Universidade do Minho
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The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller and
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Dissertação de Mestrado
Mestrado em Língua, Literatura e Cultura Inglesas

Trabalho efetuado sob a orientação da
Professora Doutora Margarida Isabel Esteves Silva Pereira
e da
Professora Doutora Maria Filomena Pereira Rodrigues Louro

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Releitura dos Clássicos: personagens LGBTQ+ em "O Canto de Aquiles" de Madeline Miller e o impacto das redes sociais na sua receção

RESUMO

Os Estudos de Receção Clássica exploram como os materiais gregos e romanos foram "transmitidos, traduzidos, extraídos, interpretados, reescritos e representados" (Hardwick & Stray, 2008, p.1). Os estudos analisam a trajetória do material clássico ao longo dos anos, e investigam as sociedades em que os materiais são recebidos. Investigam igualmente as obras que foram censuradas ou esquecidas, e questionam a prevalência de determinadas obras e prospeções.

Madeline Miller escreveu o célebre livro intitulado "O Canto de Aquiles", uma releitura da *Ilíada* através do ponto de vista de Pátroclo. A autora recorre ao material grego e romano para reescrever a história como um romance homossexual entre os heróis gregos. Quase uma década depois, o livro ganhou uma nova popularidade, graças à aplicação da rede social TikTok, especificamente a comunidade denominada "#BookTok". Na presente dissertação, será considerado como a autora recebeu, no âmbito dos Estudos de Receção, o material grego e romano, a sua perspetiva enquanto mulher a reescrever os clássicos, como as personagens LGBTQ+ foram representadas, e como tal influenciou a respetiva receção do livro. Adicionalmente, será analisada a importância da representação LGBTQ+ em termos de conteúdo visual e literário, e o impacto atual das redes sociais na receção do livro, bem como na generalidade da indústria literária.

Rereading the Classics: LGBTQ+ Characters in *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller and the Impact of Social Media on its Reception

ABSTRACT

Classical Reception Studies explore how the Greek and Roman materials have "been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented" (Hardwick & Stray, 2008, p.1). It examines the trajectory of Classical material throughout the years, as well as investigates the societies in which the materials were received. This area of expertise also researches the works that have been silenced or forgotten, and questions the reason for the survival of some works and perspectives over others.

Madeline Miller famously wrote *The Song of Achilles*, a reimagining of *The Iliad* through Patroclus's point of view. The author uses Greek and Roman material to rewrite the story as a homosexual romance between the Greek heroes. Almost a decade later, the book gained traction as the social media app TikTok, specifically the #BookTok community, gave rise to the new popularity of the book. In this dissertation, we will consider how the author received the Greek and Roman material, her perspective as a woman rewriting the Classics, the way the LGBTQ+ characters were represented, and how it affected its reception. Furthermore, we will analyse the importance of LGBTQ+ representation in visual and literary content, and the current impact of social media in the reception of the book, as well as in the literary industry in general.

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Introduction

This dissertation sought to understand the process of assembling the book *The Song of Achilles* as an LGBTQ+ rereading of one of the biggest literary works of the western world, *The Iliad*. Structurally, it is divided into three main parts titled: *The Song of Achilles* and Classical Reception Studies; *The Song of Achilles*: Rereading LGBTQ+ Classical Heroes; and The Current Impact of social media on *The Song of Achilles*.

Originally, the focal point of research was to understand the influence of intertextuality in the book *The Song of Achilles*. However, as we learned more about the ways in which Madeline Miller received the classical material, the aim changed from intertextuality to Classical Reception Studies. It is an area of study that examines the trajectory of classical material throughout the years, as well as it studies the societies in which the materials are received and the biases of those societies when analysing or silencing such works. This aspect is especially explored in the first section of this dissertation, where we make an introduction to Classical Reception Studies. We also examine the point of view of Miller as a woman in the classics and how this relates to the way she reimagined the Homeric work through Patroclus's perspective. Furthermore, we explore what the author did not receive from those sources, taking into account the implications of Miller's perspective as a twenty-first-century woman. The notion of what it means to be a hero has shifted, as much as of what it means to be a man. In this section, we focus on the aspects of gender expression and the critique of Miller's femininization of Patroclus. This critique is questioned through the lens of the meaning of masculinity itself, through Showalter's gender theory as well as Sussman's. Afterward, we delve into the inherent importance of women's perspective on the revisions of the classics. This is explored through the lens of not only Miller but also Pat Barker, Margaret Atwood, and Emily Wilson. Through the perspective of these women, we can also have a larger scope of outlooks on the classics, which inherently enriches the dialogue around them. This aspect is analysed through the way in which by revisioning the classics, women, and minorities are adding new perspectives. We draw on Adrienne Rich and Sarah Pomeroy's point of view that it is through revisioning that women are able to regain power and understand the structures that took it away in a male-dominated society.

The second section is titled "*The Song of Achilles:* Reimagining LGBTQ+ Classical Heroes". The way Miller represents Achilles and Patroclus's relationship is explored, especially regarding how Miller depicts the development of a tender relationship between two men that did not revolve solely around their sexuality and, thus, gave space for their development as individuals in the same way

a heterosexual love-story would. Later, other reimagined retellings of the heroes' lives were analysed, specifically Wolfgang Peterson's 2004 movie *Troy* and David Farr's 2018 series *Troy: The Fall of a City*. The main point of this section focuses on the value of well-done LGBTQ+ representation. We explore the importance of LGBTQ+ representation both in literary and visual media, as well as the concept of prejudice by Gordon Allport, and its correlation to ignorance. We take a look into the ways in which homophobia and heterosexism structurally impact the lives of LGBTQ+ people and how LGBTQ+ representation could be a way to combat it. Coming back to Gordon Allport, we introduced his *Intergroup Contact Theory*, which predicts that through interpersonal contact with minorities, it is possible to reduce prejudice, since it is rooted in unfamiliarity regarding said minorities. Nevertheless, we saw how this theory put in danger the minorities and how their representation would suffice. This was shown through *the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis*. The theory was developed by Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. and predicts that there is a correlation between having positive exposure to queer characters on television and a more positive attitude towards queer people. Furthermore, in this dissertation, the same is argued concerning literary works.

In the last section, we focus more on the impact of social media on the literary industry and its correlation with the novel *The Song of Achilles*. This was one of the initial instigators of research in this dissertation. The app TikTok and its sub-community have been the main factor in the resurgence of the popularity of older books. The addictive nature of the app, in addition to the global pandemic, increased the practice of reading among users. Miller's novel resurgence in popularity almost after a decade it was published is investigated as well as its correlation to the TikTok app, especially the #BookTok community. Finally, we try to understand its effect on the reception of Miller's novel as well as in the literary industry in general.

I.   *The Song of Achilles* and Classical Reception Studies

1. Classical Reception Studies: An Introduction

Lorna Hardwick defines Reception Studies as "the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented" (Hardwick & Stray, 2008, p.1). It is a "continuous dialogue between the past and the present and also requires some 'lateral' dialogue in which crossing boundaries of place or language or genre is as important as crossing those of time." (Hardwick, 2003, p.4). Consequently, reception studies examine the bonds and ways by which a text or work of art has navigated through cultural developments and how it can be read, shaped, and appropriated in this continuous dialogue between the "ancient" and the "modern" (Hardwick, 2003). As Hardwick puts it, "this kind of study has proved valuable in that it has enabled people to distinguish more readily between the ancient texts, ideas and values and those of the societies that appropriated them" (Hardwick, 2003, p.3).

Ancient societies, however, were far from perfect, especially regarding slavery and sexism; therefore, the re-appropriation or re-figuration of these values has been the fuel of some of the totalitarian agenda, which is one of the negative aspects and concerns of reception studies. These aspects are part of the focus of the analysis of this area, as well as the other contextual selective ways in which an ancient work of art or text could be appropriated regarding a more progressive and modern point of view (Hardwick, 2003). Thus, "Reception studies, (...) are concerned not only with individual texts and their relationship with one another but also with the broader cultural processes which shape and make up those relationships" (Hardwick, 2003, p.5). They can take into consideration not only the historical context of the original classical text or work of art but also recognize the value it holds in modern generations, blending the "ancient" and the "modern" in the "lateral dialogue" mentioned by Hardwick.

It is an area of study in which present and past tense are intrinsically connected through the ever-changing ways in which a classical text can be seen, read, and re-imagined (Hardwick, 2003). According to Hardwick, Classical reception studies are not only focused on the receiving society, but also on the aspects of the ancient source that have been silenced, disregarded, or forgotten and especially why this source has been marginalized. This makes the "dialogue between the past and present" (Hardwick, 2003, p.4) boundless, as the ancient texts get questioned through continuously changing points of view. This area also entails a

> [C]ross-disciplinary exchange and debates at the interface between subjects. It
> therefore welcomes submissions from researchers in Archaeology, Architecture, Art

History, Comparative Literature, Film, Intellectual History, History of Scholarship, Political Science, Theatre Studies and Translation Studies as well as from those in Classics and Ancient History. (*Classical Receptions Journal,* n.d.)

The abundance of areas of expertise that can analyse the reception gives classical reception studies an extensive and therefore limitless range regarding the new mediums and ways in which it can be regarded.

Coming back to Hardwick's *Reception Studies*, it is important to note "how reception is described, analysed and evaluated" (Hardwick, 2003, p. 5) since "[n]o description is neutral and the forms, concepts, and categories used by reception critics need clearly to indicate the extent to which they are using ancient categories to analyse and judge modern receptions." (Hardwick, 2003, p. 5). According to Lorna Hardwick, this means that the cultural politics of the appropriations and re-figurations of the ancient sources need to be understood, as there will always be a bias regarding the situation in which they are received. Understanding that how the reception of the artwork is made is a considerable sign of cultural transformation (Hardwick, 2003).

Equally, reception studies at all periods have been shaped by current conceptual and theoretical frameworks that shape and define 'knowledge'. Trends in modern literary and cultural theory, for instance, have stressed ambivalence and indeterminacy in the meaning attributed to texts, and disjunction and fissure in what might earlier have been seen as broader cultural certainties. (Hardwick, 2003, pp.5-6)

Three major influences have shaped classical receptions studies as we know them today. The first happened in the 1960s, as Hans Robert Jauss developed "Rezeptions-äesthetik" (or "aesthetics of reception"), a theory that stated that in order to examine an artwork, one needs to analyse the interaction between the producer and the consumer of said artwork. Therefore, to fully understand a work of art, according to Jauss, it was necessary not only to describe and examine the production of the artwork, but also its reception (Hardwick, 2003). As Hardwick describes it,

To frame this dialogue Jauss used the notion of a 'horizon of expectation'. Jauss's adaptation of the concept focused on a horizon of experience of life and thus rooted the receiver's mind-set in his or her social and cultural context. This was what could be said to shape expectations and interpretations of texts. (Hardwick, 2003, pp.7-8)

The second major influence was made by Wolfgang Iser, according to Lorna Hardwick, in the 1970s, and it focused on the reader-response regarding a literary artwork by the "actual" reader

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as well as the "implied" reader (the reader imagined as the target audience for the text). The third one was unintentionally made by Hans-Georg Gadamer and it was about the meaning attributed to a text and its unessential aspect. In other words, the true meaning of a text is shaped by the historical influence of the resulting receptions. Therefore, we can understand that the apparent "neutral" critique of ancient texts was most certainly shaped by the atmosphere in which said critique or reading was made. That atmosphere could have been shaped by either social or political concerns at the time, which, in turn, moulded the way in which one accredited the meaning of the said text, making its true meaning obsolete (Hardwick, 2003).

In short, classical reception studies deal with the methods involved in the reproduction, selection, and adaptation of classical works. As a result, it analyses the way an artist receives an ancient work and how they reconfigure said work through their lens. It also deals with the context in which this process takes place considering the ways outside the ancient source that contribute to its reception. Finally, it deals with the purpose or role of the new work and the ideas or values that were appropriated (Hardwick, 2003).

2. How Madeline Miller Received the Myth Proceeding the Trojan War in The Song of Achilles

One might be tempted to understand the reasoning behind Miller's choice of depicting the Greek myth, especially the one of the Trojan War. The author answers this question in her personal blog. In the Reader's Guide section of her blog, she introduces the reader to her first interactions with the Homeric text, and thus what made her turn to *The Iliad* for inspiration:

> I have loved ancient Greece since I was five and my mother began reading me the Greek myths. I was enthralled: by the larger-than-life gods, the epic adventures, and most particularly by the stories of the Trojan War, with its noble and deeply flawed heroes. "Sing, goddess, of the terrible rage of Achilles," begins *The Iliad*. The words resonated in me, lingering long after my mother had closed the book and turned out the light. (Miller, n.d.-b)[1]

Then, she immediately goes on to clarify why she turned to Patroclus's side of the story, explaining her curiosity regarding this character:

> Years later, when I became a student of Greek and Latin, I immediately sought out The Iliad. Achilles' story was just as gripping as it had always been, and I found myself particularly moved by his desperate grief over the loss of his companion Patroclus. Patroclus is no more than a minor character in *The Iliad*, yet Achilles mourns him with a shocking intensity, unlike anything else in the entire work. Why? Who is this man whose death could undo the mighty Achilles? The answers I found—about Patroclus' exile, his compassion and loyalty, his courageous and gentle heart—eventually became *The Song of Achilles*. (Miller, n.d.-b)

Afterwards, she explains the background of the myth of the Trojan War. Although it might not be essential to the reading of the novel, it is, nevertheless, a great bonus to understand the ramifications that her novel's characters deal with throughout the story. As she states, "The story of the Trojan war begins with the wedding of the mortal Peleus and the sea nymph Thetis." (Miller, n.d.-b) and the apple that destroyed the city of Troy. The following overview presents the basic mythology that precedes the book.

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[1] This is taken from Madeline Miller's personal blog and its reference is detailed more in-depth in the bibliography section.

a. The Myth preceding the Trojan War

Greek mythology is undoubtedly very rich and the story of Troy – the city that rose and fell twice – is one that is still talking about to this day[2]. To better comprehend what happens in the book *The Song of Achilles*, it is necessary to understand the intertextual aspects that Madeline Miller picked from the original text, *The Iliad*. However, it is also necessary to underpin the major ones that the author did not or those that were inferred in the text. In this section, the backstory and myth of *The Iliad* and, more importantly, *The Song of Achilles* will be explored.

The battle of Troy is a subject of major discussion. On one hand, we had the patron gods of the city: Ares, Artemis, Apollo, and Aphrodite. On the other, we had the patrons that defended the Greeks: Hera, Athena, Thetis, and Hephaestus. It is important to understand why some of these Gods were on either side to get a grasp of their actions in Madeline Miller's adaptation of the myth.

Firstly, we need to bear in mind that the walls of Troy were built by the Gods Apollo and Poseidon. They were sentenced by Zeus to work for Laomedon due to their disobedience to the God of thunder. Nevertheless, when their job was finished, Laomedon did not pay them. This made the Gods understandably angry. Apollo shot plague arrows into the city and made at least one member of every family ill with the deadly disease. Poseidon sent a sea monster, blocking the shipping and trading that maintained the city's prosperity. The population was justifiably unsatisfied with the situation and demanded a solution. In true Greek fashion, the answer was to sacrifice the daughter of the king, Hesione. Meanwhile, Heracles and his followers arrived at Troy from his Ninth Labour[3]. The hero helped the king, killing the sea monster and saving Hesione. However, once again when it was time for Laomedon to pay, he refused. This infuriated Heracles, who promised revenge. When Heracles returned to Troy from his mission (The Twelve Labours), he and his followers slaughtered all the sons of the king – except one. The youngest son of Laomedon escaped because Heracles's closest friend, Telamon, became infatuated with Hesione. Hence, when she asked to buy her

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[2] Although there are many retellings and adaptations of the Greek myth, therefore making pinpointing the right source impossible, this quick summary of the myth will be done according to Stephen Fry's Troy.

[3] The Labours of Heracles happened because of the jealously of the Goddess Hera, regarding Heracles. Her hatred for the hero propelled her to create a delusion in which he thought that his children were demons and his wife, Megara, was a dragon, which he promptly killed without knowing. The hero was overpowered by grief, but in order to meet his wife and kids in the underworld, he needed to be purified. However, when he went to the oracle, Hera tricked him again, by speaking through the body of the priest and told him that he needs to serve for ten years without questioning or complaining in order for him to be free. Therefore, Heracles was left to serve Eurystheus for those ten years, without payment. The labours were the following: The Nemean Lion; the lernaean hydra; the ceryneian hind; the erymanthian boar; the augean stables; the stymphalian birds; the cretan bull; the mares of Diomedes; the girdle of Hippolyta; the cattle of Geryon; the golden apples of the Hesperides; Cerberus (Fry, 2018).

brother's freedom from Heracles, Telamon convinced him to accept it. The prince was called Podarces, however – after this incident – he became known as Priam, the one who was bought (Fry, 2020).

Priam became a great ruler of Troy, successfully rebuilding its economy. He married Hecuba, who gave him his firstborn, Hector. A year later, the queen became pregnant once more; however, this pregnancy seemed cursed. While pregnant, the queen had a dream of giving birth not to a child, but to a torch that burned the entire city of Troy. The priests told her that this was a bad omen and meant that the child would burn the city to the ground, thus, the appropriate course of action should be infanticide. When the boy was born, they gave him away to Agelaus, the chief Herdsman, for him to kill the baby. Nevertheless, the boy was very beautiful, which prevented the herdsman to do it as well. Instead, Agelaus raised him outside of the city. The boy, Paris, grew up with a simple life, adoring nature in general, but especially his bull. He was so proud of his bull that he said that even the gods did not have a bull as beautiful. This infuriated Ares and Hermes, as the Gods were known to have a fragile ego. Hermes planned a prank for the herdsman who dared to defy the Gods. Hermes – disguised as another herdsman – appeared to Paris, while he was sleeping in a field and asked him about the bull with the matchless beauty. Paris showed him the bull and Hermes showed him his (which is to say, Ares in a bull form). Paris was speechless and marvelled at Ares, the bull. He admitted instantly that he was wrong. Hermes valued that honesty, which would become very valuable and, at the same time, detrimental, in the near future (Fry, 2020).

In the meantime, on the Greek side, there is Peleus. He was the grandson of Zeus and Chiron and the son of Aealus and Endeis. He was the brother of Telamon and later the half-brother of Phocus, who was the product of Aealus infidelity with a sea nymph, Psmathe. Endeis, as well as her children, were jealous of Phocus. The envy resulted in a stone-throwing "accident" caused by Peleus and Telamon that killed Phocus. The brothers were sentenced to exile (Fry, 2020).

The place where Peleus was exiled had a curious story. Like many other times, Hera was displeased with Zeus's cheating and proceeded to get her revenge on the product of the betrayal, Aeacus. She sent a plague to the island, killing everyone except him. Feeling lonely, he asked his father for help. He asked Zeus to send him as many people as there were ants in the tree he was laying against. Zeus answered him by transforming the ants into people. They became the Myrmidons since the word for ants in Greek is myrmex. After a while, the myrmidons went to Phthia, where Eurytion was king. Eurytion welcomed Peleus into his kingdom, cleansing him of his sins. The king offered his daughter's, Antigone, hand in marriage. However, Peleus killed Eurytion

accidentally and was, once again, exiled. This time it is king Acastus who cleanses Peleus of his sins. However, in another twist of fate, the king's wife, Astydemeia, falls in love with Peleus, although he does not reciprocate. Offended, the queen sends a message to Antigone and tells her that her husband had been unfaithful to her, resulting in Antigone's subsequent suicide. Still not satisfied, Astydemeia goes even further and tells her husband, king Acastus, that Peleus tried to seduce her. This makes the king furious and ready to kill Peleus; however, since he was the grandson of Zeus, Acastus had to make the murder seem like an accident. He planned to go hunting with Peleus and when he fell asleep in the field, Acastus would take his sword away, leaving him to fend for himself through the night, in a place inhabited by lethal centaurs. Nevertheless, as it was previously stated, Peleus's other grandfather was Chiron. Therefore, the king's plan did not go accordingly because Chiron saved him. He told Peleus what Astydemeia did and in turn, Peleus was outraged to the point of going back to Phtia and killing Acastus. Instead of staying there, Peleus decided to go with his grandfather to his cave and learn from him as Jason and Asclepius had done in the past (Fry, 2020).

It was during that time in the cave that Peleus admitted to Chiron that he had become infatuated with a Nereid he had met during the Golden Fleece. The Nereid was Thetis and Chiron told him about her curse. It was said that her son would eclipse his father and become a greater hero. Since he was a mortal, this did not faze Peleus and rather made him more interested in her. With that said, Chiron advised Peleus to possess her firstly, trapping her into marriage. As a Nereid, Thetis could shapeshift, therefore, Chiron told Peleus that to possess her, he should hold on to her as she shapeshifted until she became tired, and only then, could he rape her. Peleus did exactly what he was told, and Thetis was tricked into marrying him. Thetis's marriage was great news to the Olympian Gods who had been infatuated with her at some point or another. Since they were afraid of her curse and what it could mean for a God to have a son stronger than them especially after seeing what happened to Cronus and his subsequent downfall. Consequently, when they heard of Peleus, they were relieved, because since he was a mortal, it was less threatening for his son to be better than him. Chiron organized the marriage in his cave, inviting all the Gods, except one. The uninvited Goddess was Eris, the Goddess of strife, feuding, discord, and disarray. One could say that this mistake was what eventually caused the fall of Troy (Fry, 2020).

As a way to avenge her lack of invitation, Eris, the Goddess of feuds, caused exactly what she was known for. She appeared at the reception, gave Zeus a golden apple, and left. In it, it was written "To the Fairest" which left Zeus in the complicated situation of having to choose to whom

he should offer the apple. Trying to save his father from such a choice, Hermes had the idea of bringing the honest herdsman that was so proud of his bull. Thus, Paris comes back to the story. He is forced to choose between the three Goddesses: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. Each offered him something if they were to be chosen. Hera told him that if she were to get the apple, she would give him power and sovereignty over all people and ultimately make him an emperor. Athena offered him wisdom. Yet, when it was Aphrodite's turn, she showed him the face of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, Helen[4]. She promised her as his wife and Paris offered Aphrodite the apple (Fry, 2020). At the end of the "historical background" entree on Miller's blog, it reads,

> The rest is (mythological) history. Paris chooses Aphrodite and she in turn helps him steal Helen from her husband Menelaus, thus starting the Trojan War. She also becomes his personal protector, and in *The Iliad,* it is she and the god Apollo who are Troy's staunchest defenders. The other two goddesses declare their eternal enmity towards Troy and, joined by the sea-God Poseidon, conspire to aid the Greeks in destroying the city. Meanwhile, the now-wedded Thetis becomes pregnant by Peleus. The child is Achilles, who will grow up to play his own part in the war against Troy. (Miller, n.d.-b)

These aspects of the myth impacted the way Madeline Miller told the story of *The Song of Achilles*, considering the chain reaction it has in the narrative. For example, knowing that Apollo built the walls of Troy helps us understand why he was so protective of them and therefore, why the god eventually killed Patroclus while he was climbing it. Another aspect of the myth that has repercussions in the story is the one of Peleus's exiles. Understanding that in the myth Peleus was exiled not once but twice, makes us realize why he gives shelter to many exiled children, including Patroclus. One can therefore comprehend something that influenced greatly Patroclus's childhood and death, by being aware of the Greek myth.

