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Works Cited

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The Song of Achilles

Quick Reference

About the Author: Madeline Miller graduated from Brown University with a degree in classics. She has taught classics in Pennsylvania and in Cambridge, Massachusetts. *The Song of Achilles*, her first novel, won the 2012 Orange Prize, an international award that celebrates excellence and originality in women's writing.

Author: Madeline Miller

Publisher: Ecco (New York). 384 pp.

Type of Work: Novel

Time Period: ca. twelfth century BCE

Locales: Greece and Asia Minor

First-time novelist and classics scholar Madeline Miller re-creates the story of the friendship between the Greek warriors Achilles and Patroclus and recounts their exploits in the Greeks' war against the Trojans first described in Homer's *Iliad*.

Principal personages:

Achilles, the greatest warrior of his generation and a leader in the Greek army at Troy

Patroclus, his childhood friend

Peleus, his father, King of Phthia

Thetis, his mother, a sea goddess

Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and leader of the Greek expedition to Troy

Odysseus, king of Ithaca and counselor to Agamemnon

Briseis, a Trojan woman captured by the Greeks in a raid outside Troy



(Courtesy of HarperCollins)

Essay

The publication of Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* to a chorus of highly favorable reviews is further evidence that literary tastes in the Western world continue to change as postmodern ideology explodes notions of the sacrosanct nature of the canon. Miller's novel is a modern retelling of what is often the first work listed among canonical texts: Homer's *Iliad* (ca. 750 BCE; English translation, 1611). Its place of primacy is understandable. Until the twentieth century, mastery of Greek and Latin was required in most European and American universities. Although study of classical languages has fallen out of favor, quoting from the *Iliad* and its companion epic, the *Odyssey* (ca. 725 BCE; English translation, 1614), even in translation, remains in some circles a sign that one possesses a truly first-rate literary education. Hence, anyone brash enough to attempt an adaptation, revision, or, worst yet, a modern retelling of these classics is likely to attract a horde of detractors who will argue vehemently that rewriting Homer equates with changing the Bible or the Qur'an.

Therefore, the lack of outrage over Miller's novel suggests much about modern sensibility. While it is certainly possible to locate negative critiques, such as Daniel Mendelsohn's in the *New York Times Book Review*, which catalogs what he considers a long list of flaws in Miller's novel, far more common are ones that praise Miller's ability to exercise exceptional creative imagination while remaining true to her source. One might say that Miller's task is made easier by having a ready-made plot. Nevertheless, her significant accomplishment in *The Song of Achilles* is to create from this material a new story in which more complex motivations (and ones more amenable to contemporary readers) drive the behavior of Homeric figures.

The desire to remain faithful to her source can be seen in the title Miller chooses for her story. *The Song of Achilles* is an obvious homage to its source. The *Iliad* opens with an invocation to the Muse for inspiration, in which Homer calls on her to sing of the wrath of Achilles, which led to countless woes for his Greek comrades in arms before the walls of Troy. Miller's novel, however, sings not of Achilles's wrath but of his love for Patroclus, the boy Achilles's father, Peleus, took into his home when both were about ten years old. The most significant structural differences between Homer's epic and Miller's novel are in the organization of the tale and the point of view from which events are narrated. Whereas Homer begins in medias res and fills in his backstory through flashbacks, Miller opts for a straight chronological recitation of events. More importantly, she relates the tale through the eyes of Patroclus. The combination of straightforward chronology and first-person narrative provides Miller significant room for invention, as the scant details of Achilles's friendship with Patroclus in Homer are fleshed and become the basis for explaining their behavior before and during the Trojan War.

Having taken major liberties in narrative form and point of view, Miller remains close to Homer's account of the siege of Troy, neither inventing characters (a great temptation for writers of historical novels and romances) nor revising radically the events Homer describes. She does make sharp delineations in many of the principal characters, however, heightening Achilles's sense of entitlement, creating a persona for Patroclus as an outsider given more to observation than action, and presenting Agamemnon, leader of the Greek expeditionary force, as a vain, greedy, and vindictive tyrant often more concerned about maintaining his stature and privileges than in carrying out a successful campaign against the Trojans. Her most important diversion from her Homeric source, however, is her presentation of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers — a relationship hinted at but never fully expressed in the *Iliad*. Miller is not the first to suggest that the two were more than lifelong friends and comrades in arms. Classical commentators have argued this position, and the presence (and toleration, or even celebration) of homosexuality in ancient Greece is well documented. By adopting this relationship as a given, Miller establishes a focal point around which her entire narrative turns. In Miller's competent hands, Homer's epic becomes a love story that has been compared favorably with William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (first published, 1597).

