularly in reflecting the novel's anti-war themes and messages.

The Song of Achilles takes a heavily anti-war stance in which Patroclus' role is central, as he is positioned as a healer who feels sickened by battle and helps captured Trojan women such as Briseis. Patroclus encourages Achilles to take Briseis as a war prize to protect her from other men; neither he or Achilles sleep with her, and he attends to her wounds, 'dress[ing] the wound, and [tying] it closed with bandages' (2011: 216). As Jonathan Shay argues, 'Homer minimised to the point of falsification [...] the suffering of the wounded, and the suffering of civilians, particularly women' (2003: 121). In contrast, by having Patroclus demonstrate care for female war slaves, Miller imbues the women with a sense of humanity and uses Patroclus as a voice through which to critique war. As well as positioning Patroclus as a narrator who rallies against the misogyny of Ancient Greek war practices, Miller also draws upon Shakespeare's presentation of Achilles and Patroclus in *Troilus and Cressida*. She interprets it as 'a story of two men in love, one who is the world's best warrior, and one who has little stomach for it' (Miller, 2011). Indeed, in *The Song of Achilles*, 'Miller's Patroclus does what he cannot do in Homer. He dislikes fighting and has no talent for it' (Miller and Minkowich, 2012), a dislike and lack of talent which would have alienated a more militaristic Homeric audience from him. In contrast, we see Miller's

Patroclus demonstrate disgust at Achilles' transformation from an honest boy into a soldier; Patroclus longs to 'release him from [bloody images], and make him Achilles again' (Miller, 2011: 212). Patroclus' separation of Achilles as a soldier from the Achilles as he used to be highlights his despair at the ruinations of war.

Unlike Homer's *Iliad* or Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Miller's novel makes the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles explicitly queer. *The Song of Achilles* was published in America in 2011, at which point homosexuality was no longer criminalised in the USA. However, it was (and still is) criminalised across much of the world, and homosexuality is globally surrounded by negative stereotypes and persecution. Gay marriage was only legalised across the USA in 2015 ('US Supreme Court rules gay marriage is legal nationwide'; Train, 2015), and Miller wrote hoping 'to combat the homophobia that [she sees] too often' (Miller, 2019).

Although Miller removes Patroclus' status as a powerful and distinguished soldier, she maintains his position as a respected healer, a position through which she explores the horrors of war. Some readers argue that removing Patroclus' fighting prowess and magnifying his nurturing role as a healer makes the novel problematic in that it aligns him with stereotypical femininity and thus applies gender roles to his relationship with Achilles. This is often a problem with contemporary representations of queerness; some authors seek to map traditional heterosexuality onto queer relationships, making one character more masculine and the other more feminine. Indeed, Miller has been critiqued by some readers who believe that 'Achilles and Patroclus are assigned very stereotypical tropes in their relationship' (Watson, 2021). Although nurturing characteristics have often been linked to femininity, it is reductive to suggest that a healing role might inherently effeminise a character, particularly given that medicine was a male-dominated field in Ancient Greece.

Furthermore, rather than feminising and trivialising his role in this retelling, Miller's focus on Patroclus' role as a healer positions him as an important voice seeking to redress the violence of war. She has written that she wanted to focus on Patroclus as an ordinary person who 'has more power than he thinks' (Miller, 2019) when offering help to others, and sought to explore the question: 'What does it mean to try to be an ethical person in a violent world?' (2019). Her investigation of this topic is evident

through Patroclus' comment that he does 'not stop to think' before going to heal his comrades (Miller, 2011: 303), which demonstrates instinctive heroism. Although Miller's version of Patroclus is not a soldier, he is nonetheless labelled by Briseis as the 'best of the Myrmidons' (2011: 298) for his bravery and kindness, which demonstrates to a contemporary audience that queerness is not anti-heroic. Furthermore, it shifts traditional ideas of heroism; traditional heroes are often presented as figures with military prowess (such as Achilles), although Miller treats Achilles' eagerness to fight with a sense of alienation and disgust, as mentioned before. By elevating the heroism of a gentler healer figure, Miller celebrates the position of a character who seeks to help others rather than contribute to violence in war. Therefore, by presenting Patroclus as a queer healer, she uses his character to establish a message of queer empowerment while critiquing brutality in war.