A different aspect of the myth that has a great impact on the main character and plot is Thetis's assault. This aspect of the myth is told in the novel, and it can be later concluded that it was Thetis herself who told Patroclus what had happened. The retelling of the event makes the author's opinion on the matter very clear. She gives a 21st-century perspective on rape, albeit

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[4] Helen was the daughter of Leda and Zeus. Leda had two set of twins, one set were the children of Zeus: Helen and Polydeuces (Pollux) and the other were the children of the king which she was married to, Tyndareus, which were: Clytemnestra and Castor. However, all of them were raised as if they were the children of Tyndareus (Fry, 2020).

remaining in Patroclus's point of view. The way Miller retells the rape is done with sarcasm, especially when characterizing Peleus. He "was a pious and obedient man and did all that the gods had instructed him to do" (Miller, 2021, p.18), she wrote regarding the instructions the Gods gave him to force himself on her:

> They warned him too, of what would come once he had caught her: for the nymph Thetis was wily, like her father Proteus, the slippery old man of the sea, and she knew how to make her skin flow into a thousand different shapes of fur and feather and flesh. And though beaks and claws and teeth and coils and stinging tails would flay him, still Peleus must not let her go. (Miller, 2021, p.18)

The cynicism with which the author describes Peleus is noticeable, especially evident in her use of the adjectives "pious" and "obedient". According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, in its online version, "pious" means "marked by or showing reverence for deity and devotion to divine worship" (Merriam-Webster, 2023a). The author uses positive adjectives in order to portray the opposite, especially considering that raping a Nereid makes him anything but pious as he is not showing reverence nor devotion for her as a deity. Additionally, the author uses the word "obedient" to portray the supposed lack of accountability that Peleus had in his actions. Going back to Merriam-Webster's online version, obedient means "submissive to the restraint or command of authority: willing to obey" (Merriam-Webster, 2023b), which, in contrast to the actions of an aggressor, makes very little sense. Although Thetis was clearly against his actions, and he did not obey her wishes. The description of the assault portrays the tragic way in which she tried to fight and how she realized that the moment she did not consent to would change her life forever. Miller does not spare the details of the blood shed by Thetis and the aftermath, in which after being assaulted, she was forced to marry the assaulter and repeat this traumatic experience for a year. The author describes that year as a duty and how Thetis became "silent, unresponsive and sullen. [When Peleus] clasped her, she did not bother to writhe and twist in protest. Instead she lay stiff and silent, damp and chilled as an old fish" (Miller, 2021, p.18). The author shows how Thetis loses her will to fight against him, creating a sense of depersonalization regarding the assault and even the marriage. The expression "served her time" (Miller, 2021, p.18) is used, equating her marriage to Peleus to time in prison. Additionally, the way she was reduced from a nymph to an old fish, can also illustrate how degraded she felt. In an interview with the BBC Book Club, Miller explains how Thetis was:

In the world of the gods, she's actually nothing. She's a nymph, which means she has very, very little power. And so even though she's so frightening to Patroclus. You know, she spends all her time trying to save her son's life and she still fails. (...) she actually has a very tragic story leading up to that because originally Zeus had wanted to have a child with her. And of course, she isn't consulted about any of this. But there's a prophecy about her that her son will be greater than his father. And Zeus(...) insist[s] that she marr[ies] a mortal (...). (Naughtie, 2018, 07:30- 08:30)

This depiction of the trauma experienced by Thetis has an impact on the overall story considering that it explains her reasoning for hating mortals given that she equates Peleus with "his dirty, mortal, mediocrity" (Miller, 2021, p.19). The word "mortal" is a very important aspect of this description, and we can perceive that later in the story, it is the main reason why she hates and opposes her son's relationship with Patroclus. She does not want her golden son to be stained by the mortality and mediocrity of Patroclus the way she was by Peleus. This is made very clear when at the end, she tells Patroclus that Achilles's connection to Peleus "shackled" (Miller, 2021, p.350) his potential.

Concerning Peleus, we can detect the emphasis on the greatness of his future son in contrast with him in the myth. In the book, however, the comparison between father and son is not so much explored, but there are snippets that give the reader a sense that Achilles is, as it was prophesied, better than his father even before his presence at Troy "[Peleus] did not look like a man who could have conquered a goddess or produced such a child as Achilles" (Miller, 2021, p.28). Notwithstanding, from Patroclus's point of view, Achilles seems to be better than everyone around him, especially in contrast to Patroclus as a child. During their time at Peleus's castle, Patroclus feels inferior to Achilles due to jealousy and because of his environment in the previous dysfunctional household. This aspect of the adaptation of the myth adapted in the novel makes sense since it is Patroclus narrating the story. He is a product of the constant feeling of ineptitude in his upbringing, therefore, it is natural for him to compare himself to Achilles just like his father did. Thus, it is understandable why the author did not put so much emphasis on Achilles's greatness in contrast with his father, but in contrast to Patroclus, as the narrative is done through him.

Another matter that Madeline Miller adapted from the Greek myth to her version of the story was the episode of Chiron and the learning journey at his cave. As previously stated, Chiron is mythologically equated with the learning journey of Jason, Asclepios, and Peleus (Fry, 2018). He is known for his wisdom in hunting, medicine, and music (especially the lyre) archery, having learned

it from Artemis and Apollo (Fry, 2018). We can observe this aspect of the Greek myth adapted through Miller's depiction of Chiron's rose quartz cave on Mount Pelion. The boys spend there most of their early adolescence, learning as the previous heroes had in the myth. However, nothing is said in the myth about the rose quartz aspect of the cave. The rose quartz crystal is known for its love properties which might have been the symbolism for how Achilles and Patroclus started their journey as a couple there. Mount Pelion also symbolizes a certain parallelism between the Greek myth of Peleus and Thetis, and Achilles and Patroclus. Both Peleus and Achilles consummated in one way or another their love for someone they thought was out of reach. Peleus raped Thetis and Achilles had his first sexual encounter with Patroclus. A distinction is made between the beautiful description of the consensual sexual act between the two boys and Peleus's rape of Thetis. Putting both of these acts side by side, we can observe Madeline Miller's way of trying to naturalise the homosexual relationship, portraying what was naturalised and should not (the rape) side by side with what has taken so long to be naturalised (consensual homosexual love) and should be.

Regarding the fall of Troy in the book and the impact that the myth had on it, it is noticeable that the myth built within itself various prophecies and a clear portrayal of the city's fall ever since Hecuba's pregnancy with Paris. Moreover, it is interesting that at the wedding, the only God that was not invited was Eris, the goddess of discord and feuds, which was what ultimately started and ended the war. The author does not mention the premonitions of the fall of the city, since the narrator is quite unaware of his surroundings considering that he was isolated with Achilles in Chiron's cave for most of his tweenhood, and before that, he had spent his childhood in a dysfunctional household. Therefore, it makes sense that he does not know these things, however, we can spot the repercussions of the myth in the book, especially regarding the deaths caused by Paris and the feuds foreshadowed in the wedding by Eris. Likewise, it becomes clear why Aphrodite protects and defends Paris throughout the story since his sense of entitlement regarding Helen is her fault.

All these things are absent in the storyline of *The Song of Achilles*; however, they are very much present in the ramifications of the plot, especially during the second half of the novel and their time at war.

Finally, we can see that the author was clearly knowledgeable of and influenced by all the myths regarding the background of *The Iliad*, using aspects of the myth or their repercussions on the story of either *The Iliad* or *The Song of Achilles*. As the narrator is a relatively minor character in *The Iliad*, it was easier for the author to adapt and ignore the aspects of the myth that he did not

know. Additionally, considering that the narrator is oblivious to the background and the myth, those are presented to him and consequently to the reader - a person who may or may not be familiar with the Greek myth. Thus, it becomes more appealing to a vaster audience seeing that it does not alienate a reader who has no previous knowledge of the myth. This aspect of the novel broadens the target audience of the book, while simultaneously teaching them about such an important piece of literature for western civilization.

3. Classical Reception: How Madeline Miller Received the Greek and Roman Material in The Song of Achilles

As seen previously, Reception Studies portray how Greek and Roman material is transmitted, rewritten, and re-imaged (Hardwick & Stray, 2008,p.1). In this section, we are going to look at how Madeline Miller received said Greek and Roman material, and how she re-imagined and rewrote it into her novel, *The Song of Achilles* thus transmitting this new version of the classical work. We have already concluded that *The Iliad* was a great source of inspiration for the author; however, in this section, we are going to see what were the other sources she used, in her own "continuous dialogue between the past and the present" (Hardwick, 2003, p.4). Firstly, we will consider what the author has stated as her sources of inspiration while writing the book, in interviews, and on her blog.

Miller names various culprits when asked about what made her write the novel. She mentions that "many seeds grew to make [the] book", mentioning "[her] mother reading myths to [Miller] as a child. The teacher who taught [her] Greek. An independent LGBTQ+ bookstore near [her] house in Philadelphia called Giovanni's Room." (Miller, 2021, p. IX). Since Madeline has been interested in the classical world ever since she was a child, learning Greek and Latin and the classical material, even spending a summer in Greece on an archaeological dig and traveling around the islands, the author already had an advantage before even starting the novel. However, when asked to pinpoint the moment when Miller started to write the novel, she identifies writing her thesis, which entailed the depiction of "the way that modern scholarship discussed the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, labelling them 'good friends'" (Miller, 2021, p. IX). It was at that point that the author came to learn more about Patroclus's lover and became frustrated by the dismissal of their romantic relationship throughout the years. In her words,

> I'd read Plato's Symposium, where Achilles and Patroclus are not just presented as lovers, but the ideal romantic relationship. I knew that interpreting their relationship as romantic was a very old idea, and I was angry at the way homophobia was erasing this reading. (Miller, 2021, p. IX)

During this time, Miller was called to direct the play *Troilus and Cressida*, written by Shakespeare. In it, the erasure of Patroclus and Achilles as lovers was no longer an issue, as in Shakespeare's work, there is a strong tendency to read them as such. According to Miller directing this play made her understand that

[she]'d always loved talking about these old stories, but for the first time, [she] was part of telling them myself. [She] realised that the things [she] wanted to say about Achilles and Patroclus weren't a master's thesis after all. They were a novel. (Miller, 2021, p. X)

Therefore, she merged her passion for the classic material, her knowledge of the story of Achilles, her anger about the lack of representation of a romantic reading, and her love for writing, resulting in the novel.

Nevertheless, Miller did all of this in secret due to the legacy of gatekeeping of the classics by white heterosexual cis-gendered men. She has been open about her fears while writing the novel, only telling her Greek professor about the manuscript when it was ready (something that took her a decade). "I was afraid people would say I was desecrating Homer," (Alter, 2012) said Miller about her fears of backlash when writing the novel, especially regarding her peers in classical academia. In her words:

I feared that my classics peers and professors would hate the idea. There is a long history of gatekeeping in classics. Attempts to expand the lens of scholarship have sometimes been met with open hostility, and women and scholars of colour have been undermined and belittled. One of my professors had started his course with the following salvo: "This is a class on Greek history, so I don't want to hear any questions about women or slaves. (Miller, 2021, p. X)

However, Miller persevered because she wanted to write for the people who might be inspired by the story and take refuge in it, just like she did in books when she was young. In her words "I wanted this story to be for everyone, whether they knew classics or not, maybe even especially if they didn't." (Miller, 2021, p. XI) and this sentiment is felt throughout her novel, as it was heretofore mentioned. The myth and the story of Troy are told in a way that does not exclude a reader that might not be familiar with the story. The author explains the aspects through the lens of Patroclus, while he is learning them, which in turn, accomplishes the author's intention. Nevertheless, all of Madeline Miller's fears did not come to fruition and she stated that there were significantly fewer people who criticized her work than expected and most of the classic community supported her.

When asked about the aspects the author has taken from *The Iliad*, she answers in her blog:

It was very important to [her] to stay faithful to the events of Homer's narrative. (...) The biggest changes to the mythology came with the stories about Achilles' life before he came to Troy, which *The Iliad* doesn't cover. There are many, many variations on these, so part of what [she] was doing was figuring out which ones added to the novel's arc, and which ones [she] should omit. (Miller, n.d.-a)

Therefore, we can infer that the major plot points of *The Iliad* are retold in her book, especially the ones that are pertinent to Patroclus's point of view. The aspects omitted from the narrative are generally related to what the main character knew and those he had no way of knowing. The author also stated that:

The central inspiration behind the book is the terrible moment in *The Iliad* when Achilles hears about Patroclus' death. His reaction is shocking in its intensity. The great half-god warrior—who carelessly defies rules, and condemns a whole army to death—comes completely unglued, desperate with grief and rage. (Miller, n.d.-a)

This shocking moment made her search for references to Patroclus and in this book, she tried to understand what made a demigod have such an extreme reaction, especially regarding a secondary character. Therefore, the addition of Patroclus's post-mortem narration was important to explore the aftermath of Achilles's suicidal rage.

Nevertheless, the main plots of the Homeric narrative are followed, since both Achilles and Patroclus are absent from the main action of *The Iliad* (again because Achilles' wrath made him abstain from the war) it gave Miller a leeway to go beyond Homer, describing the events before and after *The Iliad*. The main events of *The Iliad* only start in the twenty-fifth chapter of the book. As the author stated: "I saw myself as providing the connective tissue between Homer's bones. Homer tells us the end of Patroclus' life, but I wanted to tell the beginning" (Ciabattari, 2017). And she not only told the beginning, but all of it, giving the character of Patroclus a nuanced personality, achieved by the proximity that first-person narration brings to the reader.

We can therefore ask the question: what part of *The Song of Achilles* did not have its reception from *The Iliad*? And where did the author receive it from?

The author noted that *The Iliad* had within itself the "spaciousness" (Starkston, 2012) that gathered room for so many adaptations. She believes that this openness correlates with the oral origin of Homer's work. In her opinion "by comparison that Roman poet Virgil is every bit as brilliant as Homer, but his lines fit so deliberately and snugly together it would be harder to find a space to

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write back to them" (Starkston, 2012). Yet, this did not stop her from taking inspiration from Virgil, as well as Plato, Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Sappho, Ovid, Apollodorus, and Shakespeare (Ciabattari, 2017).

Coming back to Miller's blog, especially regarding the Q&A section, when asked 'Q.: Most people don't know that much about Patroclus and his relationship with Achilles. How did you come up with your theory that their friendship grew into love?" (Miller, n.d.-a) Miller answers candidly that she "stole it from Plato!" (Miller, n.d.-a). The author is referring to Plato's *Symposium* where Achilles and Patroclus were discussed not only as lovers but as the ideal romantic relationship. The debate was related to who was the erastes and who was the eromenos, not if they were lovers or not, as it is today[5]. Phaedrus asserted that their bond was recognized since Achilles sacrificed himself in battle for him. He defended that Achilles and Patroclus's relationship was blessed as

> He uses the ultimate proof: the act is noble because the gods honor it. He tells his listeners that Achilles, after dying, was sent to live on the island of the blessed (...) Furthermore, Phaedrus states that Achilles was honored even above Alcestis, which implies that, though both are honorable, a man's sacrifice for his male lover is greater than a woman's sacrifice for her husband. (Barnes, 2014, p.20)

And this tradition of seeing the heroes as lovers was a popular concept: "[t]hat Aeschines can so confidently assume that Achilles and Patroclus' erotic relationship will be a key point in Demosthenes's argument is testament to how popular the concept was" (Barnes, 2014, p.23). Phaedrus criticized Aeschylus for portraying Achilles as the erastes and Patroclus as the eromenos[6]. This is related to Aeschylus's play *The Myrmidon* or *Achilleis*, which sadly did not survive in its entirety, but in which he displays Patroclus and Achilles as lovers and mentions "frequent kisses" between the Homeric heroes. According to Kaitlyn Barnes in *Beyond Pederasty,*

> The versions of the relationship after *The Iliad* that have been preserved for modern readers are widely varied: Achilles as Patroclus' eromenos in the Symposium, Achilles as Patroclus' erastes in Aeschylus' trilogy, Achilles and Patroclus as equals

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[5] It must be noted that this was not accepted by everyone, since neither Socrates nor Xenophon saw Patroclus and Achilles as anything more than friends.

[6] The pederastic model argued that an older man (erastes) would mentor a younger and beautiful one (eromenos). It was mainly sexual.

inAeschines' speech, and Achilles and Patroclus as nothing more than comrades as
Xenophon asserts in his own Symposium. (Barnes, 2014, p.27)

Aeschylus and his display of "frequent kisses" are also mentioned several times by Miller as a source of inspiration for her novel.

The author has admitted that it was difficult for her to find Patroclus's voice within the narrative. She had a clear vision of his personality but lacked the vision for the way in which she could portray his narrative. Firstly, she wrote in an epic mode, but then erased everything and rewrote in the lyric genre. According to Miller,

[A]lthough the story (...) was epic, Patroclus' actual vision of the world came from the lyric genre –he was more rooted in the personal and emotional than gods and destiny. [She] began looking to ancient lyric poets like Sappho for inspiration. (Wiener, 2012)

Patroclus was part of the epic but was not an epic character, but rather a lyrical one, and to portray him truthfully in her vision, she took inspiration from Sappho and Catullus in her lyrical writing.

Since the events of Homer's narrative only happen in Miller's book later in the plot, the author admits to taking inspiration from Statius *Achilleid* for the depiction of Patroclus's life before the Trojan war. According to her "The myths do tell us that Achilles and Patroclus were close and constant companions from childhood, so it seemed natural to me that he would be present for all of Achilles' pre-Troy adventures," (Ciabattari, 2017). These adventures include their stay at Chiron's cave on Mount Pelion, Achilles hiding at Scyros while dressed as a woman, and Odysseus finding him there. Finally, Miller takes Statius's idea that: "In the *Achilleid*, the boys are the same age, whereas in *The Iliad* it's implied that Patroclus is older. To [Miller], the two have always resonated as peers, so that was the tradition [she] followed" (Ciabattari, 2017). denying the discourse of pederasty that was infamously discussed at Plato's *Symposium*, since there was not an age disparity and thus, there could not be an eromenos and erastes.

Miller stated that she was inspired by Virgil's depiction of Pyrrhus, Achilles's son, in the Aeneid and Sophocles. In her words: "[she found] the way he gives voice to the displaced and dispossessed, those whom society has left behind, incredibly powerful and moving" (Wiener, 2012). Finally, as was previously stated, Miller also took as inspiration Euripides, Ovid, and Apollodorus.

Miller attributes her main inspiration for the love story between the two men[7] to Shakespeare's play "*Troilus and Cressida*". According to Miller, "(...) [Shakespeare] is taking the tradition of homoeroticism between Achilles and Patroclus and removing it from its idealized ancient contexts. What would it be like if Achilles and Patroclus were actually lovers in [Shakespeare's] corrupt Greek army?" (Minkowich, n.d.). According to the UCL website, "Shakespeare's play pathologizes sexuality and human nature, which licenses a freer and more open exploration of homoeroticism. But through its satirical mode, the play also affirms a homoerotic model of desire" (Minkowich, n.d.). Patroclus does not take a big role in Shakespeare's play; however, there is a big difference between the one in *The Iliad* and the one in *Troilus and Cressida*: Patroclus's little stomach for the war (Shakespeare, 1564), or, in other words, his lack of interest in the war and fighting. This sentiment is very close to what can be seen in Miller's depiction of Patroclus, as he is portrayed as someone who does not have an aptitude for war, or even for the activities practiced in Peleus's castle when they were young. Miller stated that,

> (...) when Patroclus gives an (...) explanation for why the Greek generals think Achilles isn't fighting: "They think my little stomach to the war, and your great love to me restrains you thus." It is an idea which remakes Pindar, Aeschylus and Homer in a single stroke, brilliantly merging the homoerotic bond with the male-female love plot. For a moment we glimpse another play entirely: a story of two men in love, one who is the world's best warrior, and one who has little stomach for it". (Minkowich, n.d.)

She too took a glimpse of this entirely different play and made a story for these men. This reading of Shakespeare is not something unheard of, the choice of portraying them as lovers is very common, going as far as RSC and Wooster Groups' adaptation called "Cry, Trojans!". It portrays a Greek army within gay culture, "with Thersites played as a drag queen and Achilles and Patroclus donning heels and dresses at different moments of high-camp aesthetic." (Perkins, 2019), which achieves arguably a more controversial reading than Miller's. However, the reading is not universal, and it remains a question of is Shakespeare's "language alien enough to contemporary readers to allow for wider interpretative potential based on misreadings?" (Perkins, 2019). In this case, there is a lot more support for the notion of them as lovers, in opposition to the same question in the hugely polarizing reading of Homer's text. In the Shakespearean one, it is especially clear when Agamemnon states in the play,

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[7] In addition to *The Iliad*.

"the great Achilles . . . . Grows dainty of his worth, and in his tent / Lies mocking our designs: with him Patroclus / Upon a lazy bed the livelong day" (1.3 145-150) (Shakespeare, 1564) However, there is a derogatory sense to this reading, especially in the historical context of the seventeenth century, in which queerness was associated with femininity and sinfulness. (Garrison, 2014)

Patroclus is implicated in the feminization of Achilles, drawing upon a complicated entanglement of gender and sexual identity that weave together Achilles, femininity, and queerness. Patroclus is also described as a "man-whore" to Achilles and a "brach," often modernized to bitch. Directors and scholars use these comments and epithets to imply the erotic nature of Patroclus' association with Achilles. (Perkins, 2019)

Which is a critique attributed to Miller's portrayal of Patroclus. Since *Troilus and Cressida* is a satirical critique of the corrupt Greek army, the characters are painted in a very different light than in Miller's *The Song of Achilles*. Although she gives a much more sympathetic portrayal of the protagonists, there were complaints regarding Patroclus's femininity and the implication that it was building upon the stereotype that there is a "male" and "female" figure within every relationship, and this is especially problematic in a gay or queer one. Even though this notion is very questionable since the definition of being gay is "characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one's same sex" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-a), in the online form of the Cambridge Dictionary, thus erasing the opposite sex of a gay relationship. Nevertheless, is it not also problematic to assume that being considerate, nurturing, and having a critical opinion of the war are inherently feminine traits?