One of the joys in reading *The Song of Achilles* is in recognizing how Miller handles epic conventions. The long list of elements that characterize traditional epic poems is honored but not slavishly reproduced. The most obvious adaptation, of course, is Miller's transposition of Homer's long narrative poem into a modern novel that crosses genres between love story and war thriller. By following Homer's story closely, however, she preserves the focus on events of national importance and deals with figures of legendary significance. In Homer's day, the siege of Troy was the equivalent of a war world, and while three millennia have demonstrated that the battle was significant only for Mediterranean civilization, the tale retains its universal significance as one of courage and foolhardiness, self-sacrifice and selfishness, and tenderness and cruelty that have always marked human behavior in times of armed conflict. In place of flashbacks are a number of what might be called interpolated tales, inserted into the narrative to create a sense of dramatic irony and to foreshadow coming events.

Despite imposing what might be called a modern sensibility on Homer's story, Miller preserves several other conventions as well. Most controversial among them, perhaps, is her decision to treat the Greek gods and goddesses as Homer does. Powerful, meddling, proud, sometimes vindictive, these superhuman figures appear regularly and influence the action. In fact, Achilles's mother, Thetis, a sea nymph, is one of the principal villains — at least from Patroclus's point of view — spirited Achilles away when the Greek army is assembling for the siege (as she does in Homer) and hiding him among women in an out-of-the-way kingdom. She also cajoles her son to abandon his friendship with Patroclus, which she considers unseemly. There are brief descriptions of Achilles' armor, lists of warriors who are fighting

on both sides of the conflict, numerous prophesies and omens, and several formal (but not overly long) speeches. The macabre humor and biting wit that characterizes Homer's epics is provided in Miller's novel by Odysseus, a figure eerily reminiscent of a Mafia consigliere or an adviser in the court of England's Henry VIII.

One may not discover an abundance of epic similes, those extended comparisons that Homer loves to employ. Instead, Miller employs vivid sensory imagery to bring alive the action and emotions of which she writes. A few examples must suffice to give a sense of her keen eye for comparison. Patroclus describes his first erotic encounter as being "like a leap from a waterfall." Squirrels that emerge after winter are "whip-thin." The ship constructed to transport Achilles and his army to Troy is "sleek and slim as a knife point, meant to cut the sea"; its oars "fringed the boat like eyelashes." When Thetis delivers her message that the god Apollo is displeased with the Greeks, Patroclus says her words are "snapped off, like an owl biting through a bone." Viewing the battle before the walls of Troy from afar, Patroclus says the "glint of swords and armor is fish-scale beneath the sea." Throughout the narrative, recurrent images of light and brightness are used to describe Achilles — images that carry dual meaning, as he is both the most brilliant warrior in the Greeks' struggle against Troy, and the bright spot in Patroclus's life.

Epithets, used commonly by Homer to highlight a character's distinguishing characteristic, are less prevalent, but Miller makes liberal use of an important one, *Aristos Achaion* — the best of the Greeks — to describe Achilles. In a clever twist, the term takes on an air of irony when Achilles learns that the best of the Greeks will be killed within two years; while he and Patroclus assume this is a prophesy of Achilles's death, the reader realizes before either character does that the epithet can have more than one meaning. While both Patroclus and Achilles assume it refers to the greatest warrior, Miller makes clear that, in the moral sphere, Patroclus stands above all others. His death, a sacrifice made to help Achilles fulfill his destiny, solidifies his position as the moral center of the novel.

Of course, like her model, on occasion Miller nods. Aphorisms like Patroclus's observation on the fate of heroes, "they never let you be famous and happy," sound more like something from Ernest Hemingway than Homer. The slave girl Briseis, Achilles's prize for bravery in a raid against the Trojans, says of the Trojan leader Aeneas that he "is known to be a pious man." Students of the classics will immediately recognize this as the epithet the Roman poet Virgil uses to describe the hero of the *Aeneid* (ca. 29–19 BCE; English translation, 1553), another story that takes its inspiration from Homer. Unfortunately, Miller's readers may get the wrong idea about what it means to be "pious." One wishes she would have explained what the concept meant to the Greeks and Romans, since contemporary readers are likely to conjure up images of elderly people kneeling in church or reading their Bibles.

These seem like small faults, however, in a novel that brings to life familiar characters in a new way. A few classical purists may be bothered by what could be seen as a diminution of the heroic stature of Homer's figures, but it is more likely that *The Song of Achilles* will be an introduction for millions of contemporary readers to the story told in the *Iliad*. Additionally, it may be hard to ask a generation saturated in postmodern ideals to appreciate Homer's epics without some form of introduction. *The Song of Achilles* may do more than any set of class notes or crib sheet to give them a sense of what has made the *Iliad* a tale for the ages.

Essay by: Laurence W. Mazzeno,

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