Miller further uses the wider narrative scope of the novel to explore more facets of Achilles' and Patroclus' characters. Patroclus acts as a first-person chronicler for both of their lives, so the reader witnesses Achilles through Patroclus' unreliable narration of his adolescent beauty, honesty and vulnerability. For example, Patroclus observes that Achilles 'said what he meant; he was puzzled if you did not' (Miller, 2011: 41). The novel's inclusion of this childhood innocence humanises Achilles through Patroclus' adoring narration. By following his arc from childhood, the novel makes Achilles' later presentation as a nearly invincible soldier all the more brutal and alienating in comparison, thus developing Miller's anti-war critiques through Patroclus' depiction of Achilles (as previously discussed). As well as exploring Achilles' childish honesty, the narrative scope covers his death, an event not included in the *Iliad*, and which Miller subverts by having Paris shoot Achilles' chest rather than his heel. Here, Patroclus' ghost watches as Achilles feels Paris' arrow 'worming its way past the interlacing fingers of his ribs. [...] Achilles smiles as his face strikes the earth' (2011: 337). The use of bodily and poetic imagery to describe Achilles' ribs invokes a sense of intimacy that highlights Patroclus' enduring love for Achilles. Meanwhile, Achilles' dying smile conjures the memory of his childhood and adolescent vulnerabilities, which contrasts his role and brutality as a soldier and therefore highlights the extent to which war has changed him and corrupted his childlike understanding of the world. Patroclus' narration therefore makes Achilles'

death more shocking and tragic by reminding the reader of the history of and between both characters.

Overall, Miller's Patroclus plays a very different role than he did in the *Iliad*, although, narratively, he still humanises Achilles through grief and through the exploration of their happier youth. His disgust at war and kind interactions with Briseis and common soldiers, as well as his disgust at Achilles' descent into soldiery, allow the novel to explore the horrors and brutality of war through a contemporary lens.

Conclusion

Overall, Patroclus is clearly a significant character in Homer's *Iliad* and its inspired works, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and Miller's *The Song of Achilles*. Patroclus has a considerable bearing on the plot, saving the Greek army in Homer and Miller's works, and motivating Achilles to join the fighting in all three. Although the texts were written in vastly different time periods, a queer reading of each (or an engagement with explicit queerness, in Miller's case) enhanced the thematic development and characterisation of the texts. While intrinsically linked with Achilles, Patroclus influences the presentation of war through his role and characterisation, from Homer's sympathetic portrayal of human suffering to Shakespeare's deromanticised vision of heroism, to Miller's critique of the cruelties of warfare.

Endnotes

[1] Book 16, Line 787, henceforth written as Book.Line – for example, 16.787

[2] Act 2, Scene 1, Line 111, henceforth written as 2.1.11

References

Allen-Hornblower, E. (2016), *From Agent to Spectator*, Berlin: De Gruyter, *De Gruyter e-book*: <https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1515/9783110430042>, accessed 10 April 2021

- Burgess, J. (2015). 'Coming Adrift: The limits of reconstruction of the cyclic poems', in M. Fantuzzi and C. Tsagalis (eds), *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception: A companion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 43–58. *Cambridge e-book*: <https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO9780511998409>, accessed 27 September 2021
- Daems, J. and H. Nelson (2019). 'The interplay of games and war in early modern English literature: An introduction.' In J. Daems and H. Nelson (eds), *Games and War in Early Modern English Literature: From Shakespeare to Swift*, Amsterdam University Press, pp. 11–22. *Cambridge e-book*: <https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/9789048544837>, accessed 29 September 2021
- Doran, G. (2018), *William Shakespeare: Troilus and Cressida*, production, Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Company, *Digital Theatre Plus*: <https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com/education/collections/rsc/troilus-and-cressida>, accessed 06 March 2021
- Fantuzzi, M. (2021), *Achilles in Love: Intertextual studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, *Oxford Scholarship Online e-book*: <https://0-oxford-universitypressscholarship-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199603626.001.0001/acprof-9780199603626>, accessed 01 April 2021
- Finkelberg, M. (2019), *Homer and Early Greek Epic*, Berlin: De Gruyter, *De Gruyter e-book*, <https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1515/9783110671452>, accessed 20 March 2021
- Garrison, J. S. (2014), *Friendship and Queer Theory in the Renaissance: Gender and sexuality in early modern England*, Oxfordshire: Routledge, *Routledge e-book*: <https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.4324/9781315883434>, accessed 01 April 2021
- Hammond, M. (trans.) (1987), *Homer: The Iliad*, London: Penguin