4. What Miller Did Not Receive from the Greek and Roman Material

a. Male Vulnerability and what it means to be a hero

Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* has been criticized for attributing traditional heterosexual roles to Achilles and Patroclus's relationship. It has been a critique of Miller's book, that Patroclus has been attributed a female role within the narrative, as can be seen, for example, in this article:

> Achilles and Patroclus are assigned very stereotypical tropes in their relationship, despite the hope of this being an accurately representative text. Achilles is a brave and fierce warrior - although beautifully vulnerable in private - and Patroclus is the gentle pacifist that acts as his calming force. Surely gay couples taking on stereotypical masculine and feminine roles have been over-used throughout literature? Is the trope of Achilles' brazen personality coupled with Patroclus' soft exterior a false, overused fetishization of a gay relationship? (Watson, 2021)

If we look at what it means to stereotypically be a man, then the criticism is applicable. Showalter explains that,

> The most powerful archetypes of manhood is the idea that the real man is the one who acts, rather than the one who contemplates. The real man thinks of practical matters rather than abstract ones and certainly does not brood upon himself or the nature of his sexuality. To think about himself would be to split and turn inward the confident wholeness which is the badge of masculinity. (Showalter, 1989, p.110)

The criticism regarding the feminization of the character of Patroclus is accurate if we take into consideration this archetype since he is a self-reflective character, which not only reflects on his issues, but also the ones impacting the women around him. Coming back to Showalter, she argues that,

> [T]he female principle is negative, like the blank space that defines a positive pictorial image or like the concept of feminine gender that allows the male to define itself as masculine; it is also supplementary, like the artistic imitation that represents natural life. (Showalter, 1989, p.120)

The definition of what it means to be a woman helps one define what is a man, through antithesis. To be a man, in the most stereotypical way, is to negate one's own femininity. It is not

easy to conceptualise, yet it is easy to understand what is not manly. If we take into consideration how one defines masculinity, it can be the negation of anything effeminate. However, to be human is to have a multiplicity of emotions, men are not born knowing that their gender will be defined by the colour blue, this is taught to them. And as they are taught what not to be, the performance of masculinity begins:

> The sense of manliness as continuous unbroken performance highlights the pressure on men to keep to the script, to follow the code—not to break character—for any divergence would show that one is not a true man but womanly or even gay. In its most radical form, such a model suggests that there is nothing natural or innate in men, perhaps not what we commonly call a "self." For men there is only a set of socially constructed rules for playing a role. Furthermore, the idea of manliness as performative also suggests what the history of manliness shows: if the social script is changed the behavior of men will change. (Sussman, 2012, p.8-9)

In *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus is denied his ability to fight and his toughness in favour of kindness and caretaking – although Miller does maintain the aspect of risk-taking in Patroclus's "manliness". However, neither of these aspects were created by Miller, if one wants to criticize Patroclus's inability to fight, then Shakespeare is the culprit since the author inspired Patroclus's ability to fight (or lack thereof) in Shakespeare's depiction. Although she took his ability to fight away, she replaced it with a love for healing, which in Ancient Greece was a male-dominated activity. Additionally, it is worth noting that the notion of Patroclus as kind and caretaking, originates in Homer, as it is that adjective that defines Patroclus and it is him who serves Achilles. It can be argued that Patroclus's lack of military prowess comes from a place of relatability. By picking Shakespeare's depiction of Patroclus and his subsequent "little stomach" for war, Miller is adapting this character for a 21ˢᵗ-century audience. The author has been clear about Patroclus's depiction as an ordinary person, that a reader could aspire to. She stated that,

> In writing this novel, [she] thought a lot about personal responsibility. Patroclus is not an epic person, the way Achilles is. He's an "ordinary" man. But he has more power than he thinks, and the moments where he reaches out to others and offers what he sees as his very modest assistance have huge positive ramifications. Most of us aren't Achilles—but we can still be Patroclus. What does it mean to try to be an ethical person in a violent world? (Miller, n.d.-a)

Therefore, it is understandable that a reimagining of *The Iliad* for a contemporary audience has been affected by modern social implications. The current values differ from the ones in the Homeric text; therefore, it is understandable that having an outcast narrator, will be more relatable for the reader.

> Patroclus is more than a little out-of-place in this world; his soul is too sensitive, his emotions too rich. Perhaps it is precisely because he seems ill-suited to the archaic world of the Trojan War that he comes across as so compelling as a narrator. We feel what he feels, we experience with him the rush of joy and pleasure when he discovers love, and we watch with him, powerless, as the strands of Achilles' fate ensnare them both. (West III, 2018)

Coming back to the criticism of Patroclus as a "gentle pacifist that acts as [Achilles] calming force "(Watson, 2021). This is also correct; however, it could be argued that the pacificist aspect of Patroclus is built up through the growth of his character. Simone de Beauvoir has stated, "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 2015) which applies to Patroclus in the sense that he is not born as this "gentle pacifist", he was socialized as such. Sussman follows this sentiment, explaining that:

> "Not all men are men." This paradox that we seldom think about but always act upon— not all men in the sense of persons born biologically male become "men" or "real men" living up to the socially constructed ideal set for males that we call manliness. As a value system set by individual societies, manliness takes different shapes in different cultures and changes over time. Men absorb these values in a script for ideal behavior as men that we call masculinity. From such scripts, men fashion for themselves a sense of themselves as men, a masculine identity. (Sussman, 2012, p.1)

At the beginning of the story, Patroclus was not calm nor pacific, he was a child that grew up in social isolation because of his father. He goes as far as killing another child, because of his anger. His athletic inability was born with him. However, his pacifistic manner was born out of this traumatic experience, which got him exiled at a very young age and separated from his family and everyone he knew permanently. His exile is a turning point in this character's development. He not only had to leave his home forever but his status as a prince was taken away lowering his class and forcing him to subordinate to Peleus and Achilles. This is not to say that it is wrong to describe

Patroclus as a gentle pacifist, because it does define him. What could be arguably wrong, is the way in which those attributes effeminise him as if a man cannot be gentle or pacifist without being metaphorically chastised. Sussman explains how the definition of manly seems to be obvious; yet, it is not a single experience, with one definition, as "[m]anliness is an unmarked category, an area that is seemingly so self-evident in its meaning that we seldom think about it. And when we do, we often meet confusion and contradiction" (Sussman, 2012, p.1).

On the other hand, Achilles "is a brave and fierce warrior" (Watson, 2021), whose pride gets him into trouble, because he has not been through any terrifying circumstances like Patroclus did. The circumstances in which he grows up are different from Patroclus in the sense that he was never socialized to be subordinated. Achilles had a supportive father who raised him to be a leader. He was raised to speak his mind and to be a fighter, and more importantly, he was prophesised to be one, which are circumstances that have an impact on his personality. Even though Achilles grows up with the difficult reality of having to choose between a short life and future glory, these only intensify his predisposition for being "brave and fierce". Patroclus is calmer than Achilles because he was raised in a household where he was expected to be quiet, he is against war because he was traumatized from a young age when he killed a boy and dealt with the consequences. As Showalter has stated:

> Gender is, above all, a social construct, arbitrary and varying from one society to another, related to sex but not identical with it, and gender roles vary from one culture to another just as the words we use to signify our meanings vary from one language community to another. (Showalter, 1989, p.115)

This is not to say that gender roles are not still something that impacts society, it just means that it is something as arbitrary as the word and the object it defines, or the signifier and signified (Showalter, 1989). If Patroclus is more feminine in the arbitrariness of what it means to be feminine then it is because of his circumstances.

> Miller (...) knows mythology, like history, gains its meaning in large part from retellings. Her Achilles and Patroclus have their own fictitious voices and inner and intimate lives, separate from their images and monuments, and this novel, like *Circe*, is rather incredulous towards the conventional notions of masculinity. Masculine power is fact but it also inheres in a dynamic and malleable culture of reception, as is suggested

early in the book when Patroclus's father seeks a wife for him and finds manhood dependent on the exchange of women, among other things. (Bibby, 2022, p.502)

And if Patroclus is considered more feminine because of his calm manner, then should Achilles not be considered feminine as well, for hiding disguised as a woman? Why is his masculinity not questioned, even though he has been "coerced into marriage to a princess in a striking reversal of the scenario in which women are married as the spoils of conflict" (Bibby, 2022, p.503)? And why is his vulnerability only considered private, when he has been more outwardly vulnerable than Patroclus? Achilles is not shy in portraying his emotions, he cries for the help of his mother (not only in Miller's work but in *The Iliad* too) and cries when his beloved companion died. Additionally, "Achilles is allowed to waver; he wants to be a hero, but not just yet. Miller's Thetis, a cruel and distant mother, makes Achilles look more like a victim than a future hero" (Minkowich, n.d.). All these things are displays of vulnerability and instead of being shamed, they make his character arguably more enjoyable than Homer's Achilles, since it gives a background and three-dimensionality to his actions. Achilles is still "beautifully vulnerable in private", but so is Patroclus. They seem to have within their relationship, a safe space where they can be honest and vulnerable with each other. However, Achilles has been more vulnerable in public than Patroclus, as the latter has only begun to answer and tell Achilles everything that he thought after a lot of time spent in Peleus's castle, where he was silent as he has been throughout his life up until that moment and continues to be more quiet than talkative given most of the interactions.

However, since we are getting a first-person narration, we can be led to believe that he is more vulnerable because as a reader, we get to know his thoughts. His only displays of vulnerability are done to Achilles and Briseis, the people he considers family. The stereotyping of masculinity is mutable since the male experience is not singular- as there is no singular experience of any gender. As Judith Butler has stated:

> If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler, 1999, p.6)

How Patroclus and Achilles behave portrays vulnerability and reliance on one another, which has traditionally been related to femininity, but ultimately should not be. Vulnerability is part of the human experience, just like reliance, fierceness, and gentleness, these attributes should not be gendered. Additionally, just like being a woman, being a man is not a singular experience. As R.W. Connell writes, the

> [M]odel of gender that treats men as an undifferentiated class. This view is inconsistent with contemporary research, which documents a considerable range of masculinities, both in terms of cultural representations of men, and in terms of the institutionalized practices of men in gender relations. Differences are found not only across cultures (Herdt 1982) and through Historical time (Roper and Tosh 1991) but also - a point vital for theory- within a particular culture at any given time, e.g., heterosexual and homosexual masculinities and the masculinities of different ethnic and age groups (Kimmel and Messner1989). (Connell, 1992, p. 736)

With that said, I would argue that allowing Patroclus and Achilles to be vulnerable, makes for a celebration of male vulnerability and kindness, which inevitably rejects the traditional gender roles associated with the male hero. Therefore, something that the author did not receive for her novel through Classical Reception is the tradition of what it means to be a hero. Instead, the author tries to deconstruct that notion through the lens of Patroclus.

Firstly, Achilles's stereotypical heroic characteristics, like his eagerness to fight are seen from the disappointing point of view of Patroclus, who tries to cleanse him of his deeds every night when he comes back from battle. Additionally, Achilles asked Patroclus "name one hero who was happy" (Miller, 2021, p.98) and tells him that he will be the first, because of Patroclus. He not only shows that he knows of the negative path of other heroes, but he also knows that to be happy he needs Patroclus beside him. "Because you're the reason. Swear it." (Miller, 2021, p.98), says Achilles, which portrays a reliance on his partner and hence vulnerability, and these attributes are conversely seen as positive.

Miller based Patroclus's personality on Homer's unusual description of the character as "kind". Patroclus questions the ethics of war and heals others instead of injuring them, which in turn builds upon Miller's question: "What does it mean to try to be an ethical person in a violent world?" (Miller, n.d.-a) The construction of Patroclus's heroic persona is done without his knowledge since he is a first-person narrator instead of an omniscient all-knowing narrator, he is unaware of his kindness and how he does "'not stop to think before going to heal his comrades' (Miller, 2011,

303), which demonstrates instinctive heroism" (Campion, 2022). This heroism is not connected to his fighting abilities.

However, it is worth remembering that despite his hatred towards fighting, Patroclus goes with Achilles to Troy because of his love for him. As Miller has stated,

> I see Patroclus as a character who is dragged into the world of an epic because he loves Achilles, not because it is his natural place. I wanted him to be shaped instead by the world of ancient lyric poetry, the poetry of love, friendship, internal emotion, daily life. (Miller, 2019)

Patroclus does not demonstrate fighting abilities, up until the day of his death, when he overcomes his desire to stay away from fighting and instead sacrifices himself to save the other soldiers at the camp: "therefore, by presenting Patroclus as a queer healer, [Madeline Miller] uses his character to establish a message of queer empowerment while critiquing brutality in war" (Campion, 2022). Briseis calls him "the best of Myrmidons" and there is a prophecy in which "the best of the Myrmidons will die (...) [Achilles] will still be alive when it happens" (Miller, 2021, p.250). We learn that this prophecy makes Patroclus "the best of Myrmidons" even if he is not the typical soldier "which demonstrates to a contemporary audience that queerness is not anti-heroic" (Campion, 2022). Miller uses this deconstruction of the heroic ideal in her reception of *The Iliad* while dismantling what it means to be a man.

> The male is no more seen as a maverick, a provider, a protector, or a hero, as the essential semiotics of the phallus that have driven masculinity are contradicted. Hence, less traditional masculine identities are increasingly being created in the marketplace. (Fowler et al., 2016)

Miller shows that to be "a man" or a "hero" is ultimately to be kind and sexuality and gender have nothing to do with it.

> Patterson and Elliott (2002, p. 241) argued that hegemonic masculinity is adapting to recent societal changes with "the increasing feminization of masculinities, as men ... get in touch with their emotions." (...) An increasingly popular conception is that there is an evolution of the so-called "new masculinity" overtaking the older, primitive masculine norms. (Fowler et al., 2016)

Additionally, it expresses that kindness, pacifism, gentleness, and vulnerability are heroic traits, that should not only be equated to the female gender. Especially, vulnerability and kindness should not be antithetical to heroism, but rather something that should coexist.

b. A Woman's Perspective (and its inherent importance):

Adrienne Rich has stated that "re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (Rich, 1978, p.18). And it could be argued that the same could be said regarding minorities that have been underrepresented throughout history. In general, the act of looking back at those who have been underrepresented is important, since it begs to question the reasons for said lack of representation. The women looking back at the classics are asking questions, interpreting the texts in different ways and this ultimately broadens the scope of perspectives one has, in this case, regarding the Homeric texts. For example, we have seen that Miller's perspective on what it means to be a hero is different as she values kindness and self-sacrifice, instead of physical prowess and killing abilities. As Leanne Bibby stated, relating to women writing about classic heroes:

> One of the reasons for women novelists' persistent fascination with writing the stories of male leaders and heroes is the value of looking back at historical definitions of masculinity itself, and none of these, it seems, cast a longer shadow than the masculine ideals of classical masculinity. Because the ideals of the warrior, the soldier, the king or emperor, the patriarch and the good citizen once underpinned the reality that only men could be full citizens and full selves, certain women novelists seem especially drawn to them, and their work suggests that knowing the patterns and roots of hegemonic masculinity is itself a form of power. (Bibby, 2022, p.504)

By questioning what it means to be not only a hero but a man, Miller questions masculinity itself. By looking back, women are regaining their power because they can critically examine the classics in order to understand the repercussions of a patriarchal society on the future of women and minorities.

Through Patroclus, Miller questions the ethics of war and the ways in which women were treated. It is when Patroclus is confronted with these aspects that we can better hear Miller's opinion. Since Patroclus is empathetic, especially towards women, it gives Miller the ability to

criticize the problematic aspects she found in the Homeric text. This is seen in the way Patroclus ironically depicts Peleus as a kind man, just to clarify that his kindness comes with a price, as it can be seen in this excerpt: "here is where I tasted the full truth of Peleus' kindness: well-trained and indebted, we would one day make him a fine army" (Miller, 2012, p.23). Additionally, the way Miller interprets the Homeric text differs from one of the glorifications of war. Therefore, Patroclus's way of looking at war also comes from Miller's interpretation of the text, as she explains that:

> [I]nteresting to see how so many people over the years have interpreted Homer's texts as being about the glories of war. That to [her] is amazing because whenever [she] read Homer all [she saw was] the brutal effect of war on men's bodies and on women's lives. Literally, their teeth are exploding! If you read it in the Greek, you learn all the vocabulary words for the internal organs because bodies are constantly being ripped apart in these incredibly brutal ways! This, for [her], is absolutely not about glorifying war. Yet, other people have understood it that way. The profundity of myths comes from the multiplicity of possible interpretations. (Juin, 2021)

Therefore, by reading Homer through that lens, it was easier to adhere to Shakespeare's depiction of Patroclus with his little stomach for war. Furthermore, how he sees the mistreatment of women seems to come from Miller's perspective as well.

> From early on in the novel, when Patroclus' childhood is narrated, he is already aware of the commonly accepted mistreatment towards women in his society. His mother is physically abused by his father and ignored and laughed at by everyone else due to a mental illness which is not named in the story. Consequently, Patroclus' is fairly quick to detect when similar treatments are inflicted on other characters, especially women. (Otero, 2020, p.25)

Patroclus recognises abuse because of his background, as well as his empathetic personality, which makes it easy for Miller to use both aspects to have a different take on the ways women were handled. For example, when depicting Thetis' rape, the language used is harsh and leaves no room for excuses. The word "ravish" in itself means, according to the online version of the Cambridge Dictionary, "to force a woman to have sex against her wishes" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-b). Therefore, the way in which Patroclus presents it, makes it clear that it is something serious and impactful. Going further, the arc of the character is affected by this traumatic event, influencing the way Thetis acts throughout the story. In the same way, Patroclus's

background affects his perception of the world, so does Thetis's, especially in the way she sees humans. This is important because it makes it clear that the actions of these men had long-lasting consequences, but since the stories are generally seen through the perspective of the male leads, the costs of their actions on others are never deeply explored. That is another reason why it is important for women to revisit the classics since they can take it upon themselves to explore these issues. Miller also condemns the ways in which the women at the palace were treated. When the exiled boys at Peleus's palace go through their sexual awakening, it is revealed that they took advantage of the girl servants. Patroclus looks through his critical lens at how,

> It was customary for a palace to have a full complement of nobly born women, as servants for the mistress of the house. But Peleus had no wife in the palace, and so the women we saw were mostly slaves. They had been bought or taken in warfare, or bred from those who were. During the day they poured wine, and scrubbed floors, and kept the kitchen. At night they belonged to soldiers or foster boys, to visiting kings or Peleus himself. The swollen bellies that followed were not a thing of shame, they were profit: more slaves. These unions were not always rape; sometimes there was mutual satisfaction, and even affection. At least that is what the men who spoke of them believed. (Miller, 2021, p.55-56)

The last sentence makes the reader question the validity of those young men's beliefs, and how those would differ if one were to ask the servants. It is important to question these things, as generally servants had no voice in the classics, therefore, the only version of the events that the public has is the male one. Thus, it is valuable to question if that retelling of the events would be the same if we were to look at them from the point of view of the women, servants, or slaves.

The criticism of the pointless hurting of women is seen again when Iphigenia is killed because of her father's mistakes. Bringing it back to Classical Reception, it "has enabled people to distinguish more readily between the ancient texts, ideas and values and those of the societies that appropriated them" (Hardwick, 2003, p.3). Miller does this, by allowing the reader to have a closer look into the realities of those women, as well as giving commentary on its problematic aspects through the criticisms and ironic remarks made by Patroclus.

> He reflects on it in different occasions during the novel; with Thetis's rape, as mentioned above, with "those serving girls with their lowered eyes and obedience" (Miller, 2012, p.56) whose only use was to be "spear-wives and bed slaves" (Miller,

2012, p.214). He even tries to help them in different occasions, which is seen as a weakness by other male characters, by asking Achilles to take them as his war trophies and avoid the other soldiers to abuse them. (Otero, 2020, p.25)

How Miller is allowed to look at the text and make Patroclus so aware of the wrongdoings of his Homeric counterparts is influenced by the values of our current society. By taking a twenty-first-century look at the past, the reader can have a more nuanced understanding of the classics, since it enables more than one perspective to be put forward. "In a more general sense, Patroclus's perception in matters such as female slavery, domestic and sexual abuse, and the consequences of war become a fundamental aspect of the novel" (Otero, 2020, p.25).

Nevertheless, Patroclus is not the only character that Miller uses as a vehicle to criticize the challenging aspects of the Homeric text. When reimagining the character of Briseis from *The Iliad*, the author changed her from an almost invisible character, who served as a plot device to symbolize Achilles's pride and gave her a fully-fledged personality. In her only piece of dialogue in the original text, she mourns Patroclus's death and says "Patroclus –/dearest joy of my heart, my harrowed, broken heart! (...) you were always kind" (Homer et al., 1998, p. 498) and from there, Miller built their friendship, making Briseis Patroclus's closest friend. This friendship and development of her as a character makes it more impactful for the reader when we see her being used as an object by Agamemnon, especially when he takes her to his camp. It makes Achilles's refusal to save her from Agamemnon more exasperating. As the events are described through Patroclus's desperate and frustrated point of view, we can see the problematic aspect of the way women slaves were taken from camp to camp to be abused and how their perspective on the matter was never questioned. Briseis had become Patroclus's family and indispensable to Achilles's camp. She turned into a matron to the women slaves that Achilles saved by choosing them as war prizes. Briseis represents female camaraderie by helping the other female slaves when they arrive at the camp, cleaning their wounds, and teaching them Greek, all of which, parallel the ways in which Patroclus helped her when she was kidnaped and turned into a slave.

Something that Miller did not receive from *The Iliad* was Briseis's status before arriving at the Greek camp. In *The Iliad*, she was married to the son of King Mynes, but in *The Song of Achilles*, she was the daughter of a farmer. In the BBC radio Bookclub interview, Miller stated that she deliberately changed the class of Briseis, lowering her status from a Princess to a:

> Farmer's daughter. [Miller] thought, we have enough aristocrats in this story and [she] was really interested in what happens to all these farms that are around Troy, all the

regular people that this war affects, (...) the Greeks camp there for 10 years. (...) they're living off of everyone who lives in the area around Troy and that would have been absolutely devastating and those people had no stake in the war and no say in the war so [she] wanted there to be a voice that represented that. (Naughtie, 2018, 09:17-09:59)

Miller admitted that she reimagined this aspect of *The Iliad* and, in this case, refigured Briseis' background, to give a voice to the people who had nothing to do with the war. Through this deliberate change, Miller gives the reader a look into another aspect that the Homeric text never touches on and makes the reader question the repercussions of war, beyond the ones that Homer gives us. It makes the reader question the morality of war, with Patroclus, and understand that most of the time, the people most affected by war, are the ones with the least stakes in it and whose voices were never heard.

Another thing that the character of Briseis offers the reader is the portrayal of the suffering of women and slaves. *"The enslavement and sexual violation of women and the death of husbands are realities of war that are neither condemned nor avoided in epic poetry"* (Dué, 2006). However, they are condemned by Miller, who has stated that "when you study these texts you have to deal the dark and terrible side of these stories'' (Minkowich, n.d.). In *The Iliad*, Briseis shows her suffering by saying:

The husband to whom my father and noble mother gave me,/I saw him torn by the sharp bronze before our city,/and my three brothers – a single mother bore us:/my brothers, how I loved you! –/you all went down to death on the same day. (Homer, 1998, p.498)

The impact of these traumatizing events on the character is only seen here; however, in Miller's story, it is always present in the way Briseis and Achilles interact. Briseis never fully recovers from what Achilles did to her family, which is something that is only afforded when we look at the text from her point of view. In the book, we can see her unsettledness when around Achilles, in for example: "But at his voice, she startled a little and sat up. He did not speak directly to her often, nor she to him. A remnant, perhaps, of what had happened in her village." (Miller, 2021, p. 239). The way Briseis reacts to Achilles, one of the men who killed her family, is valid and it begs to question why her emotional arc in later adaptations does not take this into consideration. For

example, in Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy,* the repercussions of Achilles's actions regarding Briseis are shallowly explored. As Miller has stated,

> Troy deprived Patroclus of any depth as a character, but created its own plot line for Briseis, ensuring that she spent much of the film in the tent of a heterosexually active Achilles. Briseis' emotional attachment to Brad Pitt's Achilles was a very conventional form of romanticized, heterosexual female masochism. (Minkowich, n.d.)

Nevertheless, the repercussions of Achilles's actions are seen in another revision of the Homeric text written by a woman. Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* explores Briseis' point of view during the events of *The Iliad*. In contrast to Miller's story, in which Patroclus shows his undying adoration for Achilles, Barker reveals through the voice of Briseis the negative aspects that Patroclus was willing to forgive because of his love for the demigod. Through first-person narration, Briseis exposes to the reader her thoughts and the ones of the women around her. Instead of masochistic love for someone who caused destruction, death, and trauma, Briseis is allowed cynicism, critical thinking, and judgment regarding the men surrounding her, even more than she is allowed in *The Song of Achilles*. This is seen right away in the first lines of the novel. We are presented with acute criticism regarding the usual depictions of Achilles, for example in: "Great Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles...How the epithets pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called him "the butcher" (Barker, 2018, p.1). And the story ends in "His story. His, not mine. It ends at his grave. (...) Once, not so long ago, I tried to walk out of Achilles's story—and failed. Now, my own story can begin" (Barker, 2018, p.291). Consequently, attributes, in *The Silence of the Girls,* a voice to Briseis. Like Patroclus, Briseis was almost a plot device for Achilles to retrieve from the war; however, by reimagining the Homeric text through the perspective of these characters, these authors are able to give them a voice, at the same time that they question the ways in which their stories have been previously told.

The same can be said about Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad*, in which the author tells the story from Penelope's post-mortem point of view of the events of *The Odyssey.* We can see how, like Barker, Atwood, is vindicating the story of this woman in "Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. (...) So I'll spin a thread of my own" (Atwood, 2018, p.3). Atwood shows the perspective of a woman who felt betrayed by her husband and was not aware of all his bad deeds. The feeling of betrayal is felt in the ways in which she looks back at the events and asks:

Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation-almost the compulsion- to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. (Atwood, 2018, p.2)

The last sentence makes the reader understand that Atwood is shifting the narrative of Penelope as the perfect wife, the example of patience and faithfulness, and instead of telling women to be "as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering" (Atwood, 2018, p.2) as Penelope, she is instead trying to see the story from her point of view. Penelope herself, tells the reader: "Don't follow my example" (Atwood, 2018, p.2).

Atwood not only gives a voice to Penelope but also to the twelve maids hung by Odysseus. By portraying the twelve maiden voices, the author gives an extra layer to the atrocities caused by the Greek hero. In between chapters, we see them singing about the injustice caused by Odysseus in excerpts like:

(...) we danced in the air/ our bare feet twitched/ it was not fair// with every goddess, queen, and bitch/ from there to here/ you scratched your itch// we did much less/ than what you did/ you judged us bad (...) the ones you failed/ the ones you killed. (Atwood, 2018, pp.5-6)

Another love interest of Odysseus that has been revisited in her own depiction of the events of *The Odyssey* is Circe. Coming back to Madeline Miller, we can see once again a woman being vindicated through the reimagining of her story written by a female author in first-person narration. According to Miller, "Both *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* came out of a desire to address something in the text that [she] felt was either overlooked, missed or forgotten" (Juin, 2021). In *Circe*, Miller comes back to the idea of what it means to be a divine entity with significantly less power than the ones in Olympus. Just like Thetis, Circe is not very powerful or acknowledged in the world of either the gods or the humans. Yet, Circe creates her power, turning to witchcraft, which according to Miller is:

A power that is not based around the privilege Gods are born with, but instead comes from hard work and dedication, from trial and error. (...) [She] was as frustrated with her story than [she] had been with Patroclus'. [Circe] is such an interesting character, and she had been unfairly treated. Odysseus, who is telling the story in the original text, speaks about her in a very objectifying way: he is constantly talking about how

beautiful she is and how mysterious she is. But he never reflects on her reasons for doing anything. [Miller] wanted to say more about her: who is Circe? Why is she turning men into pigs? (Juin, 2021)

We can see that the author is looking at the original text with inquiring eyes, just like Atwood and Barker, trying to understand these characters' motivations beyond their relation to the Homeric hero. The women revisiting the classics are trying to understand the full scope of the events and the repercussions of said events on these characters. Thus, it can be said that the revision or rewriting of the classics by women gives the classics a new voice as well. This is not to say that only women can look at the classics through a critical lens. Yet, in a societal standpoint, being a woman others you, making it easier for women to see things from the perspective of the other. Therefore, women such as Atwood, Barker, and Miller question what seem to be the blind spots caused by a patriarchal society. As Rich puts it:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh. (...) We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (Rich, 1978, p.18)

Even when revisiting the classics through the act of translating, the perspective of a woman has its inherent importance. For example, Emily Wilson was the first woman to translate *The Odyssey* into English and she did it from a different standpoint from her predecessors. Miller has shown to be a great advocate for Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*, going as far as to write an article titled *The first English translation of 'The Odyssey' by a woman was worth the wait* where she reviews the translation with a metaphorical "well-deserving (...) applause" (Miller, 2017). In her translation of the Homeric text, Wilson "emphasize[s] the emotional arc of the story" (Miller, 2017), she also gives readers a different look into the nature of the story, by using "language [that] is fresh, unpretentious and lean" (Miller, 2017).

The unpretentiousness of the translation gives the reader a rawer look into what made Wilson uncomfortable, thus making the readers uncomfortable themselves. This aspect is seen in her clear portrayal "[o]f Eurymedusa, a slave in the house of princess Nausicaa (...)" (North, 2017). According to Wilson, "often, they're not identified as slaves at all. Fagles, for instance, calls

Eurymedusa a "chambermaid." Fitzgerald calls her a "nurse." Wilson admitted to being stunned about "how much work seems to go into making slavery invisible" (North, 2017) in other translations. In her translator's note, Wilson wrote:

> To translate a domestic female slave, called in the original a dmoe ("female-house-slave"), as a "maid" or "domestic servant" would imply that she was free. I have often used "slave," although it is less specific than many of the many terms for types of slaves in the original. (...) and to mark the fact that the idealized society depicted in the poem is one where slavery is shockingly taken for granted, seems to me to outweigh the need to specify, in every instance, the type of slave. (Homer, 2018, T/N)

Wilson makes it clear to readers that what was so commonly accepted in the classics, cannot just simply be erased, it needs to be examined. If slavery was taken for granted at the time, then it is necessary to explore the ramifications of this reality and bring to light the perspectives of those so often overlooked, as a way to get a full scope of the realities at the time, instead of having the narrow perspective of the free Greek men. Additionally, Wilson makes it clear to the readers that in her translation, she tries to:

> Avoid importing contemporary types of sexism into this ancient poem, instead shining a clear light on the particular forms of sexism and patriarchy that do exist in the text, which are partly familiar from our world. For instance, in the scene where Telemachus oversees the hanging of the slaves who have been sleeping with the suitors, most translations introduce derogatory language ("sluts" or "whores"), suggesting that these women are being punished for a genuinely objectionable pattern of behavior, as if their sexual history actually justified their deaths. The original Greek does not label these slaves with any derogatory language. (Homer, 2017, T/N)

Like Atwood, Wilson takes the blame away from the maids and portrays clearly how the classics have been tainted by several forms of sexism. She also explains the main aspect that differentiates her translation from previous ones, stating that,

> 'Earlier translators are not as uncomfortable with the text as I am, (...) and I like that I'm uncomfortable.' Part of her goal with the translation was to make readers uncomfortable too — with the fact that Odysseus owns slaves, and with the inequities in his marriage to Penelope. Making these aspects of the poem visible, rather than glossing over them, 'makes it a more interesting text'. (North, 2017)

Wilson's "uncomfortable" look at the text, is very reminiscing of Atwood's word "haunted" in the introduction to *The Penelopiad*, in which she admits being haunted by the maids hung because of Odysseus. It is also evocative of Miller's "disturbed" take on the Greek texts in general, as she has stated that:

> It was something that [she has] been disturbed by since [she] first encountered them. And [she thinks] in some ways it's amazing that we teach these myths to children because they are full of the most horrific cruelty and full of sexual assault and rape and slavery and really, you know, horrific treatment of women and others. (Illing, 2020, 33:03-33:20)

The way these women felt regarding the classics seems to have something in common: a feeling that something is not right with the way problematic things were and continue to be overlooked when it comes to the people on the side-lines of stories.

As we have seen before, Madeline Miller has been open about her fears regarding the reception of her book, *The Song of Achilles*, and these fears were related to the history of gatekeeping in the classics in which she quotes her Greek professor stating that "This is a class on Greek history, so I don't want to hear any questions about women or slaves" (Miller, 2021b, p.X). The erasure of female or enslaved people in the discipline is not unheard of; however, by placing more women and minorities on the receiving end of the classics, this erasure is being questioned. Sarah Pomeroy explains the importance of representing women in antiquity by stating:

> The story of the women of antiquity should be told now, not only because it is a legitimate aspect of social history, but because the past illuminates contemporary problems in relationships between men and women. Even though scientific technology and religious outlook clearly distinguish ancient culture from modern, it is most significant to note the consistency with which some attitudes toward women and the roles women play in Western society have endured through the centuries. (Pomeroy, 1975, p.XVII)

The same could be said about the importance of portraying slaves and how it affects the attitudes and socio-political repercussions of the erasure of certain identities. These erasures are being questioned more frequently, and other perspectives on stories are being added, like the perspective of women, slaves, and previously accepted homosexuality, which was removed throughout time.

Classical works are not unproblematic. By portraying their nature in a raw manner, Wilson, Barker, and Atwood take away the veneer that served as a shield to insure the reader's comfort. Nevertheless, as we have seen, those texts should make the reader feel uncomfortable. Neither the writers nor the translator mentioned above gave their female characters more power in their revision of the Homeric text to make them superior to their male counterparts in favour of a supposed feminist reading. They simply portrayed the situation through a different perspective and peeled off any excuses or embellishments. Wilson states that,

> Part of fighting misogyny in the current world is having a really clear sense of what the structures of thought and the structures of society are that have enabled androcentrism in different cultures, including our own, (...) *The Odyssey*, looked at in the right way, can help readers understand those structures more clearly. The poem offers a 'defense of a male dominant society, a defense of its own hero and his triumph over everybody else, (...) but it also seems to provide these avenues for realizing what's so horrible about this narrative, what's missing about this narrative'. (North, 2017)

Both Wilson and Pomeroy show the importance of understanding the past in order to have a clear vision of the structures that enable a patriarchal society. We can relate it to Classical Reception Studies, in which Hardwick explains how:

> The diversity of ancient culture itself is now more widely recognized and interest has focused on ways in which some aspects were selected and used ('appropriated') in order to give value and status to subsequent cultures and societies and to inspire new creative work. This kind of study has proved valuable in that it has enabled people to distinguish more readily between the ancient texts, ideas and values and those of the societies that appropriated them. (Hardwick, 2003, p.3)

In other words, the perspective of women and minorities regarding the Classics is inherently important, because it enables a different take on the ways the Classics are read, adapted, translated, interpreted, and rewritten. Coming back to Rich "Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (Rich, 1978, p.18).

II.   *The Song of Achilles*: Rereading LGBTQ+ Classical Heroes

1. *The Song of Achilles:* The Tale of the Two Achilles and the Perils of Choosing the Wrong Path

The novel *The Song of Achilles* is a historical fiction romance, narrated in the first person, using one of the minor characters of *The Iliad* as an auto-diegetic one. It is first and foremost a love story, therefore the tone is very romantic. However, it is also ominous since it is a retelling of the myth and *The Iliad*, therefore, the author gives frequent nudges to the omens of the future. Additionally, since the story is told by a first-person narrator who is recalling his life with his partner, the tone is reminiscent.

In an interview, the author explained her reasoning for calling the book *The Song of Achilles*:

> One of [Miller's] favorite parts about Achilles's legend is the fact that, aside from his skills as a warrior, he is also a beautiful musician. I have always found this a tantalizing and tragic path not taken – Achilles as a creator, instead of a destroyer. Throughout the novel, Patroclus fights to help Achilles keep that human, creative side—to be the man, not just the warrior. It is also a reminder that none of us are just one thing. There is always more complexity beneath. The title is also a reference to *The Iliad*, which literally means "the song of Troy." I saw my story as Patroclus's song to Achilles. (Carstensen, 2012)

We can see that it was a way for the main character to sing, or in other words, elevate the deeds his lover did not as a warrior, but as a human. Therefore, from the title, we can tell that the story will not be told in an unbiased manner. Since Patroclus is in love with Achilles throughout the story, we get to see the idealized, romanticized, and more intimate version of the myth and *The Iliad*, especially in the time before Troy.

The novel has thirty-three chapters and is structured into two parts. The first part takes place before the war on Troy and the events of *The Iliad*. This is the part where we see the intimate growth of the characters, something majorly created and fictionalized by the author. It is only in chapter twenty-five that the events told in *The Iliad* start to unfold, and Patroclus retells them through his point of view, which at times differs from what we are told happened in *The Iliad*. The first part is set in various locations such as Phtia, Mount Pelion, Scyros, and Aulis, but the second half of the book is set only in Troy. The antagonists of the story are intrinsically connected with Patroclus or

Achilles's point of view of the events; therefore, they are Menoetius (Patroclus's father), the fates, Thetis, Agamemnon, and Neoptolemus or Pyrrhus (Achilles's son).

The story starts with the words "My father" (Miller, 2021, p.1), which shows right away the importance of the father figure in Patroclus's retelling of his life. The first chapters of the story are an overview of a childhood tainted by inadequacy. Immediately on the first page, we see that even as a child (or especially as a child) Patroclus considers that he "quickly became a disappointment" (Miller, 2021, p.1). This is an ongoing sentiment present in the first part of the novel, especially when he recalls his childhood. The writer conveys a feeling of loneliness and being completely lost in a world where nothing makes sense. All the adjectives that Patroclus uses regarding himself when he was still living with his father are either negative or imply a negative connotation. The way he tells the story, portraying his low self-esteem and the terrible circumstances that made him have that lack of confidence, especially as a young child, appeals to the empathy of the reader. The story develops through Patroclus's childhood. It is explained that his mother is "simple", which is used as a negative descriptor, making the reader understand that she had a mental incapacity of some sort. Her simplicity is shown in: "when at last they pulled off the veil, they say my mother smile. That is how they knew she was quite stupid. Brides did not smile" (Miller, 2021, p.1). In the passage, we can see that the author makes herself known through the descriptions she writes of women and quick remarks such as these, that make the reader question how they were treated.

Foreshadowing is a big part of this story, as the author is always metaphorically winking at the reader who already knows *The Iliad* and the myth. For example, when Patroclus sees Thetis for the first time, she tells him "You'll die soon" (Miller, 2021, p. 51), which is not really foreshadowing, just plain telling of the future.

Patroclus is exiled at the age of ten, after a traumatic incident where he killed a young boy over a pair of dice. When telling Achilles about this, his response is empathetic. He tells Patroclus that he was defending himself, something that, as readers, we already knew, however, Patroclus only realizes it at that moment. He also realises that he could have lied, yet he chose not to, revealing that Patroclus is also very truthful in nature. Miller builds this image of Patroclus and Achilles as honest to a fault, especially since it was the reason to kickstart the events of *The Iliad*, as Achilles was the only one to confront Agamemnon about the plague that he caused inadvertently. In an interview, the author states that she took inspiration from Achilles's honesty from *The Iliad*: "Where he says "I hate like the gates of death, the man who says one thing and hides another in

his heart." (...) Achilles is just this honest, but that it's both his strength and his fault" (Illing,2020, 1:01:50-1:01:58).

This characteristic makes the reader trust both Achilles and Patroclus, even though sometimes one might question the reasoning for their actions. Coming back to the moment when Patroclus realises that he could have lied about murdering the other child,

> I stared at him, stunned by the simplicity of it. I could have lied. And then the revelation
> that followed: if I had lied, I would still be a prince. It was not murder that had exiled
> me, it was my lack of cunning. I understood, now, the disgust in my father's eyes. His
> moron son, confessing all. (...). 'You would not have lied,' I said. 'No,' he admitted.
> 'What would you have done?' (...) 'I don't know. I can't imagine it. The way the boy
> spoke to you.' He shrugged. No one has ever tried to take something from me.' (...)'I
> don't know,' he repeated, finally. 'I think I would be angry'. (Miller, 2021, p.48)

The author is making a foreshadowing for the reaction Achilles will have when the events of *The Iliad* start to develop, and Agamemnon takes something from him. The anger or wrath of Achilles here is explained by showing Achilles's privilege, as he was not used to being questioned or having something (someone) taken away from him. We can see how Patroclus reacted to the dice incident and how explosive his consequences were, and in a way, in *The Iliad*, we are watching Achilles's first experience with that and the explosive consequences of his anger. Patroclus, on the other hand, is used to the hurdles of having everything taken away from him, which builds character, therefore, making him evolve mentally quicker than Achilles. This can be seen when Patroclus states that Achilles,

> had always trusted too easily; he had so little in his life to fear or suspect. ... His trust
> was a part of him, as much as his hands or his miraculous feet. And despite my hurt,
> I would not wish to see it gone, to see him as uneasy and fearful as the rest of us.
> (Miller, 2021, p.127)

By describing Achilles as honest and trustful, Patroclus builds upon his humanity. As he fights to keep Achilles's human side on the surface, he is also trying to prove to the reader that this side exists, and that, as Miller stated in the interview "none of us are just one thing" (Carstensen, 2012).

In the story, the boys around them start to discover their interest in girls as they are entering puberty. Nevertheless, neither Achilles nor Patroclus develops that interest because they are

developing it for each other. Hence, on an impulse, Patroclus kisses Achilles. This makes Thetis very mad, which adds to the homophobic parent trope that she seems to represent. Consequently, she tries to separate both boys, by sending Achilles to Chiron's cave without Patroclus. However, I would argue that Thetis' perception of Patroclus is negative because of his humanity, instead of his gender. Her traumatic past with Peleus has tainted her judgment of humans, therefore, by understanding that her son is infatuated with one, she becomes enraged. This can be seen when we take into consideration that she thought of Deidameia[8] as inferior in relation to her son as well. The disapproval of their relationship is mentioned several times by the women around them. Thetis[9] and Deidameia think of Patroclus as inferior to Achilles, but Briseis[10] finds the opposite. Their disapproval is not related to their gender or sexuality, but to jealousy, since both Deidameia and Briseis are infatuated with Achilles and Patroclus accordingly, and Thetis is jealous of the attention her son is giving to a human.

Nevertheless, neither of the boys seems to have a choice in whom they love, since both of them are connected ever since they first met. Patroclus confirms this when he is describing the way Achilles looked at Deidameia:

> I had seen the way he looked at Deidameia; or rather the way he did not. It was the same way he had looked at the boys in Phthia, blank and unseeing. He had never, not once, looked at me that way. (Miller, 2021, p.127)

This connection can also be seen when Patroclus goes after Achilles when Thetis takes him away to Chiron's cave. He only considers coming back to Peleus castle to get "[his] mother's lyre, kept in the wooden chest within the inner room (...) [he] hesitated a moment, thinking [he] might try to go back, to take it with [him]" (Miller, 2021, p.64). We find that Achilles was waiting for Patroclus to go after him. Their mental connection is made clearer with the image of the lyre[11], as well as it symbolises the duality of Achilles.

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[8] "You do not deserve my son" (Miller, 2021, p.125)

[9] "She had not seemed to know I was there, but now her eyes found me, and her nose wrinkled, as if at a rising stench. She looked back to him. 'He is not worthy of you,' she said. 'He has never been.'' We disagree on this,' Achilles answered. He said it as if he had said it many times before. Probably he had" (Miller, 2021, p.51)

[10] "You are the one who made him go. (...) He fought to save you, and your darling reputation. Because he could not bear to see you suffer! (...) You have never deserved him. I do not know why he ever loved you. You care only for yourself!" (Miller, 2021, p.324).

[11] My mother's lyre. He had brought it with him. 'I wish I had known,' I said, the first day, when he had showed it to me. 'I almost did not come, because I did not want to leave it.' He smiled. 'Now I know how to make you follow me everywhere.' (Miller, 2021, p.80).

In the story, there is a theme, the tale of the two Achilles the one Patroclus gets to see and the one everyone else sees, the human and the god. Patroclus's Achilles is childish, honest to a fault, and a musician (which is represented by the lyre). The other Achilles is the prideful killing machine we know from *The Iliad*. The author plays with the idea that Achilles is half god and half human, to portray this reality. Throughout the book, when a god is mentioned, it is done with a negative connotation. Pyrrhus was raised by Thetis, a goddess, and he became the most heartless of the antagonists. In a way, Pyrrhus symbolizes what Achilles could have been if he had been raised by Thetis, in other words, Achilles if he had succumbed to his godly side. The demigod without Patroclus, since he is the one to remind him of his humane side. Pyrrhus is the one to kill Priam, a stark contrast to Achilles, who offered him hospitality and his son's body back. He hunts Hector's wife and kills her baby son in such a horrific way that even Agamemnon seems to be shocked, again in contrast to what Achilles did, when killing Andromache's family. He left a son on purpose to maintain the bloodline, Pyrrhus on the other hand, does not. In the end, Patroclus confronts Thetis about this and tells her that the way people were representing Achilles, (glorifying him for killing so many people) was not indicative of how he was truly, only his actions while he was grieving. He tells her that there is no glory in taking a life, that maybe killing is a "virtue among the gods" (Miller, 2021, p.349), but humans die too easily. He asks her if she would make him another Pyrrhus and demands that the stories told about Achilles should be about something more. Alluding to the point and intention of this book, after all, showing that by telling *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus is allowing the reader to learn something more about Achilles than the lives he took. This sentiment is also seen when Odysseus talks with Pyrrhus about collective memory: "We cannot say. We are men only, a brief flare of the torch. Those to come may raise us or lower us as they please. Patroclus may be such as will rise in the future." (Miller, 2021, p.347). This seems to sum up the whole intention of the author while writing this book: reimagining Patroclus and his story, to keep him in the memory of this generation.