- Homer (1987), *The Iliad*, trans. M. Hammond, London: Penguin
- James, H. (2007), *Shakespeare's Troy: Drama, politics, and the translation of empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Jordison, S. (2016), 'Achilles is brutal, vain, pitiless – and a true hero', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/feb/16/achilles-homer-iliad-brutal-vain-pitiless-hero>, accessed 11 April 2021
- McCann, H. and W. Monaghan (2019), *Queer Theory Now: From foundations to futures*, London: Macmillan Education UK, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=6234860>, accessed 08 February 2021
- Miller, M. (2011), *The Song of Achilles*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing
- Miller, M. (2019), 'Q&A with Madeline Miller', <http://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/>
- Miller, M. and H. Minkowich, (2012), 'The Song of Achilles: UCL interview', interview by Hamutal Minkowich, *UCL*, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/outreach/public-engagement/song-achilles>, accessed 14 April 2021, accessed 02/04/2021
- Morales, M. S. and L. Mariscal, (2003), 'The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus according to Chariton of Aphrodisias', *The Classical Quarterly*, 53 (1), 292–95., doi:10.1093/cq/53.1.292, accessed 09 April 2021
- Nagy, G. (2015). 'Oral traditions, written texts, and questions of authorship', in M. Fantuzzi and C. Tsagalis (eds), *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception: A companion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 59–77. *Cambridge e-book*: <https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO9780511998409>, accessed 27 September 2021
- Plato (1925), *Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Harvard: Harvard University Press

- Shakespeare, W. (2015), *Troilus and Cressida*, Arden Shakespeare revised edition, ed. D. Bevington, London: Bloomsbury
- Shay, J. (2003), *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*, New York: Scribner
- Sinfield, A. (2011), 'The leather men and the lovely boy: Reading positions in *Troilus and Cressida*', *Shakespeareer: A queer companion to the complete works of Shakespeare*, M. Menon (ed.), Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 376–84, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=1172298>, accessed 18 March 2021
- Strauss Clay, J. (2011), *Homer's Trojan Theater: Space, vision, and memory in the Iliad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, *Cambridge e-book*, <https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO9780511667022>, accessed 01 April 2021
- Train, L. (2018), 'BWW Review: TROILUS AND CRESSIDA, Royal Shakespeare Theatre', *Broadway World*, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/westend/article/BWW-Review-TROILUS-AND-CRESSIDA-Royal-Shakespeare-Theatre-20181019>, accessed 12 March 2021
- Train, L. (2015), 'US Supreme Court rules gay marriage is legal nationwide', *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-33290341>, accessed 12 April 2021
- Watson, N. (2021), 'Queer representation in literature: The Song of Achilles', *The Courier*, <https://www.thecourieronline.co.uk/queer-representation-in-literature-the-song-of-achilles/>, accessed 29 March 2021

Glossary

Apostrophe: A dramatic technique in which the narrator addresses a character or abstract concept.

Argives: Another name for the Greek soldiers.

Metalepsis: a figure of speech in which a word or a phrase from figurative speech is used in a new context.

Myrmidons: Achilles' soldiers.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Campion, J. S. (2022), 'Examining Patroclus' role in Homer's *The Iliad*, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and Miller's *The Song of Achilles*', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, <https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/884>. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.