The duality of the good and the bad Achilles is also related to the one we find in *The Iliad* and the Achilles Miller created through Patroclus's eyes. He sees him through a romanticized lens, as we can see in: "[h]is face is innocent, sleep-smoothed and sweetly boyish. I love to see it. This is his truest self, earnest and guileless, full of mischief, but without malice" (Miller, 2021, p.299). Again, Patroclus is always alluding to Achilles's honesty and how it has been corrupted by his circumstances. He blames Agamemnon and Odysseus for ruining his Achilles with their "wily double meanings, their lies and games of power. They have confounded him, tied him to a stake and baited

him. (...) I would untie him if I could. If he would let me" (Miller, 2021, p.299). Patroclus wants to untie Achilles from his pride and bring him back to the honest young man. He does this constantly, trying to bring Achilles to his human side. Miller has spoken of this duality within Homeric heroes as well:

> [Achilles is] such a wonderful foil for Odysseus. You know that between *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,* we have these two men who are so opposite from each other in so many ways. (...) Achilles the young, idealistic brash, honest, proud warrior. And then in *The Odyssey*, we have the liar, the politician, and the manipulator. (Illing, 2020, 1:01:50-1:01:58)

Within this tale of the two Achilles, we have another layer of what he has sacrificed by coming to Troy. The hero knowingly forfeited his life by coming to war, in order to be remembered. As he says in the novel "[m]y life is my reputation. It is all I have. I will not live much longer. Memory is all I can hope for" (Miller, 2021, p.280). Just like in *The Iliad*, Achilles takes great offense regarding Agamemnon's actions, because of what they mean. Achilles is the only prince that is there without an oath, and he is doing this for his future glory, therefore, when Agamemnon takes Briseis away publicly, he is disrespecting him, thus tainting his legacy. Patroclus knows that Achilles has made a great sacrifice by giving up his life in favour of future glory, therefore, we can see him striving to protect the way Achilles will be remembered constantly, for example in "[h]e would be hated now. No one would remember his glory, or his honesty, or his beauty; all his gold would be turned to ashes and ruin" (Miller, 2021, p.306). Miller has referred to this aspect of the paths Achilles could have chosen, stating that,

> The thing about Achilles is that he gets remembered as the killing machine, the ultimate soldier. But in *The Iliad*, Homer represents him as this beautiful singer as well. It's almost as if *The Iliad* and the Trojan War hadn't happened, he could have been another Orpheus. So I wanted to honor that side of him. (Naughtie, 2018, 12:33-12:50)

The idea of Achilles choosing the wrong path is made very clear when Hector starts to burn their ships and we can see him choosing his pride over his heart or his divine side over his human one. Patroclus thinks of ways to persuade him to fight for the Greeks and says: "Save them for me. I know what I am asking of you. But I ask it. For me" (Miller, 2021, p.308). To which Achilles answers: "Anything else," (Miller, 2021, p.308). Patroclus tries again by pulling at his heartstrings,

stating: "If you love me-"(Miller, 2021, p.308). But Achilles interrupts him with a crack in his unbothered persona by saying:

> No! (...) I cannot! If I yield, Agamemnon can dishonour me whenever he wishes. The kings will not respect me, nor the men! (...) Do you think I wish them all to die? But I cannot. I cannot! I will not let him take this from me! (Miller, 2021, p.308)

It is at this point that Patroclus finds something to which Achilles agrees: "Send the Myrmidons at least. Send me in your place. Put me in your armour and I will lead the Myrmidons. They will think it's you" (Miller, 2021, p.308). Patroclus persuades him by appealing to his fame and telling him that "(...) your phantom is more powerful than Agamemnon's whole army" (Miller, 2021, p.308) as Patroclus plays with Achilles's pride strings, showing that just by appearing, he would terrify the trojans and that would embarrass Agamemnon since it was not even him. It is also worth noting that the choice of phantom here is also a foreshadowing. At this point, we understand that Achilles values fame more than his love for Patroclus as he lets Patroclus do it when he appealed to his pride but denied him when he appealed to his love. Even Meleager was persuaded by his love of Cleopatra[12]; however, Achilles seems to be even more corrupted by his hubris than Meleager. Since it is Patroclus the one to bring him to his human side, and he is no longer able to do so, we understand that Achilles is truly lost. He is clearly at the pinnacle of his pride or hubris at this point, which coincides with the version of Achilles that is portrayed in *The Iliad*.

After this, the roles are reversed, and it is Achilles's turn to help Patroclus put on Achilles's armour. While he does it, he reiterates that Patroclus cannot leave the camp or get close to the Trojan walls. He also tells him to "[b]e careful," (Miller, 2021, p.311) and Patroclus answers with an "I will." (Miller, 2021, p.311). And those are their last words to each other, even though they are followed by Patroclus thinking "[t]here was more to say, but for once we did not say it. There would be other times for speaking, tonight and tomorrow and all the days after that" (Miller, 2021, p.311). The mention of hope for a tonight and a tomorrow together makes the character's death even more impactful.

Halperin mentions "the tradition of the heroic warrior with his subordinate male pal or sidekick (who inevitably dies), in addition to the patron-client model of male friendship, there is

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[12] In the story, there is an analogy between Meleager and Cleopatra's relationship, and Achilles and Patroclus's. The first serves as a cautionary tale of what happens when a someone lets their pride ruin their judgment.

another tradition that emphasizes equality, mutuality, and reciprocity in love between men" (Halperin, 2000, p.99). He builds upon this notion,

> (...) Aristotle championed precisely such a reciprocal model of friendship between male equals, and he wrote, most influentially, that the best sort of friend is "another self," an allos autos or alter ego (9.4 [1166a31]). The sentiment is echoed repeatedly through the centuries: a true friend is part of oneself, indistinguishable from oneself. True friends have a single mind, a single heart in two bodies. (...) We find the theme of the inseparability of male friends in both life and death repeated time and again from representations of Achilles and Patroclus. (Halperin, 2000, p.100)

When Patroclus puts on Achilles's armour, in a sense, we can see them become "oneself, indistinguishable from [each other]" (Halperin, 2000, p.100). He seems to embody Achilles himself, and it is most evident in:

> Perhaps it was the armour, moulding me. Perhaps it was the years of watching him. But the position my shoulder found was not the old wobbling awkwardness. (...) And then, before I could think about what I did, I threw (...) If he bled, if his skull split to show his brain, I did not see it. Dead, I thought. (Miller, 2021, p.312)

This is a call back to the way Achilles did not think before killing[13]. Patroclus does everything Achilles's told him not to do, as he was guided by "that feeling (...) of pure balance, of the world, poised, and waiting" (Miller, 2021, p.312) that was normally associated with Achilles. We start to see that not only does he embody Achilles's fighting ability, but his recklessness too. He starts to think of himself as Achilles: "Greeks behind me screaming my name. His name." (Miller, 2021, p.312). And like Achilles, he throws his spear and manages to kill every single person to whom he aims. Since Patroclus worked in the medical tent, he knows the weak spots of the soldiers, "[f]rom [his] days in the white tent [he] know[s] every frailty [the soldiers] have. It is so easy." (Miller, 2021, p.313). And just as it came naturally to him to cure and save the people in the white tent, it comes naturally to him to kill the Trojans. There is a stark difference between the Patroclus who had to overcome the thought of Achilles killing people and the Patroclus in Achilles's armour. Corrupted by an ambition that blinds him, Patroclus starts to climb the wall. This is a call-back to the first time

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[13] "I did not think at all" (Miller, 2021, p.208).

Patroclus saw the walls of Troy and thought that only someone delusional would try to climb them. Nevertheless, here we can see how he does it anyway:

> Yet I am climbing. I will crack their uncrackable city and capture Helen, the precious gold yolk within. I imagine dragging her out under my arm, dumping her before Menelaus. Done. No more men will have to die for her vanity. (Miller, 2021, p.316)

Patroclus has never portrayed any ambition for power, but when he is dressed in Achilles's armour, he strives for more, which is what inevitably gets him killed. Secondly, Patroclus has always portrayed sympathy for women, but when he is dressed as Achilles, he blames Helen for the war, even though he had previously expressed that it was not her fault.

After understanding that Patroclus has died, Achilles loses his alter ego, his soulmate. Just like Patroclus has made clear throughout the novel, Achilles does not want to live after his death, because a part of him is also gone. This can be seen in the novel and *The Iliad*, in the way Achilles lets go of the value of his pride and glory, the moment he understands that Patroclus has died. He understands that he made the wrong choice, and the importance that he put on his pride, becomes obsolete. Achilles regretting the choice of his glory over his future and his soulmate is mentioned by the author in an interview:

> We see [Achilles] again in *The Odyssey*. Odysseus goes down to the mouth of the underworld and calls the shades out, and Achilles and Patroclus are there, and he speaks to Achilles. And Odysseus says, 'you know Achilles, here you are. You're famous, just like you wanted. You're king of the dead. It must feel great.' Achilles basically says 'no I made the wrong choice it's better to be alive and to be nothing but to be King of the dead'. (Illing, 2020, 13:00- 13:15)

Coming back to what Miller stated in the first interview,

> I have always found this a tantalizing and tragic path not taken – Achilles as a creator, instead of a destroyer. Throughout the novel, Patroclus fights to help Achilles keep that human, creative side—to be the man, not just the warrior. It is also a reminder that none of us are just one thing. There is always more complexity beneath. (Carstensen, 2012)

Nevertheless, Miller does not reimagine the path not taken by Achilles, she makes it more obvious in her retelling of the story. She tries to convey this message of the perils of choosing inhumanity and pride over one's humanity, and how Achilles had to deal with the repercussions of

that. The duality of Achilles can be seen as Patroclus's romanticizing his lover, or the duality within Achilles as the human and the god, or even both. Regardless, we know that by choosing the path tailored by the gods, he ultimately chose wrong and how "Achilles smiles as his face strikes the earth" (Miller, 2021, p.337) when Paris kills him is evidence of that.

2. Miller's depiction of Achilles and Patroclus's Relationship and how it affects its Reception

In *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller's attribution of the meaning of the text is done so through her background as a Classic's scholar and the most obvious intertextual aspect of her book is that it is a rereading of *The Iliad*. Nevertheless, it is the interpretation of a text through a 21st-century woman's point of view as she uses the ideas of Plato, Aeschylus, and many others to write the romance between those characters. The characters were not hers obviously, but her interpretation is. All these aspects and intertexts are joined in the final work, creating a mixture of the writer's background, Homer's work, the texts read by the writer, and finally, how the readers read it. We must bear in mind that the author's intent and how it is read are inevitably different. Additionally, we can see how Madeline Miller's intertextuality came to be in the book, but since we live in a social media-curated moment in history, we can also see the reader's reception through their reviews of the book (either written or in video format). These can be influenced by their ethnicity, sexuality, knowledge of the classics, or even how the book was recommended to them (as the recommendation can also affect their interpretation of the text). All of these aspects relate to Barthes' knitted web of what is the meaning of a text since all of the readers of *The Song of Achilles* are made of what they have "already read" and of what was already written.

In the novel, Achilles and Patroclus's sexual orientation is not explored beyond their love for each other. Although they have a sexual encounter with Deidamia, neither seems interested in said activity. They partake in a same-sex relationship that can be called gay or homosexual. The term dates back to "1869, when (...) "homosexuality" first appeared in print" (Halperin, 2000, p.89). Nowadays, the term,

> Applies to both partners, whether active or passive, whether gendered normatively or deviantly. The hallmark of "homosexuality," in fact, is the refusal to distinguish between same-sex sexual partners or to rank them by treating one of them as more (or less) homosexual than the other. (Halperin, 2000, p.110)

This description is accurate for Achilles since he does not show any sexual interest in other women. Patroclus, however, shows a connection with Briseis, stating that he could imagine a life with her, had Achilles not appeared in his life. This is more evident in:

> There is only her small hand on my stomach, and the softness of her cheeks as I stroke it. It is strange how well she fits there. How easily I touch my lips to her hair,

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soft and smelling of lavender. She sighs a little, nestles closer. Almost, I can imagine that this is my life, held in the sweet circle of her arms. I would marry her, and we would have a child. Perhaps if I had never known Achilles. (Miller, 2021, p.298)

Nonetheless, this connection is not developed enough to be called anything more than platonic. These relationships can be labelled as such in Miller's narrative since they existed when she wrote the story. However, they do not translate to the Homeric text.

To some extent it is impossible to avoid some projection of present mores onto the past, particularly when the past's ability to speak for itself is limited. At least one reason Achilles and Patroclus's relationship remains opaque (and therefore malleable in adaptation) is that modern readers simply lack sufficient evidence to fully reconstruct the past. Therefore, to make sense of ancient sexualities, interpreters inevitably fill in the gaps with their own sexual mores, often without noticing what they themselves are doing. In this sense all interpretations of ancient sexualities are acts of reception, and the shifting horizon of expectation from generation to generation – or even reader to reader – can yield very different results. (Delbar, 2022, p.23)

As it was previously stated, Miller wrote this story part out of frustration since, in her own words she "knew that interpreting their relationship as romantic was a very old idea, and [she] was angry at the way homophobia was erasing this reading" (Miller, 2021, p. X). When studying *The Iliad,* the "sense of [Achilles'] physical devastation spoke deeply to [her] of a true and total intimacy between two men" (Miller, n.d.-a), especially after Patroclus's death. Additionally, her main inspiration was Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, and his "passionate approach to the story, and his bold handling of the characters" (Minkowich, n.d.). The initial pillars of her novel, cemented by all the inspirations detailed in a former section, created a story that portrays a clear homosexual love between both characters. In Miller's words,

I think that now we are at a place in our culture where we can re-accept that interpretation of the story. It felt like it was a love story already, but I sometimes think the idea of them as lovers has been a little bit whitewashed from the record. (Day, 2012)

We are going to see how the author depicted their relationship.

Firstly, since she was depicting a relationship set in Ancient Greece and dealing with mythology, it is important to come back to the aspect of pederasty. A pederast, as the online

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it, is "a man who desires or engages in sexual activity with a boy" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c), which nowadays entails something very problematic and illegal. However, in Ancient Greece, this practice was common in certain regions, as a rite of passage, in which an adult male (erastes) would pursue his interest for a younger boy (eromenos). William Armstrong Percy explains that "in his early twenties the young aristocratic lover (erastes) took a teenaged youth, the eromenos or beloved, to bond with and train before going on at about age thirty to matrimony and fatherhood" (Percy, 1996, p.1). Nevertheless, there were rules regarding the courtship, as David Cohen states in *Law, Sexuality and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens*:

> Among the Greeks, we are told, active homosexuality was regarded as perfectly natural: sexual desire was not distinguished according to its object. There was, however, a prohibition against males of any age adopting a submissive role that was unworthy of a free citizen. (Cohen, 1998, p.171)

Since the idea of pederasty is archaic and it would have been harmful to perpetuate it due to the stereotype that unjustly marks gay men as paedophiles, it was only appropriate for Miller to erase that part of the Greek tradition in her retelling. Moreover, pederasty was not culturally accepted during the timeline of the Homeric text, it was a tradition that came down the line. Additionally, Achilles and Patroclus's relationship "as the men are characterized in *The Iliad,* does not easily fit into a pederastic model" (Barnes, 2014, p.16). The pederastic model argued that an older man (erastes) would be the more experienced and the younger one (eromenos) would be the most beautiful, therefore catching the attention of the first (Barnes, 2014). In *The Iliad,* Menoetius says Patroclus is the oldest, but it is Achilles who is the most experienced and apt of the two (Barnes, 2014). Furthermore,

> [C]onsidering the way that Patroclus comes to Achilles, like a girl to her mother, and the way Achilles mourns Patroclus, it might make sense that Achilles is the erastes, the dominant figure in a pederastic relationship, more closely associated with a caretaker role. But this behavior cannot be reconciled with his age relative to Patroclus', if the two are meant to be pederastic lovers. (Barnes, 2014, p.15)

Miller solves all these issues by giving the boys the same age and removing completely the pederastic model from the novel. Miller explains her decision by using the *Achilleid* as inspiration,

where "the boys are the same age, whereas in *The Iliad* it's implied that Patroclus is older" (Ciabattari, 2017).

By erasing pederasty, she builds a relationship in the novel that values honesty, companionship, and love. She explains it in the following terms: "I was deeply moved by the love between these two characters—whose respect and affection for each other, despite the horrors around them, model the kind of relationship we all can aspire to" (Miller, n.d.-a). She also states that "[b]oth characters are equals at an emotional level, even when Patroclus has no status and Achilles is considered almost a God among men" (Otero, 2020, p.20). By basing their relationship on equality, mutual respect, and honesty, she is creating a model for a healthy relationship, despite all the hurdles that are eventually thrown at them or created by them. Thus, Miller tries to convey the message that a queer relationship can be healthy, despite the monstrosities that are happening in its background. Going further by locating the first "erotic scene between Patroclus and Achilles in the mountains and green environment, it can be argued that Miller aimed to naturalise their actions, challenging the norms that denaturalise same-sex relations" (Bogaard, 2020, p.21). Portraying a healthy same-sex relationship is very important, especially for a book that is so popular with the Young Adult audience.

Despite being a retelling of *The Iliad*, *The Song of Achilles* can also be seen as a coming-of-age story for the lovers, a story that focuses on their journey through life. Starting at Patroclus's childhood and ending when both lovers are reunited in the afterlife. Instead of focusing on the characters coming to terms with their sexuality as the main plot, the author lets them have a full-fledged narrative that, while still being about their love, goes beyond that. The conflict of the story is not based on them coming to terms with their sexuality, or others accepting them. Instead, the motivations and main plot portray a misfit (Patroclus) thrown in a narrative of gods, going to the Trojan war with his lover and finding some kind of normalcy within a war. "Achilles and Patroclus's love story largely exists in secret, just focusing on them and not the surrounding society, which allows the author to delve into the true raw beauty of their connection" (Mor, 2021). Even when we think about the trope of the homophobic parent, in which Thetis seems to fit perfectly, one could argue that sexuality is not the main factor when considering her actions. Coming back to Thetis' rape, we have established that this event tainted her perception of humans. Therefore, she tries to take Achilles away from Patroclus because she wants to protect her son by preventing Patroclus's humanity to contaminate him.

This is not to say that there is anything wrong with a queer story about a character coming to terms with their sexuality and all the usual tropes it entails. However, it is important to have a myriad of narratives of the queer experience in order to achieve a wider range of representation. As a queer reader of the novel has put it:

> With most queer literature, the time period is modern. There is nothing particularly wrong with this, but I often find myself wishing for more period pieces that feature LGBTQ characters. (...) we get modern storylines that usually centers around a character coming out, a forbidden love, or a steamy gay affair. In moderation these stories are fine- these are situations that plenty of queer people have dealt with, but let's change the narrative a little (...) [In *The Song of Achilles*] there are themes of the "forbidden love" trope that is so common in LGBTQ literature and media, but the difference is that this text focuses on the beauty of human connection, not the struggle for human connection. (Chadwick, 2020)

The depiction of the queer struggle is seen too often, which makes it seem as if a queer person's whole life is a coming-out story, instead of it being just a chapter in most people's lives, "there are relationships and growth and evolution just like with anyone else. Having stories that depict queer relationships as the same sort of sidenote a heterosexual relationship would have is a key point in diversity and inclusivity" (Kelly, 2022). It is this kind of side note that Miller achieves in her depiction of Patroclus and Achilles's relationship, retelling the story of a young demigod and his partner coming to terms with the tragic reality of war and their imminent death. This aspect of Miller's representation of the story impacted favourably the reception of the book. As a queer reader of the novel stated, "It serves as a great example of LGBTQ+ representation in that it approaches and treats gay romance the same way straight romance would be written about. There is so much more besides their sexuality that makes this book great" (Mor, 2021).

3. Other Depictions of Achilles and Patroclus

There has been a lot of speculation regarding the relationship between Patroclus, Achilles, and Briseis. Despite the fact that several adaptations of the Homeric text have been made, this section will focus on the film *Troy* and the miniseries called *Troy: The Fall of a City*. Both adaptations have a different take on the relationship. As we have seen, the Homeric text leaves a lot of room for interpretation, which is something positive, as it creates space for the various receptions of *The Iliad,* thus, allowing us to investigate the social implications and traditions in which the text is received.

The movie *Troy* was released in 2004 and received a positive response. It was directed by Wolfgang Peterson and written by David Benioff. The movie follows the plot points of *The Iliad* albeit with artistic liberties regarding certain aspects, which is typical of most adaptations. The first shot of the character of Achilles is one of him presumably hungover, surrounded by women, naked. He is very clearly coded as a heterosexual man. Performed by Brad Pitt, his first shot in the movie shows the audience how this character is supposed to be interpreted: a virile, eroticised heterosexual man. The speculations about his relationship with Patroclus are completely nullified, as he is made to be Achilles's younger cousin, which in turn, gives the audience a clear message that their affection is strictly familial. By making Patroclus the younger one, Benioff is ironically adhering to the same "age change [that Athenians used] to open up a sexual interpretation within their paradigm of pederasty, which required an age difference for acceptable same-sex erotic relations" (Delbar, 2022, p.25). The de-erotization of their relationship goes beyond their cousinhood. Instead of sharing a hut, like in *The Iliad*[14], Patroclus is not only removed from said hut but is only allowed in there once. Moreover, when he is inside, Achilles and Patroclus are far away from each other, and they never appear in the same shot while in the room. Thus, creating another layer distancing them (Delbar, 2022). The character of Patroclus, played by Garrett Hedlund, is stripped away from any depth, and Achilles's wrath after his death is attributed to their familial bond. Additionally, Benioff writes off any possible assumption left, by focusing the romantic plot on Achilles and Briseis' heterosexual relationship. "With a slight tweak of a family tree, the story more fully conforms to heteronormative expectations" (Delbar, 2022, p.26). The character of Briseis,

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[14] "And deep in his well-built lodge Achilles slept/ with the woman he brought from Lesbos, Phorbas' daughter,/ Diomede in all her beauty sleeping by his side./ And over across from him Patroclus slept/with the sashed and lovely Iphis by his side,/whom Prince Achilles gave him the day he took/ the heights of Scyros, Enyeus' rocky stronghold" (Homer et al., 1998, p.274).

played by Rose Byrne, is given more depth within the narrative, as we see her accept Achilles's advances in the time they spend in the hut from where Patroclus was removed.

According to Antonio M. Martín-Rodríguez,

> Wolfgang Petersen's filmic version of the Trojan War and the fall of Troy is likely to be the most popular point of reference for at least a generation (...) spectacular cast have made Achilles' image inseparable for many from that of dashing Brad Pitt. (Winkler & Martín-Rodríguez, 2015, p.203)

Consequently, it is only natural that its depiction of Achilles (the quintessential archetypal hero and the model of masculinity) is the one most people, who have not read the Homeric text, have in mind. And thus, it becomes a point of comparison to Miller's novel. In her words: "It was just incredible how they had to make Patroclus a younger cousin of Achilles [in Troy]. They established a close kinship link between them so that there wouldn't be any possibility of an erotic dimension to Achilles' feelings" (Minkowich, n.d.). The denial of homoeroticism might just relate to the strong debate that dictates Achilles and Patroclus's relationship to be one of friendship and camaraderie. Nevertheless, it is also a valid and widely accepted reading of *The Iliad* and one that gives us a better look into the societal implications of the reception of the classic text.

A more recent depiction of the Homeric text (alas less successful) is the BBC's miniseries *Troy: the fall of a city*. Aired in 2018, the series presents a colour-blind cast who got many viewers angry, especially for their depiction of Achilles as a black man, David Gyasi, instead of the white, blond, blue-eyed Brad Pitt. The reviewers are clear about being offended by this portrayal of Achilles; therefore, such rage does not concern his sexual orientation, or perhaps it holds less importance at the time of the reception. In David Farr's *Troy: The Fall of a City*, we have an Achilles that follows neither the depiction of Peterson's undoubtedly heterosexual macho-man nor Miller's monogamously homonormative demigod. "They saw Achilles' affections for Briseis and Patroclus not as mutually exclusive or even competing, but co-existent" (Delbar, 2022, p.24). In this depiction, Achilles is bisexual, a concept very hard to grasp in the binary discourse about Patroclus and Achilles's relationship. When coming across the question of whether Achilles and Patroclus were lovers, the answers given follow either Miller's or Peterson's interpretation. Farr's depiction of their bisexuality and a polygamous relationship with Briseis should please all sides of the conversation. In episode four of the series, titled "*Spoils of War*", we have a clear intimate scene between the three of them at the beach. The fluidity and openness of Achilles, Patroclus, and Briseis's relationship, as well as their sexuality, can also answer the various romantic interests that Achilles

is rumoured to have had throughout time[15]. This depiction of the Homeric hero's sexuality is very different from the one we can see in 2004. It reveals a changing society, that has different ideals, and this series shows that the conversations around gender, relationships, and sexuality are shifting. Delbar explains that the expectations regarding relationships are shifting:

> Thirty-eight years of shifting expectations on how human sexuality might manifest resulted in radically different interpretations of the same base text, particularly when practices and identities such as bisexuality and polyamory were named and normalized. What is inconceivable to one generation is credible to another. (Delbar, 2022, p.24)

This aspect of *The Iliad's* reception is very interesting, as there is no change in the Homeric text *per se*, instead what changes are the values of the society in which the text is received and interpreted. It is important, however, to highlight that no interpretation is more legitimate than the other. I would argue that, if there is evidence for a heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual reading, then all speculations are valid because there is no correct answer. Additionally, even though,

> Queer commentary on *The Iliad* has, (...) often been limited – amongst both classicists and others – by a literalism about sex, an insistence on proving sex and on sex as proof. While classicists, in their adherence to philological-historical method, would admit sexuality only where sex is explicitly narrated (surely, this is the abyss of traditional philology) and while contemporary reception communities have triumphantly imagined the ecstasies of Achilles and Patroclus, the literalism of both groups of readers has foreclosed queer possibilities and revisions. (King & Kozak, 2022, p.43)

Achilles and all the encompassing cast of *The Iliad* are, for all intents and purposes, fictitious. Therefore, a text can be read in many ways, and I would argue that they would all be correct. Barthes killed the author, and I would claim that metaphorical murder is very much legitimate in favour of the reader's freedom to enjoy literary works as they please.

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[15] "The various myths around Achilles include numerous female "lovers": Deidameia, the mother of his son; the Amazon Penthesileia, with whom he fell in love as he killed her; Polyxena, whom his shade demanded be sacrificed on his tomb at death. By the fourteenth century AD, Dante Aligheri placed Achilles in the second circle of his hell with the lustful rather than in the fifth with the wrathful" (Lloyd, 2018).

Such materials allow us to make far richer connections between text and context than is possible with ancient materials and to enhance our understanding of the kinds of connections that might have been apparent to ancient audiences, as they participated in post-show gossip of their own. (Blondell, 2008, p.118)

If a queer reader can feel seen in a queer interpretation of the Homeric text, then, that interpretation is as valid and acceptable as the heterosexual reading of the said text. "There is power in identification, in the finding and enlivening of the self within the tradition, and in subsequently making creative – potentially self-transforming, even community-transforming – use of that tradition" (King & Kozak, 2022, p.42). If there has been such a lasting debate about these fictional characters, it is because there is space and evidence for such.

Marco Fantuzzi[16] is correct to point out that Achilles and Patroclus never make physical contact with each other's genitals within the confines of Homer's text and that they instead sleep in separate beds. But must the two be caught in flagrante delectatione as the only possible expression of human sexuality? Or have our own assumptions of what sex is obscured other forms of eroticism? (Delbar, 2022, p.35)

Have the rules for a queer reading of *The Iliad* been stricter than the ones for heterosexual reading? Absolutely. However, this does not negate the validity of either, or both (as we can see in *Troy: The Fall of a City*). It only begs us to question these receptions and the reason for the suitability of one in contrast with the other. The concept of LGBTQ+ and all the labels it incorporates are new, hence they did not exist during the timeline of *The Iliad*. However, it is easy to forget that the concept of heterosexuality is also recent. Therefore, by applying either of them to that era, we are falling into what is called presentism, "a term of abuse conventionally deployed to describe an interpretation of history that is biased towards and coloured by present-day concerns, preoccupations and values" (Armitage, 2022, p.4). Consequently, it is important to have in mind that any label attributed to their relationship or a character's sexuality is anachronistic. However, to Classical Reception studies, it is essential to focus on the ways subsequent societies rationalized them.

Scholars can draw on insights gained through contemporary expressions of human sexuality to provide new starting assumptions in analyzing ancient texts, but also

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[16] In his work titled *Achilles in Love: Intertextual Studies* (Fantuzzi, 2012).

temper these assumptions by studying how the presentation of ancient sexuality in Homer differs from modern practices. (...) The main problem in starting from this approach (...) is that relationship categories are not stable, but rather are constructed and therefore contingent on the surrounding society and time period. (Delbar, 2022, p.24)

Nevertheless, one could argue that inadvertently, history is made of presentisms (Armitage, 2022). The meaning one attributes to certain events of the past is unconsciously connected to the values of the present.

Literal answers about sex (and about characters who, after all, only exist in a poem) do not access questions of sexuality: its historicity, its variability, its cultural locations, whether normative or oppositional, its relations to counter-cultures and to utopic thought and aspiration, its protocols and strategies of representation. (King & Kozak, 2022, p.43)

It comes to the readers to interpret those questions. In Homer's *The Iliad,* one thing is for certain, Patroclus has a great impact on Achilles, either as a lover, friend, companion, or cousin. We know that it is because of him that Achilles comes back to war, and

[A]lthough Achilles explicitly states that he loves Briseis (9.342–3), Diomede[17] is nevertheless an adequate substitute for sexual gratification; Achilles' direct sexual partner is not an irreplaceable point on the bromance parallelogram. Yet when Patroclus dies, all sexual activity ceases. (Delbar, 2022, p.36)

As Madeline Miller has said in her blog "I would also add, more specifically, that I think the culture is ready for the kind of love story that transcends gender and time" (Miller, n.d.-a). Indeed, the depiction of LGBTQ+ characters in today's culture is growing, and six years after Miller's daring depiction of Patroclus and Achilles as a gay couple, we can see them as bisexuals and in a polygamous relationship with Briseis. The continuous act of looking at the classics through new perspectives, helps us understand our place in the present.

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[17] "But Achilles would sleep in the innermost part of the well-built hut; and a woman whom he had brought from Lesbos slept beside him, beautiful-cheeked Diomede, the daughter of Phorbas. Patroclus laid on the opposite side, and next to him was well-dressed Iphis, whom godlike Achilles gave to him when he took steep Scyrus, the city of Enyeus]." (Homer, 1998, p.274).

The moments of discrepancy between Homer and his adaptors – the ways in which these receptions pull Achilles and Patroclus into more definite realms of sexuality intelligible to modern audiences – are critical points of ingress for exploring the contours of their relationship at both ends of their reception history. (Delbar, 2022, p.23)

4. The Importance of LGBTQ+ Representation

Gordon Allport defines prejudice as "feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward a person or thing, prior to, or not based on, actual experience" (Allport, 1954, p.6). It can come from the lack of knowledge of a community which can lead to unjustified hatred and stereotyping. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines homophobia as the "irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or gay people" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). Since people with prejudices and homophobes have a lack of knowledge, in this case, of the LGBTQ+ community, this can lead to negative stereotyping. Coming back to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, stereotype is defined as "something conforming to a fixed or general pattern. Especially: a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-d). Prejudice, homophobia, and stereotyping have in common their origin in ignorance. Throughout the years, the queer community has been a target of prejudice, homophobia, and stereotyping that developed from generalizations, which in turn came from a lack of knowledge. These stereotypes have negatively impacted the way outsiders look at the community, thus creating a hostile environment for those in it. Ignorance makes people believe that homosexuality is a choice or a disease that can be cured, among other things.

This is especially clear when we take into consideration conversion therapy, which is defined as:

> The use of any of various methods (such as aversive stimulation or religious counselling) in an attempt to change a person's sexual orientation to heterosexual or to change a person's gender identity to correspond to the sex the person has or was identified as having at birth (NOTE: Conversion therapy is generally regarded as having no scientific basis and as being both ineffective and harmful.). (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a)

It has negatively affected the people who go, or have gone, through it. Thankfully, several countries have banned conversion therapy[18], although there are still many who enforce this practice, thus continuing to harmfully affect the lives of queer people in those countries.

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[18] The countries that have banned conversion therapy are: Brazil, Samoa, Fiji, Tawain, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, Malta, Germany, Spain, Australia, Chile, France, Canada, New Zealand and some states in the United States (staff, 2022).

In addition to conversion therapy, in some places being queer is not even legal[19]. This not only negates the sexuality of the people but reinforces homophobia while denying the safety of LGBTQ+ people living in those countries. It has been made worse recently, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in which LGBTQ+ safe spaces for those in the community have shrunken and LGBTQ+ communities saw their rights being crushed again. According to Roberto Igual, governments took,

> Advantage of these circumstances and stepped up their efforts to oppress, persecute, scapegoat, and to violently discriminate against [them]. In many places where laws were already a cause of inequality, things have only got worse.' (...) The proliferation of so-called "LGBT-free zones" in Poland, Indonesia seeking to give new boost to 'conversion therapies' and a reversal of two state-level bans on them in Florida, USA, and laws that could severely restrict the operation of NGOs working with our communities are only a few of the legal provisions that are being advanced across the world.". (Igual, 2020) (ILGA, 2020)

This is a worrisome reality for many LGBTQ+ people and makes it evident that, unfortunately, homophobia is still rampant. In a world where fear and unsafety are a reality for those whose sexual orientation differs from what is traditional because they are not being protected by authorities or even their government. It is necessary to guarantee that there is a way to educate others about those realities and thus make them aware of the ways in which things can change in order to give LGBTQ+ people a safer space in the world.

Nevertheless, because we live in a world where the standard is heterosexual, it is difficult to explain the existence of other realities and all the things that those experiences encompass to those who have no direct contact with an LGBTQ+ person. This othering of anything queer is related to heterosexism, which Herek explains as:

> [A]n ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community. Like racism, sexism, and other ideologies of oppression, heterosexism is manifested both in societal customs and

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[19] "Afghanistan, Algeria, Antigua & Barbuda, Bangladesh, Barbados, Bhutan, Brunei, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Cook Islands, Dominica, Egypt, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Grenada, Guinea, Guyana, Iran, Jamaica, Kenya, Kiribati, Kuwait, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Myanmar, Namibia, Nigeria, Occupied Palestinian Territory (Gaza Strip), Oman, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and The Grenadines, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Togo, Tonga, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe." (team, 2021)

institutions, such as religion and the legal system (referred to here as cultural heterosexism) and in individual attitudes and behaviors (referred to here as psychological heterosexism). (Herek, 1990, pp.316-317)

Furthermore, Herek explains how "[c]ultural heterosexism (...) is so ubiquitous that it is hardly noticeable. (...) This alternation between invisibility and condemnation is readily apparent in four major societal institutions: religion, the law, psychiatry and psychology, and mass media" (Herek, 1990, p.317). The cultural exclusivity of heterosexuality or its vast predominance, makes it seem as if heterosexuality is not only the default but the norm, which in turn, outlies non-heterosexuals. This can have a negative psychological impact on members of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as it feeds prejudice, stereotyping, and fear. In a heterosexist or heteronormative world where white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, and able-bodied people are considered the standard, it is common to see their experience represented in mass media. Therefore, it is imperative to show other realities in order to teach people about them and thus make sure that these communities know that there is a place in the world for them.

Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory, "assumes that stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination of a social minority can be reduced when members of the majority engage in interpersonal contact with members of the respective social minority (Allport, 1954)" (Bond & Compton, 2015, p.719). However, Allport's theory can be challenging, especially for the minority, as it can create "anxiety and hostility [which] are common feelings that hinder intergroup contact" (Miller & Brewer, 1984, p. xv). This can be solved through what can be called Parasocial Contact Hypothesis, which predicts:

> [T]hat television viewers will form impressions and relationships with television characters similar to those that they form with real-life others. In turn, exposure to social minorities on television may have a similar effect in reducing stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination as real-life intergroup contact (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). (Bond & Compton, 2015, p.719)

In short, we have seen that Allport explains that prejudice comes from ignorance, then the effects of this ignorance on the community, and how media can impact the perspectives of heterosexual people on queer people. With Allport's intergroup contact theory, we can deduce that prejudice towards a minority can decrease through contact, and we can relate it to LGBTQ+ people. However, it is the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis that explains why these people can do it through

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a television character, which can take real LGBTQ+ people out of the equation, only depicting a representation of them. The Intergroup Contact Hypothesis puts real queer people in the hands of homophobes whose actions are unpredictable and can be unsafe. It has been proven that portraying positive depictions of queer people, can help heterosexual people change their perspective of them, thus creating a way for heterosexists to understand that their reality is not the monolith. The evidence for this can be seen in a study done in 2015 that examined "the relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality using cross-sectional survey data collected from a sample of heterosexual emerging adults" (Bond & Compton, 2015, p.712). It showed that there is a correlation between having a more positive attitude towards gay people and exposure to gay characters on television. In the study, it is stated that Biden (who at the time, was vice-president of the United States of America) showed "acceptance of same-sex marriage on national television (...) attributing an increase in support for gay equality to the situation comedy Will & Grace" (Bond & Compton, 2015, p.723). Additionally,

> An Entertainment Weekly special report on the portrayal of gay characters on television concluded that young, gay characters were changing the hearts and minds of American audiences because audiences were invested in the characters, regardless of their sexual identities, (...)" Consequently, one can conclude that "television may play a role in heterosexual audiences' perceptions of gay men and women and the issues that they face. (Bond & Compton, 2015, p.718)

We can see that the representation of queer people on television makes for a safe way of combating homophobia, stereotyping, and heterosexism. However, this can only be achieved through positive representation since,

> [W]hether the dominant media discourse defines homosexuality as a perversion, sickness or crime or defines it as a normal expression of human sexuality has a significant impact on how individual gay males or lesbians view themselves and their relationships to society. (Steiner et al., 1993, p.127)

Therefore, villainizing or turning queer people into the punch line in media, impacts the perceptions of straight people on them, as well as the perception they have of themselves. Consequently, when representation is done in a negative light, the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis predicts that it can impact the relationship viewers have with "real-life others" (Bond & Compton, 2015, p.719). This is not to say that there can only be positive depictions of LGBTQ+ characters.

However, what is being said is that it is imperative that writers spend as much time and effort on their depiction of queer people as they spend on straight people, for viewers to understand the depth of their emotions and thus empathise with these characters. Given that when a character is flatly depicted as a stereotype, a villain, or a side character, it is harder to sympathise with them. Queer people have been shown as side characters whose life revolves around the straight main protagonist or as a villain whose villainy comes from their sexuality. Unfortunately, it is through this lens that LGBTQ+ characters have been represented throughout the years:

> When a gay character is portrayed on television, he or she is usually the subject of jokes and stereotypes. The typical manner in which homosexuality is represented on the screen is through a gay male character who is very flamboyant, sexually aggressive, and funny (mainly because he feeds into all of the stereotypes that people have about homosexuality). In those rare instances in which the gay characters are not portrayed in a stereotypical fashion, they do not have a visible sex life on screen (e.g.. Matt Fielding on Melrose Place), or attempts are made to censor it if writers attempt to challenge this norm (as on Ellen). (Levina et al., 2000, p.742)

The 2015 study mentioned earlier concluded that positive representation of gay characters on television,

> [V]icarious interactions with gay characters reduced uncertainty about gay individuals among these heterosexual viewers, created feelings of connectedness to the gay characters and, in turn, increased endorsement of gay equality. (...) A fundamental assumption of the parasocial contact hypothesis is that the inter- group interactions must be positive and rewarding for the majority group member if parasocial contact is to increase positive attitudes toward the social minority. (Bond & Compton, 2015, p.728)

And to add to this study, the organization GLAAD in 2020 determined that,

> [N]on-LGBTQ Americans who had been exposed to LGBTQ people in media were more likely to accept LGBTQ people and be supportive of LGBTQ issues in comparison to respondents who had not been exposed to LGBTQ people in the media. (...) non-LGBTQ consumers exposed to LGBTQ people in the media had higher levels of comfortability with LGBTQ people in their daily lives. (...) Respondents also looked

favorably upon companies who included LGBTQ people in their advertisements. (Procter & Gamble & GLAAD, 2020)

These studies exhibit that positive gay representation can have a positive impact on heterosexual viewers, whose parasocial connection with the characters makes them more likely to endorse gay equality. It not only creates a better outlook of the gay community for heterosexuals but also a safer place for said community since it can decrease the prejudiced homophobia that stunts the freedom and safety of LGBTQ+ members.

In addition to a positive or at least a well-developed representation of queer characters, it is important to have representations that are mainstream, because this increases the possibility for both queer people and the population at large to see them. By portraying these realities to a mainstream audience, it makes it easier to expose them to the people who need to see themselves represented. And even though they are only watching a fictional character, knowing that the character shares their reality can be comforting and create a sense of companionship, since queer people are less likely to find that in their real life. Even members of a racial minority can more frequently see themselves represented in their own homes. The same cannot be said for some members of the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, by seeing their reality being represented, their feeling of otherness can perhaps be lessened by having the ability to see others like them. Therefore, LGBTQ+ representation is important because "seeing proper representation validates their experiences and affirms their existence because it lets them know that they are not alone in their struggles. (...) the lack of representation often encourages hostile environments that are very distressing for queer folks" (Kaur, 2021). It reaffirms their identity in the media and instead of living in isolation or hiding such a huge part of themselves, they can understand that their experience is valid and shared. On the other hand, it is a message within itself that if a member of the community watches a movie, series, or any other popular form of entertainment and they cannot see any representation. If the most popular and well-loved movies or series have no LGBTQ+ representation, it makes clear that their reality is not worth representing. And even in sci-fi and fantasy, where fiction is so detached from the rules of reality, by not representing LGBTQ+ people, it makes it seem that not even in escapism, there is a place for them. This sense of self-doubt can be detrimental to the mental health of members of the community. Furthermore, this loneliness added to the message sent by the creators of media that the LGBTQ+ reality is not worth representing isolates queer people even further.

Regardless of if this lack of representation of identity is related to race, gender, or sexuality, representation matters because it demonstrates to those who are represented, that they have a place in society, and as human beings, we thrive on societal living. Consequently, when creators release a movie or series to the wider target audience possible while excluding non-heterosexual, transgendered, non-neurotypical, or non-white because their reality is not "universally shared", it makes clear that the real target audience of those artistic mediums is the white, heterosexual, neurotypical, able-bodied, and cis-gendered, which are the population with generally the most representation. According to Gross,

> Representation in the mediated "reality" of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that nonrepresentation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or political power bases. That is, while the holders of real power- the ruling class - do not require (or seek) mediated visibility, those who are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their places in part through their relative invisibility. (Gross, 2020, p.143)

Therefore, representation and its inherent visibility can make it easier to take the LGBTQ+ community out of this hierarchy.

Nevertheless, the stereotyping of LGBTQ+ characters has decreased, and more positive depictions of those characters are increasing. The organization GLAAD has made a study called *Where We Are on TV* which annually analyses "the overall diversity of primetime scripted series regulars on broadcast networks and assesses the number of LGBTQ regular and recurring characters on primetime scripted cable programming and original scripted streaming series on the services" (Deerwater, 2022). The study gathered that from the "775 series regular characters scheduled to appear on scripted broadcast primetime programming for the 2021-2022 season, 92 characters (11.9 percent) are LGBTQ." This represents an increase of 2.8 from the previous year, making a new record high percentage of LGBTQ series regulars on broadcast. There are an additional 49 LGBTQ recurring characters on the platform for a total of 141 LGBTQ characters on broadcast (Deerwater, 2022). This upsurge can mean that "[t]he growing state of LGBTQ representation on television is a signal that Hollywood is truly starting to recognize the power of telling LGBTQ stories that audiences around the world connect with, (...)" (Deerwater, 2022). This is a silver lining, that can mean that "[a]t a time when anti-LGBTQ legislation and violence continues to increase, it is cultural institutions like television that take on the crucial role of changing hearts and minds through diverse and inclusive storytelling" (Deerwater, 2022).

There is also an increase in LGBTQ+ representation in gaming. Games are featuring more queer characters, relationships, and stories.

> Games are giving players more options to create characters that reflect them, removing binary gender selection, building character customisation that allows for subversive and nuanced gender expression, including non-binary pronoun options, and more. Games that offer the opportunity for romance are starting to allow players LGBTQIA+ romance options. This representation is not only making games more enjoyable for LGBTQIA+ players but also helping gamers explore their queerness in safe, virtual spaces (MacDonald, 2022).

This ability to see themselves represented not only on television but also in games makes it easier for members of the queer community to discover themselves safely. Additionally, both mediums offer a safe space for queer people to explore their sexuality. John Faciane, an associate producer in the Sim's developer, has stated that the representation of gay men in games helped him come out and made him more comfortable with who he is (MacDonald, 2022). He added that:

> The next generation can see this representation, they don't have to have the same experiences that others may have had growing up. [Decades ago] there wasn't a lot that you could see in the gaming space or even media in general that felt like that was your identity. Now you can see more of it, and it is really important. I'm hopeful that the industry can start to take on this challenge. (MacDonald, 2022)

Like Faciane, most queer people see the increase in LGBTQ+ representation as something beneficial. Older generations of the queer community generally state that they would have benefited if they had the representation that is now portrayed on television when they were growing up. Many admitted that they would have come out earlier if they had the positive representation that we are starting to see. However, many of them grew up when gay marriage was illegal and for even older generations, when being LGBTQ+ was illegal. As we have seen, nowadays there are still places where being gay is illegal, and how harmful it can be for them. Even though Hollywood and gaming companies are creating more space for LGBTQ+ narratives, LGBTQ+ people still experience the fear of being excluded from their family or group of friends by coming out. There is still the inner denial of their queerness in order to avoid conflict or an unsafe situation. LGBTQ+ representation matters because it gives them a voice and shows them that their reality has a place in the world.

5. The Importance of LGBTQ+ Literary Representation

Even though the kind of representation that was mentioned in the previous section has been visual, it can be argued that literary representation can be as beneficial. While the medium is very different and television is massively spread in a way that differs greatly from literary works, the root values of the importance of the first can be used to justify the latter. Reading is a very immersive experience, that leaves room for interpretation, and even though visual media can leave room for interpretation as well, visual information is more readily available for viewers, while literary information can be adapted to the circumstances of the reader. Helen W. Hartley argues that:

> [B]ooks can aid in developing personality. In even subtler ways they may serve. Not infrequently progress toward maturity is blocked by emotional stresses and tensions within the individual. If these can be relieved or lessened through the medium of literature, as many a therapist claims, the way is cleared for more direct progress. Such a relieving of tension may come through imaginative identification with a character in a book. A person who feels himself a member of a socially undesirable group may gain a wholesome self-esteem as he reads of the achievement of one like himself of that group. Through a kind of identification he feels himself achieving; he discovers himself to be of greater worth than he had dreamed. (Hartley, 1951, p.201)

Just like in media and gaming, literary works offer a safe space for the members of the LGBTQ+ community to explore their sexuality. It allows for self-discovery and gives the reader the ability to read about realities close to theirs, without being in anxiety-inducing situations. Again, as a minority that is less likely to find people of the same community (without specifically looking for them), LGBTQ+ people need to have safe spaces where they can explore their sexuality without the pressure of finding a label immediately. Furthermore, many LGBTQ+ people can be put in very unsafe situations if they were to explore their sexuality more openly. Therefore, just like movies, series, and games, literary works are a way to explore or see themselves represented in a more readily available and safe manner. Additionally, it can be a great source of escapism for members of the community. It might also impact heterosexuals in their perception of the queer community since it allows them to explore other realities that are not considered the norm and thus vicariously live through them. Coming back to the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis, one might argue that a reader can form relationships with characters in a book and if that book has positive LGBTQ+ representation, maybe it can make them understand reality from the point of view of the minority. Considering that reading is such an immersive activity, maybe they can empathise with the

character and reflect that on "real-life others" (Bond & Compton, 2015, p.719). This can create an empathetic look towards the LGBTQ+ community, and thus make them advocate for gay equality, as we have seen before with visual representation.

Moreover, there is a need for LGBTQ+ narratives to be represented. Not only because they allow members of the community to explore their sexuality or for escapism. As Blondell states, "[t]he desire of the marginalized to 'feel historical,' a response in part to mainstream history from which they have been excluded, has given additional point to the appropriation of historical models as 'evidence' that one's 'tribe' has (always) existed" (Blondell, 2009, p.117). This especially relates to *The Song of Achilles*, because it gives LGBTQ+ people a way to immerse themselves in a historical time where there is not much queer representation, especially for the Young Adult audience.

This need to feel historical or simply represented has existed for a long time and this is more evident when we take into consideration fanfiction. As the Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary tells us, Fanfictions are "stories involving popular fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted on the Internet", which changes the dynamic, by putting the receiver of the story as a provider of another story with the same roots. Thus, the readers are the ones making the rules of the narrative of the original work.

> The mushrooming of fan fiction since the rise of the Internet evinces a similar attitude of ownership towards texts and characters on the part of the audience. (...) In some cases, fan fiction itself feeds back into the original product (...). The production conditions of much popular culture—at least in visual media—make the concept of the author meaningless, if not actively misleading. Finally, there is no standard version of many popular texts; they may exist only as part of a process (...). (Blondell & Gamel, 2005, p.117)

Fanfiction, or the rewriting of stories by fans, is not a recent thing that arrived with the internet. The online space, however, has made it mainstream.

> Like *Wide Sargasso Sea and Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern Are Dead*, fanfiction asserts the rights of storytellers to take possession of characters and settings from other people's narratives and tell their own tales about them—to expand and build upon the original, and, when they deem it necessary, to tweak it and optimize it for their own purposes. (Jamison, 2013, p. XII)

This is what many authors have done regarding well-known texts and the classics. Rewriting a story to prolong, explore and represent other realities in the same universe is not new, though, it does show that those who need to do it in order to be represented, are revealing that there is a gap in the readership for them. Thus, it becomes necessary to ask the reason for this gap and why it has impacted them.

How queer people were represented, for example, in television was through coded messages. "In fact, as a result of the unspoken nature of the queerness depicted on many television shows, LGBT viewers often actively choose to interpret the storylines as queer, thus negotiating their relationship to and interpretation of the encoded messaging" (Breitenfeld, 2022, p.11). Being queer is made of reading encoded messages of a character's queerness because mainstream media appeals to the straight audience first and foremost, therefore, it excludes them, and historically, queer representation was illegal. Therefore, it is only natural that there is this tradition of picking up subtext and making a text out of it as one does with fanfiction, and indeed many queer people go to fanfiction to see themselves represented, or the characters they read as LGBTQ+. "The reader's activity is no longer seen simply as the task of recovering the author's meanings but also as reworking borrowed materials to fit them into the context of lived experience" (Jenkins, 1992, p.53). Hence, here is, a clear necessity for representation by the community and the literary market is starting to pick up on this.

The LGBTQ+ literary market has grown throughout the years, which in turn, connects to publishers' increasing their search for authors to tell those stories. This is a positive thing, as it gives a voice to those who have historically been underrepresented. In an interview, the author Robbie Couch, a member of the LGBTQ+ community himself, has stated that:

> Even in the past, five years or so, there's been a lot more hunger from both readers and publishers to respond to stories that really reflects the full experience of being human. And that, of course, includes more stories centering the LGBTQ experience. (Breckon, 2021, 5:32-5:44)

He talked about his experience of trying to find a publisher for his book focusing on a gay narrator, and how it was easier than he thought it would be. The literary market for LGBTQ+ stories has increased due to the open-mindedness of the younger generation. Couch stated that "Gen Z and younger readers are just more open to LGBTQ people. They kind of approach LGBTQ issues in different ways than even my generation. (...) I do think that that is a reflection of the actual reader base (...)" (Breckon, 2021, 13:23-13:45). This means that the newer generation is willing to buy

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books that better reflect their reality or of others. Since LGBTQ+ books are being bought by this generation so rampantly, it gives out the message to publishing companies that there is a place in the market for better representation of the hitherto underrepresented realities.

III. The Current Impact of social media on *The Song of Achilles*

1. Tiktok and its Literary Community

Parented by ByteDance, TikTok is one of the biggest short video-sharing social media Apps. ByteDance is based in China, where TikTok is known as Douyin. "TikTok is one of the world's most commonly used social media platforms, with 800 million monthly active users (DataReportal, 2020)" (Merga, 2021, p.3). It was merged with Musical-ly, an App, which, just like TikTok, had primarily the features of dancing and lip-syncing. "Users could choose songs and record lip-synching or dance routines ranging from 15 seconds to one minute" (Rozaki, 2022). However, the App had a very young audience, which its successor, TikTok, was able to overcome, becoming an app for all ages (Herrman, 2019). "TikTok immediately reached and surpassed Musical.ly's success, however, "the coronavirus lockdown was [also] to thank for the exponential rise in TikTok's use and visibility" (Kennedy, 2020, p.1).

The main difference between TikTok and other apps is that it does not try to pretend that it is not run by artificial intelligence. It does the opposite, embracing its algorithmic-centered approach that intends on making the user stay in the App for as long as possible. It is "a manifestation of user-generated media (UGM) as creating content is its backbone" (Omar & Dequan, 2020, p.2). According to the 2015 study by Zhu & Chen, called *Social media and human need satisfaction: Implications for social media marketing*,

> Social media platforms are utilized by users for four different motivations: relationships, self-media, collaboration, and as creative outlets. For example, Facebook falls under the relationships category and Instagram under the self-media category. Based on this categorization, TikTok—with its user-generated videos—is in the creative outlets and self-media categories. In other words, TikTok users get to be creative and also use the app as a medium through which they share their opinions and ideas. (Rozaki, 2022, p.2)

Instead of primarily being a bonding app between the user and the people they follow, like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, TikTok shows users their "For You" Page first.

> TikTok is "primarily algorithm driven, which differentiates it from the other social media apps that are modeled around following and followers" (Anderson, 2020, p.5). TikTok's unique algorithm, which anticipates users' interests as they use the app more and more, creates personalized "For You" feeds that are unique for every user and,

because the algorithm deliberately pushes material created by strangers to strangers, individuals may find themselves going 'viral' and acquiring recognition overnight as a result of a single public video (Tiffany, 2020). (Rozaki, 2022, p.2)

The "For You" page curates the user's feed by showing them videos that best adapt to what they have previously interacted with and watched longer. It adapts itself to the users' preferences, tastes, and interactions, sometimes showing widely popular videos, but not predominantly. "The more the user engages with content, the more data the algorithms have to curate specific content for the user. The 'For You' page is constantly exposing the user to new content created by different TikTok users" (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021, p.4). It celebrates "appropriation, repetition and imitation, though this mimicry is often best received when it is done in a unique way, similar to how cover versions of songs can receive more acclaim than the originals" (Merga, 2021, p.4).

Additionally, TikTok is regarded as a more genuine App, unlike Instagram which depicts "the 'flawless' portrayal of life (...) [TikTok] gives way to the 'authentic' (...) content (Abidin, 2020), where portraying your everyday self is preferred as opposed to filters and posing" (Rozaki, 2022, p.5).

TikTok presents short-form videos of up to a minute in length. These videos are texts which may rely on combinations of sound, video and static images, as well as text, hashtags, emojis and animations to make meaning. TikTok "emphasizes the role of music in the creation of videos, allowing users to easily align special visual effects of videos to the chosen music. (Lu & Lu, 2019, p. 234)

Furthermore, its most important catch is that TikTok never repeats its videos to the user while never running out of newer videos that are curated to maintain its user in the app for an extended amount of time (Herrman, 2019). It might not even show any of the users' friends at all unless they train it to do so. Instead of being mainly about networking between followers, TikTok is based on entertaining the user in order to trick them into staying for longer. However, if the user chooses to, the App can be about interactions between friends, as there is the option to send them messages. TikTok wants people to stay in the app for as much time as possible, therefore, it adapts itself to satisfy the user's preferences. Still, it also encourages the user to jump from audience to audience, to widen their chances of staying in the app longer and broaden the communities in which the user feels inserted (Herrman, 2019).

Feedback is instant and frequently abundant; virality has a stiff tailwind. Stimulation is constant. There is an unmistakable sense that you're using something that's expanding in every direction. The pool of content is enormous. Most of it is meaningless. Some of it becomes popular, and some is great, and some gets to be both. As The Atlantic's Taylor Lorenz put it, "Watching too many in a row can feel like you're about to have a brain freeze. They're incredibly addictive. (Herrman, 2019)

The core demographic of TikTok's users are:

[M]embers of Generation Z, which encompasses teens and adults born between 1996 and 2010 (Dimock, 2019), and almost half of TikTok's global audience is teens and young adults aged 16-24 years old (Aslam, 2022). The popularity of video creation can explain the rise of TikTok, as the number of videos users watch has doubled since 2018 (Hayes, 2022) and roughly 71% of Gen Z teens and young adults use their smartphones to watch videos (Cervi, 2021). (Rozaki, 2022, p.4)

It is an App run by young people, "used by teenagers for entertainment, as evident in 60% of American TikTok users being between 16-24 years old (Wallaroo Media, 2021)" (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021, p.2).

2. #BookTok

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to one of many sub-communities on TikTok. In a time when most people were stuck at home, forgotten hobbies like reading were revived and with the help of TikTok, shared with an unexpectedly large audience of people with the same interests (Stewart, 2021). The pandemic has been a huge factor in this phenomenon,

> Kristen McLean, executive director and industry analyst at NPD Bookscan, said social media—particularly TikTok users who post about books, known collectively as BookTok—has "definitely been a factor" in surging book sales, along with the pandemic in general, with many of the sales gains coming in Q1 and Q2 before the Covid-19 vaccines were widely available. (Kaplan, 2022)

> BookTok lives in three places: TikTok (obviously), Twitter, and Wattpad. On Twitter, BookTok gets wide reach among both gen Z and millennials, with almost half of participants under the age of 25 and more than 80% under the age of 34. (Regaudie, 2022)

The creators in the app, BookTokers, "range from readers and authors to publishers, literary agents, graphic designers," (Dalrymple, 2022). However, it is mainly reader based. Old bookworms and new readers are joined by the hype of the App, as the negative connotation that reading can have, is obstructed by the popularity of the TikTok subcommunity,

> While fiction reader identity has historically been laden with derogatory subtext (Ross, 2009b), community appropriation of derogatory terms such as #booknerd show a community supported subversion and an assertion of ownership over the term. This is important, as previous research has found that "adolescents who deemed books to be socially unacceptable were less likely to read books in their free time, and to enjoy recreational book reading" which highlights "the importance of raising the social capital of books" and reading in learning environments (Merga, 2014, p. 479). (Merga, 2021, p.7)

The main influencers of BookTok are generally teenagers and young women, which debunks the fear that young people are replacing books with screens (Stewart, 2021). Thus, even though screens have been replacing the practice of reading, BookTok brings them both together. "While this absorbing screen-based new social media might be seen as a natural enemy of book

reading, youth-produced content on social networks such as TikTok can influence reader choice."
(Merga, 2021, p.1).

BookTok functions as a way to bring book lovers together. By recommending and exploring
the books that are loved within the community, BookTok brings the feeling of being in a Book Club,
"but on a more global and accessible level. Jerasa & Boffone (2021) note that BookTok challenges
the stereotype that portrays reading as a solely academic activity and readers as 'uncool'" (Rozaki,
2022, p.10).

However, this Book Club offers the reader an extra step to the reading process, or even the
process of choosing the book they are going to read, as

> [T]he pre-reading and post-reading stages, or research and evaluation (...) The
> research stage consists of information-seeking, and in this stage the reader selects
> their next read. In other words, either they passively scroll on TikTok and land upon a
> book recommendation which triggers their interest, or they type the hashtag #BookTok
> and actively search for their next read by watching recommendation videos. With the
> research stage completed, the user visits an online or physical bookstore to purchase
> the book. When the reader finishes their book the evaluation stage begins; the reader
> logs on TikTok and searches hashtags that are relevant to the book they just read (...)
> Thus, the evaluation stage brings readers together in a massive virtual book club where
> they connect through their shared experience of reading a book. (Rozaki, 2022, p.13)

It could be argued that this process is inherently connected to the predominance of social
media in our current society. Since everyone has access to the opinions and evaluations of people
around the world as well as their recommendations, the process of choosing not only a new book
to read, but a movie, series, makeup, clothes and practically everything else, can come with the
research and evaluation stage. When one is watching a movie, the review is readily available one
click away, the same can be said about series and online shopping. And after being in contact with
what the consumer was looking for, it is their task to rate it themselves, thus continuing the cycle.
The same happens to someone choosing their new book on TikTok.

After all, BookTok is also a subcommunity within the App TikTok. As a community, certain
necessities need to be met by the members within it.

> Fuchs (2014) characterizes virtual communities as "participatory" (p.6), and writes
> that they value artistic expression, strong mutual support, and informal mentorships

between more knowledgeable and less knowledgeable members of the community. Members of online participatory cultures are encouraged to think that their efforts count, and everyone is socially connected to one another to some extent. (Jenkins et al, 2009). (Rozaki, 2022, p.8)

This happens because not only do people consume the content in the #BookTok, but they are able to participate by creating content themselves. Since there is no need for perfection within the community, videos are easy to make and the community builds upon itself, by using the same sounds and trends, as well as creating new ones. Additionally, because of the algorithm, it is fairly easy to reach a wider audience when posting. In short, BookTok worked as an amplified online book club. The sense of communal gathering and sharing of opinions on an otherwise solitary hobby, is part of the appeal of BookTok (Chaddah, 2022). The community,

[O]ffers a form of connection not just to another world through books, but to users' own world; it provides a platform where "you can pick up any book and still be able to connect with other people online as you're reading it. (Chaddah, 2022)

Therefore, one is able to not only enjoy the book on their own but also to enjoy it with people around the world. Due to TikTok's nature, this aspect of sharing one's interest with like-minded people around the world is very much a pillar,

TikTok's user-generated nature enables the creation of communities that gather people who share the same interests, and who use the platform to exchange content that revolves around these interests (Abidin, 2020). The accessibility of an internet connection and the availability of the app on all smartphones has allowed thousands of online TikTok-based groups to operate regardless of international borders (O'Connor et al, 2020), allowing users to form communities with people they may never meet in person. (Rozaki, 2022, p.8)

The act of reading becomes a joint activity in which ideas are shared, opinions are expressed, and healthy discussions about their current reading are encouraged. Someone's favourite character is loved, revered, and praised globally, and to find it, one just needs to search for the hashtag related to said character.

Since the TikTok algorithm is focused on maintaining the attention of its users, it presents newer communities that can be of interest to the user, especially if they are related to other interests previously presented by the user. Therefore, it can attract people who have never been interested

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in reading. This can bring more people to experiment with books, which is overall a very positive aspect. And as Trevor Boffone and Jerasa have explained, the community is a significant part of the process of reading in general, since it makes it a collective activity.

> Community is an important aspect of fostering reading motivation and engagement. Readers' engagement is often increased when they are afforded opportunities to discuss, reflect, and share their textual thinking, reactions, or questions with others (Cease & Wilmarth, 2016; Fisher & Frey, 2018; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1999). These interactions provide book or author suggestions that can foster a sense of community and support the development of personal identities (Hagood, 2008; Tierney, 2007). (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.11)

It offers users a way to share organic connections with other readers. The reader is the one commanding the conversation as if they were in a book club. "In short, they don't allow the book to be taken too seriously. They are revered, loved, obsessed over, yes, but they never enter the untouchable elitism that's been inflicted on classic literature" (LadyAcademia, 2022).

The book's popularity is spread through the best medium, word-of-mouth, but rather amplified, (Harris, 2022), and this person-to-person spread of the book is done without the need for highbrow literature. The recommendations are given without judgment and based on how the book made the reader feel. It empowers the users to share their recommendations without the gatekeeping of literary prudes (Hynek, 2022), which in turn, gives the publishing industry a wider scope of literary works to sell. This is not a novelty, nonetheless the size of TikTok and its never-ending power of recommending short videos tailored to the users, gives Booktok a huge influence in the literary industry, which has "followed the numbers and recognized that this form of social media clout has empowered independent self-publishing and reader-led marketing. Acting on this social capital has switched the power dynamic, making the reader the defining critic" (LadyAcademia, 2022). This judgment-free community gives readers the freedom to express their love for literary genres that were previously thought as inferior, or that should be outgrown, in search of more highbrow pieces of literature. Literary adulthood has an unwritten rule of being filled with more intellectual pieces, critically and academically acclaimed books. However, BookTok tears down this notion, giving highbrow pieces of literature the same respect as they do to Young Adult, Fantasy, or Science Fiction (Hynek, 2022). Since the pandemic was all about reviving hobbies or creating new ones, the act of reading became about enjoying the literary pieces that bring comfort to the reader, instead of turning them into a chore. By rebelling against the gatekeeping of literature,

BookTok has made sure that reading is to be enjoyed and fun. Instead of only analysing a book for its literary prowess, (Hynek, 2022) BookTok focuses mainly on the way a book makes them feel. "The most popular videos don't generally offer information about the book's author, the writing or even the plot, the way a traditional review does. Instead, readers speak plainly about the emotional journey a book will offer" (Harris, 2022). The emotions can range from "sadness, engagement, optimism, shock and arousal, including reference to works that will lead to transformation of life, self or state of mind" (Merga, 2021, p.10). By sharing how a book has made them feel, users, are giving other readers the ability to feel the same emotions (Jean, 2022).

> BookTokers capture the "visceral reaction" to a book, which doesn't come across in a written review, Horrox says. "There's something about the fact that it is under a minute. People who are consuming this content want stuff that's quicker and snappier all the time – you watch a 32-second video. (Flood, 2021)

The feeling of being part of a book club that reaches worldwide audiences, in an unexpectedly "wholesome place of the internet" (Hynek, 2022), creates a "space of camaraderie, stress-free fun, and the revival of the appreciation of reading for many an ex-bookworm" (Hynek, 2022). Additionally, the main draw of BookTok is the fact that it centres its full power on the reader experience (Hynek, 2022), especially the younger reader. The most powerful person of this dynamic is the reader/consumer, and

> [I]t's true that the consumer was always the make or break factor for a book's success, however this social media modernization has made the reader the one to push a book into the spotlight and then maintain its visibility and relevance by incorporating it into popular trends. (LadyAcademia, 2022)

This power gives the reader the final say on what books are sold. Book sales are moving quickly not because of the authors themselves. It's because the readers are so passionate. Head of Simon and Schuster's Atria division, Libby McGuire, states that"(...) The magic that turns books into hits on BookTok is something that can really only happen from the ground up. (...) I don't think you can manufacture it, I think it's happening organically, and that's great" (Zarroli, 2021).

It is an accessible way of sharing book recommendations without the need for publishers or booksellers, while still welcoming the relationship between the users and those entities (Dalrymple, 2022). Additionally, this connection between them gives the users a sense of having a say in what is published, by consuming books that make them feel represented, giving these entities

a clear message that literary representation of other realities has the potential for monetary success. "Larger literary institutions still hold sway over the book community and are needed if we want to make significant changes to the author-to-reader funnel" (Dalrymple, 2022). With this connection, readers ensure that their voices, needs, and concerns are heard, creating a more democratic system within the literary publishing industry.

It is noticeable that BookTok is a very genuine place, where in order to be successful, the members of the community have to sincerely like the books they are advertising, since the users they are advertising to, can tell if it is genuine.

The most unusual aspect of BookTok is the fact that the most popular books on the platform are not new, in fact, they were most likely published several years ago and are now being recommended because they have been the user's favourite book for quite some time. "This is unusual in publishing, where most titles, if they have a burst of sales at all, see it right out of the gate" (Harris, 2022).

It is one of the biggest differences between BookTok and other book-loving communities like BookTube and Bookstagram. Moreover, not only are these older books widely advertised but they are continuously advertised. This is a unique feature of the BookTok community since the popular titles continue to be popular for a long time. The director of Barnes & Noble has stated that:

> Our booksellers are able to buy deeper—and I like to think intelligently so—because the top titles and recommendations maintain high volume for weeks and months on end." The bump in sales that follows a book's popularity on YouTube and Instagram, on the other hand, is usually just a "flash in the pan" (...). (Stewart, 2021)

Furthermore, Instagram is more curated and overall aesthetic-based regarding their book recommendations. Since BookTok's appeal is mainly about community, authenticity is a key factor and the users do not care for the aesthetic aspect of the posts as they do for Instagram (Jean, 2022). This sense of honesty gives the users a feeling of reassurance that they are not being lied to or advertised to. Additionally, the main difference between BookTok and its YouTube predecessor, BookTube, is its short-video format, and the instant gratification it provides.

> BookTube has established itself as a place for long-form content, reviews and of course, un-boxings,(...) while BookTok is all about the short, snappy reviews and emotions about the book (...) it is so quickly consumable, and the genuine emotion from fellow readers and booksellers has created a flourishing community. (Jean, 2022)

Many of the best-selling books have in common their appearance on the #BookTok. The App has become an anchor in the literary industry in the short time it existed (Harris, 2022), bringing "book sales to over 825 million print books sold in 2021, which is the highest amount on record" (LadyAcademia, 2022). BookTok has helped the genre of adult fiction sell "20 million printed books in 2021, according to BookScan" (Harris, 2022). Adult Fiction was the leading category "of sales in 2021, up 25% from the previous year and driving more than half of 2021's overall market gains" (Kaplan, 2022). The romance genre has hugely benefited from the BookTok phenomenon. In 2022, print book sales are led by the romance category in the United States of America, according to the NPD, "[f]or the year to date through August 6, 2022, romance sales volume reached nearly 19 million units. The romance market hasn't reached those levels since 2014" (Chojnacki, 2022). This category is "contributing to nearly two-thirds of the overall gains for adult fiction. In fact, 5 million more units sold this year, compared to last year, and unit sales grew 40% over 2021" (Chojnacki, 2022). Regarding the genre of Young Adult, seemingly the most popular one in the BookTok community, "in America sales of YA fiction novels are up nearly 70% for the year as of May 2021" (O'Callaghan & Haldron, 2021). Due to the landscape in which BookTok was created, a global pandemic, it is understandable how readers are choosing escapist genres, to cope with the overwhelming reality. According to NPD Bookscan, "[t]he U.S. print book market was up 9% compared to 2020, (...) finishing 67 million copies ahead of 2020 and selling 125 million more copies than in 2019" (O'Callaghan & Haldron, 2021). "Approximately 825.7 million print books in 2021, led by fiction. This is up from 757.9 million in 2020" (Jean, 2022). More recently, in March of 2022, "#BookTok has amassed 45.8 Billion views and shows no signs of losing momentum" (LadyAcademia, 2022). Bookscan NPD states that "no other form of social media has ever had this kind of impact on sales" (Harris, 2022).

The sheer size of those numbers is reshaping the ways books are advertised. Bookstores are starting to pay attention to the books that are advertised on the platform. "Barnes & Noble in particular caught on early; many of its stores put out tables with a selection of trending titles. Those displays spread the word about BookTok to new readers, and the cycle continued" (Harris, 2022). Barnes & Noble is adapting its book-selling advertising, by having a section in their physical store where #BookTok is displayed (Kaplan, 2022). They went even further and "announced an official partnership [with TikTok] — a summer reading challenge designed to encourage people to post about books they're reading and to cross-pollinate readers" (Harris, 2022). Additionally, the bookstore has several local TikTok pages, in which they include:

[A] selection called "get to know your local B & N booksellers," and a list of suggested titles, which links to the Barnes & Noble website. Barnes & Noble will have QR codes in its stores that send customers to the BookTok landing page. (Harris, 2022)

This culminates in advertising for new books, new authors, and for the store itself. In turn, members of the BookTok community post short videos where they show themselves going to Barnes & Noble to pick new books, inadvertently advertising the bookstore and the books they show in the video.

The #BookTok display section is not exclusive to Barnes & Noble, as more and more bookstores are taking strides to encourage young adults to read by doing the same. In these sections, popular books on the platform are displayed and changed as other books gain traction. Additionally, the employees are shown on the bookstore's TikTok page, sharing book recommendations and their preferences (O'Callaghan & Haldron, 2021). European bookstores like Waterstones, Fnac, and Bertrand have made their way into this social media place and used these advertising techniques to gather a younger audience. Moreover, on these store's websites, they have a section in which by typing #BookTok it directs you to what books are popular on the App.

Publishers have also taken notice of TikTok's success and are changing their marketing to appeal to the platform (Stewart, 2021). For example,

Penguin House, one of the most well-known publishing houses, developed a TikTok account to bring themselves back into relevance and to scout out prospective works. Indeed many have employees scrolling through sites like Wattpad, Archive of Our Own, even Fanfiction.net to see potential books. (LadyAcademia, 2022)

This has been a successful tool for Penguin House, as their TikTok account has gathered 38.8k followers as of September 2022. Like Barnes & Noble, the publishing house saw the appeal of adapting to BookTok and they made a partnership with the platform as well. This partnership allows members of the BookTok community to share their favourite books from Penguin Random House, by linking them.

Users in the U.K. and U.S. can click "Add Link" and select "Book" prior to posting their video. (...) Once the video is posted, the book title will be featured above the caption, and when viewers click the link, they are directed to a dedicated page with details about the book, including a brief summary and other videos that linked to the same title. (Cohen, 2022)

However, Penguin Random House is not the only publisher that has accredited success to TikTok,

> [I]n 2020, British publishing house Bloomsbury saw a 220 percent rise in profits, which CEO Nigel Newton partially attributed to the "absolute phenomenon" of BookTok. Titles particularly impacted by BookTook hype include *The Song of Achilles* by Madeleine Miller and *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke. (Chaddah, 2022)

Publishers are still sending BookTok's creators free copies or trying to appeal to their audience through advertising, though it is difficult for BookTok to be corporately approached. (Harris, 2022) Furthermore, many other publishers are trying to ride the BookTok wave, but the platform is very different from others. Therefore,

> [T]hey're finding it challenging because TikTok is not as easily reverse-engineered as other platforms. There are no native analytics on the platform, so marketing requires lots of manual analysis to find the influencers and figure out what types of content and participation will drive engagement in the moment. (Anderson, 2022)

Recommendations and reviews of the user's favourite books are the main content regarding this corner of the internet, yet there are also "voice-overs, audio memes, and video effects to create content paying homage to their favorite books and authors" (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.11). The members of the community use other trends to recommend their favourite books to other people, such as "5 Books To Read To Get Out Of A Reading Slump", "10 Books Everyone Must Read", "The Books That Made Me Cry" (LadyAcademia, 2022). Additionally, BookTokers make trailers for their favourite books, as a way to recommend them to other potential readers,

> These 'snapshot' visual trailers are making books cinematic in a way that publishers have been trying to do with marketing book trailers for a really long time. But the way TikTok users are creating imagery inspired by what they are reading is so simple, and so clever. It's that thing of bringing the pages to life, showing what you get from a book beyond words. (Flood, 2021)

Furthermore, there are hauls, advertisements, and challenges. According to Merga in her, *How can Booktok on TikTok inform readers' advisory services for young people? Library and Information Science Research*, the videos shared can fall into,

[E]ight themes recurred across the videos. Videos focused on recommendations (40.5%), reader experience (24.1%), emotional reader response (14.6%), reader community and identity (13.8%), characters and places (11.2%), writer (6.9%), personal library management (6%), and reader in the family (4.3%). While it is clear even from these descriptors that there was potential for overlap between themes, and some videos had to be dual-coded, videos typically had a clearly articulated purpose that positioned them predominantly in one of these themes. (Merga, 2021, p.11)

The books that have gathered more love from BookTok are generally the ones that have made the members of the community feel strong emotions. As it has been established, feeling something strongly within a book has been a great component in the community's love for it. One might be tempted to ask what genres and books cause such a "visceral reaction" (Flood, 2021).

Young Adult is a very widely sold genre on the platform, however as we have seen, currently Adult Fiction is the most prolific one, according to BookScan (Harris, 2022). Other genres that are popular on the platform include romance, fantasy, and science fiction. (Harris, 2022)

But even classics like *Wuthering Heights* and *The Great Gatsby*,

Dracula, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Crime and Punishment, The Trial, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Native Son, and others back into the mainstream, acting as an introduction for those who were unaware of hidden gems. Within this platform, niche genres were shared such as Russian Literature, Feminist Short Stories, and Surrealist works by authors that aren't well known. (LadyAcademia, 2022)

According to Sophia Stewart on Publishers Weekly, the most popular books on the platform are: *It Ends with Us* (2016), by Colleen Hoover; *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017), by Taylor Jenkins Reid; Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End* (Quill Tree, 2017); *A Little Life* (Doubleday, 2015); E. Lockhart's *We Were Liars* (Delacorte, 2014); Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (Ecco, 2011) (Stewart, 2021). As a consequence of these books' success, the subsequent books written by these authors are also popularized. E. Lockart has even published a prequel to her popular book *We Were Liars*, because she noticed the demand. "People have been asking me for a prequel for a long time," Lockhart said. "But I don't think I would have kept trying if there hadn't been demand for it" (Kaplan, 2022). The success of these books can mean new opportunities for the popular authors on the platform. Many independent authors are being signed to large publishing

houses however, many are taking inspiration from Colleen Hoover, a self-published author that has gathered the most success in the platform without the help of a publisher (Dalrymple, 2022).

> Established authors are releasing books at a much quicker rate. (...) not only do these books sell out, but many of them are also being rereleased in new covers or editions, signed to movie and TV adaptations, and getting long-awaited sequels or continuations of their series. (Dalrymple, 2022)

Madeline Miller's BookTok success is related to the contents of the book *The Song of Achilles*, especially the way the tragic ending made the users feel. Many of the videos that were related to the book, showed users crying while or after reading the ending. When the book was first published, it was successful; however, "almost a decade after it was first released in 2011, sales went from 1,000 a week in April 2020 to 11,000 a week in April 2021" (Chaudhry, 2022). In 2012, it had an initial print run of 20,000 copies. "[In July 2022], its publisher, Ecco, announced it had sold two million copies across all formats" (Harris, 2022). The book reached the New York Times Bestseller list almost a decade after its first release and was re-released in a tenth-anniversary special edition. According to Ecco's associate publisher, Parker, this phenomenon is quite remarkable, since "It never happens," she said. "This is a book about *The Iliad*!" (Harris, 2022). Because of BookTok, the classics are being received by this new generation of TikTok users. The commercial success of *The Song of Achilles* meant that Miller, who was

> [S]truggling with long Covid and was concerned about her ability to work, (...) Having "Song of Achilles" catch fire on TikTok allowed her to take care of herself and her family, and to keep working on her next novel. (...) The sales also came as a relief during an extremely challenging time. (Harris, 2022)

Miller has admitted that the success of her book on BookTok gave her the ability to continue to be a writer. The other novel published by the author, *Circe* (2018) has been successful on BookTok as well. Moreover, it will be adapted to the small screens in an HBO Max miniseries. The recent success of the book was a shock to the author as well, as she is "still not on TikTok [and she] remain[s] very bad at social media" (Harris, 2022). When Miller understood that her book's resurgence happened due to the BookTok effect, she sent a message to the readers through the Bloomsbury Books account. Nevertheless, besides that post, the author has been very absent from the platform, showing that the new success of books on the platform is mainly due to the users/readers. Consequently, it confirms that readers are democratizing the literary industry, by

showing publishers and bookstores that there is a market for more diversity and that readers are willing to buy books that represent different communities.

For example, the novel's reception in South Korea, a country where same-sex relationships have not been legalized yet, was surprisingly positive. "I think queer literature has already established a significant presence in the Korean literary world and [that] Korean readers are relatively prepared to accept it" (Laura, 2021). This notion can be hopeful, especially in places where queer rights have been neglected. A member of the LGBTQ+ community sees this increase in the

> [B]ook's popularity to be a good sign, "it can somehow allow people to be more open-minded and open to discuss issues without fearing being judged." Korea seems to be opening to the struggles of sexual minorities. Queer literature like the novel allows societal issues to be viewed beyond heteronormativity (...) With the popularity of *The Song of Achilles*, queer literature seems to be expanding its reach to an increasingly accepting audience possibly marking a step forward into a new era of literature. (Laura, 2021)

One of the things that the most popular books on BookTok have in common is queer representation. It

> [P]rovides a crucial opening to increase the representation of groups that have been historically underrepresented in mainstream conversations about literature. For instance, several novels that rank in the upper echelons of BookTok feature queer protagonists, including *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid, *Red, White, and Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston, *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, and others. (Hynek, 2022)

This is a positive aspect of BookTok. Julia Hynek has described it as *The Last Wholesome Place on The Internet*, in which she explained that the community was judgment-free. A place where readers shared their opinions about everything that encompasses a book, without being judged for the book's lack of academic prowess (Hynek, 2022). This sense of being a safe space is extended to their openness to minorities. "(...) BookTok inherently is a queer friendly space in which LGBTQ+ teens and allies can find their digital community and learn about their intersectional identities" (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.12). In the study conducted by Alexa Hiebert and Kathy Kortes-Miller, called *Finding home in online community: exploring TikTok as a support for gender and sexual*

minority youth throughout COVID-19, they explored the aspect of found family that TikTok presents for youths suffering from homophobia and transphobia in their own home during the pandemic, "[a] powerful example of TikTok community involved both gender and sexual minority youth and adults offering to be each other's chosen family. Often this occurred following TikToks where youth express experiences with homophobia or transphobia" (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021, p.11). This facet of the platform is crucial for those who are in a situation where being LGBTQ+ is not safe or accepted.

> Given that queer youth historically face digital problems that their straight and straight-passing counterparts do not experience, the role of queer-friendly and "safe" spaces is critical for queer teenagers. TikTok content, creation, and spectatorship, therefore, form an extension of queer communities (Loya & Almeida, 2020). (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.11)

Coming back to the importance of LGBTQ+ representation, we have seen how movies and TV shows were a great source of companionship and reaffirmation for those whose identities are not accepted. On social media, the same phenomenon can happen, and for those whose interests align with reading, BookTok can be a great source for one's self-exploration.

> Given their age and development, teenagers might not fully understand their sexuality or identify confidently as queer. BookTok becomes a corrective that imagines a reading community in which intersectional queer identities can be discussed and celebrated far from the supposed "safe" spaces that most high school classrooms claim to foster. (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.11)

In a world where heteronormativity is instilled, having a safe space where one can explore their identity is essential, and "[o]nline spaces allow queer teens to experiment with their identities in ways that are not viable or safe off-line (Cavalcante, 2019)" (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.11). Not only by having the possibility of searching and discovering more about themselves, but they are also able to find out that their reality is shared. This not only makes it easier for those with struggles in common to connect, but also to confide and share with others who need to.

> Social media can provide connection to others with shared experiences of discrimination as well as the ability to access vital information that may not be accessible outside of online spears due to societal heteronormativity, homophobia and transphobia (Schmitz et al., 2020; Yeshua-Katz, 2019). Connection to online

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communities has been found to increase resilience in gender and sexual minority youth (McInroy, 2019), aid in identity formation (Lucero, 2017), connect youth to supportive peers and adults (Byron et al., 2019; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Robards et al., 2018), support the development of sexuality and gender identity, and help guide the process of coming out (Pullen & Cooper, 2010). (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021, p.3)

As it was mentioned before, the landscape in which TikTok was popularized (and BookTok was created), a global pandemic, makes it easy to understand the need for connection and escapism within the community. However, this need is intensified when we take into consideration those whose reality at home is not safe. Coming back to Alexa Hiebert and Kathy Kortes-Miller's study,

Thematic analysis of the data resulted in an overarching theme of gender and sexual minority youth utilizing TikTok to create a supportive community where they reported feeling safe to share experiences, connect with others, and support each other throughout COVID-19. This theme of a supportive community is further broken down into four additional themes which include (1) support navigating family relationships; (2) identity formation; (3) community and belonging; and (4) sharing knowledge and information. (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021, pp.6-7)

During this time of isolation, many youths were stuck at home with family members who did not accept them, and by taking away an escape like school or other activities, these youngsters became trapped. "This participation creates valuable representations for young readers who might not see themselves or their friends or family reflected in the literature studied at school" (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.1). On TikTok, they had an online community where they are free to be themselves,

Since digital platforms became the norm, queer communities have found online spaces not only to be valuable but also to be critical as sites to meet fellow queers and build community. Digital spaces enable queer youth to educate each other about queerness, which does not typically transpire in institutional spaces teenagers occupy, including schools (Fox & Ralston, 2016). (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.11)

The same can be said about the community on BookTok since there is an overarching allyship that welcomes anyone who shares a love for reading. Additionally, since some of the most

recommended books feature a queer couple, it translates into a community mostly full of either LGBTQ+ people or allies,

> Queer BookTokers and allies create queer-inclusive content and use specific discourse language to support their communities. Without the fear of book banning or censorship, BookTok contributors and followers are able to authentically express their views, share opinions, and engage in dialogue in an allied space. (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.14)

Furthermore, it is a great source of escapism for those living in less-than-ideal situations. Again, the global pandemic heightened the need for escapism, still, the global landscape is not necessarily required for queer youths to feel solitude or unable to fit in regarding their situation. "BookTok enables teen readers to reimagine a queer present in which queerness is a regular feature in daily life" (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.11). This turns queerness into less of an abnormality or exception that a heteronormative world wants to make it seem, and more like the shared experience that it is.

> The wealth of digital spaces today enables queer teens to forge new civic and community spaces in ways that were not necessarily possible for previous generations (Jenzen, 2017). BookTok, therefore, participates in what Blackburn (2012) refers to as the act of "interrupting hate" (pp. 17–18), a process whereby literacy projects push against homophobia and transphobia that queer students may face. (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p.11)

As we have seen before, Booktok users are sending a message to publishers and bookstores that queer representation is profitable, hence, more books that depict this reality are being published.

However, there has been criticism of the underrepresentation of racial-ethnic diversity. The most popular authors and novels on BookTok are white, as well as the most prominent content creators.

Luckily, the nature of TikTok is such that it is quite easy to find BookTok sub-communities that can act as affinity groups, but these groups need not be limited to one identity. Diversity and inclusion of all underrepresented identities should be normalized in the BookTok mainstream, not just in the margins (Hynek, 2022).

The authors promoted are usually white and able-bodied, which mirrors the lack of representation of other realities that inhabit the publishing industry in general.

> The book industry as a whole is still overwhelmingly White. Take authors as an example: a *New York Times* analysis that looked at books released by major publishers between 1950 and 2018 found that 95% of authors in their sample were White. The hashtag "publishing paid me" on Twitter also highlighted pay discrepancies, showing that some White authors had been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars more than some writers of color. (Staff, 2022)

The industry is concerned that including the voices of minorities might not be profitable. Nevertheless, BookTok creators are showing that this is not the case. They are making videos in which they say something along the lines of "do you feel underrepresented, here are some books for you", and proceed to show books written by authors that are part of marginalized groups, which in turn, increases sales of said books (Matters, 2022). Thus, proving that taping into a more diverse audience is profitable, just as they did with queer representation.

> Brands and publishers are increasingly partnering with BookTokers, including those who focus on diversity. This creates a great opportunity to promote the works of authors who might not otherwise succeed simply because traditional publishing and promotion have failed to make space for them. (Matters, 2022)

Again, proving that BookTok became a great link between readers and publishers, in which they can show what they are looking for, and what needs to change, which increases representation in the industry in general.

Conclusion

One of the three main aspects explored in this dissertation is the way Miller used the Classical material to reimagine *The Iliad* through Patroclus's point of view. The author also utilized many other sources of Greek and Roman materials in addition to Homeric works; however, they are explained through Patroclus's perspective. The novel does not exclude potential readers who are oblivious to the Classical material, as the main character is learning about them throughout the story, at the same time as the reader. Miller reimagined particularly the aspects before the events of the Homeric text where Achilles and Patroclus's story started to develop. Additionally, she added a different point of view on what it means to be a hero. As a 21st-century woman, Miller is influenced by the society in which she received the Greek and Roman materials, which, in turn, affects the way heroism is perceived throughout the novel. We can conclude that the ways in which the world sees gender nowadays have changed and Miller reflects this aspect in her novel. Empathy, kindness, and self-sacrifice are seen as the key aspects of what it means to be a hero, instead of strength and military prowess. Moreover, as a woman, Miller has an inherently different perspective on the Homeric text, just like other women writers who have revisited the classics. By adding the perspectives of people whose voices were not heard throughout history, we can have a more nuanced insight into one of the founding texts of western society.

In the second section of this dissertation, Miller's depiction of Achilles and Patroclus's relationship was explored, bearing in mind the undertone that paints the whole novel, which is the one of Achilles choosing the wrong path. Patroclus is seen as a link to Achilles's humanity, therefore when we see Achilles choosing his hubris over Patroclus, we know that it was the wrong choice. By making it clear that Achilles would have been happier had he chosen a simpler life with Patroclus, and dismissing any link to pederasty, Miller reinforces a positive depiction of an honest LGBTQ+ relationship, in which sexuality is a sidenote to the story the same way it would have been in most heterosexual stories. Those are positive aspects in the reception of the book. Moreover, other depictions of Achilles and Patroclus's relationship were explored, especially Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy* and David Farr's *Troy: The Fall of a City*. In the first, Achilles was coded as a heterosexual man who was in love with Briseis and Patroclus as his cousin, hence nullifying any speculations about their romantic relationship. This was a very different approach to Miller's, where their homosexual love is unmistakable. On the other hand, Farr's reimagining of their relationship joins both points of the conversation, by having a polyamorous relationship between Achilles, Patroclus, and Briseis. The various ways of reimagining Achilles's relationships are a sign of the broadness of the Homeric

text and, in this dissertation, are argued to be all valid since, firstly, the labels in which our current society defines sexuality did not exist at the time, and different takes on their love can be a great source of representation for LGBTQ+ people. After that, Allport's definition of prejudice was examined, and its link to ignorance was highlighted as one of the biggest reasons concerning the need for more and better LGBTQ+ representation. We delved into Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory; however, it was the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis that more safely exposes the LGBTQ+ reality to heterosexual people. This hypothesis explains how heterosexuals can have a better attitude towards LGBTQ+ people by watching a depiction of them on a television show or movie. Consequently, well-done LGBTQ+ representation can have a positive impact on the perception of heterosexual people regarding real-life queer people. Additionally, LGBTQ+ representation can have a positive impact on members of the community by making their reality seem less alienating, and by offering escapism and a safe space for self-discovery. It was determined that this can be attained through movies, television series, video games, and literary works.

The third section of this dissertation started with a rundown of what is the app TikTok. It boomed in popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic, where its literary subcommunity, BookTok, was explored more comprehensively. The sub-community also boomed during the pandemic, especially because it was during this time that old hobbies, such as reading, were revived. BookTok worked as an amplified book club where books were recommended through word-of-mouth in short videos. Readers recommended their favourite books to like-minded people without any judgment of their genre. Subsequently, the genres of Young Adult and Adult Fiction boomed, ensuing in a wider scope of literary works for the literary industry to sell. This sub-community not only centres the power on the reader, but also welcomes a relationship between them and the publishers, which allows for clear communication between the needs of the readers and what is published, resulting in more and better representation. The most unusual aspect of BookTok is the prevalence of older books, such as *The Song of Achilles*, whose rise in sales took place almost a decade after its publication. It became successful due to the way it represented the LGBTQ+ couple and how it gathered a strong and visceral reaction in the reader. Therefore, the videos advertising the novel appealed to potential readers by telling them that the book would make them cry, which, interestingly, worked. The book went from selling 20.000 copies to two million. We also saw how BookTok is an inherently queer-friendly place. The app, as a whole, offers a safe space for those who did not have one at home, especially during the pandemic. We have seen how movies and TV shows were a great source of companionship and reaffirmation for those whose identities are not

accepted. On social media, the same phenomenon can happen, and for those whose interests align with reading, BookTok can be a great source for one's self-exploration, escapism and for gathering a supportive community. Moreover, since some of the most recommended books feature a queer couple, it translates into a community mostly full of either LGBTQ+ people or allies. However, as we have seen, there is still room for improvement regarding the representation of ethnic and racial minorities. Nevertheless, BookTokers are sending out the message to book publishers informing that those realities need to be represented and that there is a market for them. This ultimately proves that social media has become a great way for consumers to demand the representation they have always needed.

In future research works, it would be interesting to investigate the new marketing strategies that the literary industry is using in order to adapt to a world that is chronically online, especially when we consider the fast-paced nature of TikTok. Additionally, it would be thought-provoking to explore comprehensively the rereading of classical women in classical material by female writers. This dissertation aimed to approach this aspect, in which we focused on the novel *The Song of Achilles*, wherein a female writer reimagines the masculine perspective of a classical work. Novels such as *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood; *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker; Miller's *Circe* and others would be great candidates for an in-depth analysis. Finally, it would be interesting to explore if the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis can be applied to literary works in the same way as to visual mediums. Furthermore, a case study could be performed where the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis is applied to literary works and the attitudes of heterosexual people towards LGBTQ+ people are analysed.

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