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Trabajo Fin de Grado: Classical Tradition and Reception Studies in Contemporary Literature Written in English. *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller.

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## Resumen

La novela de Madeline Miller, *The song of Achilles*, ganadora en 2012 del Premio “Orange Prize for Fiction”, constituye un nuevo y original ejemplo de la fascinación que la mitología griega sigue ejerciendo en los autores y autoras de lengua inglesa. En este ensayo nos proponemos analizar la versión novelada de Madeline Miller, tomada como una refiguración de los principales personajes de la *Iliada* de Homero y de los poemas del Ciclo. Examinaremos qué elementos de la tradición clásica han pervivido, especialmente en relación con los personajes principales –Tetis, Aquiles, Patroclo, Briseida y Agamenón–, y qué elementos han sido reelaborados en la recepción de la autora. Finalmente, intentaremos explorar los motivos y consecuencias de las principales estrategias de reelaboración por parte de la autora y aportaremos nuestra particular interpretación crítica y literaria de esta novela.

## Abstract

*The song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller was awarded the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2012 and it adds up, as a new and original example, to the fascination that ancient Greek mythology keeps holding both for men and women writers in English. In this essay we aim to analyse Madeline Miller’s novel version of some of the most famous characters from the Homeric and epic tradition, such as Thetis, Achilles, Patroclus, Briseis and Agamemnon. We will try to explore which elements from the classical tradition of these figures remain alive in the novel and which other elements have been reelaborated by the author in her reception of the ancient material. The last part of the essay will be devoted to the analysis of her strategies of refiguration as well as the effects on the deployment of the novel. We will conclude with a critical and literary assesment of *The song of Achilles*.

## INDEX

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Main body.....	3
2.1. Thetis in Greek literature and myth. Classical tradition and reception in M. Miller's <i>The song of Achilles</i> .....	3
2.2. Achilles in Greek literature and myth. Classical tradition and reception in M. Miller's <i>The song of Achilles</i> .....	13
2.3. Patroclus in Greek literature and myth. Classical tradition and reception in M. Miller's <i>The song of Achilles</i> .....	23
2.4. Briseis and Agamemnon in Greek literature and myth. Classical tradition and reception in M. Miller's <i>The song of Achilles</i> .....	28
3. Conclusions .....	35
4. Bibliography .....	39

# CLASSICAL TRADITION AND RECEPTION STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE WRITTEN IN ENGLISH. *THE SONG OF ACHILLES* BY MADELINE MILLER.

Leticia González Pérez

## 1. Introduction

“Although Homer tells us *what* his characters do, he doesn’t tell us much of *why* they do it. Who was Achilles? And why did he love Patroclus so much?” This quotation is found in Madeline Miller’s personal webpage about her novel *The Song of Achilles* (2011), and it briefly explains the reason why I wanted to write this essay.<sup>1</sup> I want to compare this novel to the original myth as it is found in the *Iliad* because I consider the explicit way in which Madeline Miller has described the love relationship between Achilles and Patroclus very appealing. In the original poem there is only a suggestion of their mutual love or, rather, close friendship. In contrast, the love bond between Achilles and Patroclus is permanent in Madeline Miller’s novel. Furthermore, she has adapted not only the *Iliad*, but the previous and following events chronicled by other ancient Greek literary sources in order to develop this romantic novel from the beginning of both Achilles’ and Patroclus’ lives till the end. Finally, she has modified the myth and added new elements around the lovers’ story too. So, for example, Thetis has a different personality from the *Iliad*; in *The song of Achilles* she can be considered as the antagonist of the star-crossed lovers, whereas in the original myth she is just a caring mother who will do anything for her son, Achilles.

*The song of Achilles* is the first novel by Madeline Miller, awarded the 2012 Orange Prize and considered a Bestseller by the *New York Times*. Madeline Miller was born in Boston but grew up in New York City and Philadelphia. She studied at Brown University as well as at the University of Chicago. Moreover, her impressive curriculum includes also the Yale School of Drama, “where she focused on the adaptation of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/> [24/05/14]

classical texts to modern forms.”<sup>2</sup> She is currently a teacher of ancient Greek and Latin languages and literatures in High School Education.

As regards the *Iliad*, there are not clear evidences about its date and author, although it is considered to have been created by Homer, “for whose life and activity no trustworthy information has come down to us. The poem, in other words, is 2700 years old.” [Knox 1990: 5] The *Iliad* begins with the confrontation between Agamemnon and Achilles over Chryseis. She was taken by Agamemnon as war booty, and when Chryses, her father and Apollo’s priest, goes to the camp to ask her back, Agamemnon refuses his request rudely. As a consequence, Apollo kills many Achaeans with a plague. Calchas, a seer, tells Agamemnon he should return the girl to his father. Reluctant to let Chryseis go, he is forced to do so by Achilles, who censures him in front of the Assembly as a selfish and irresponsible leader. Agamemnon decides to take revenge on this, so he takes Bryseis, Achilles’ share of the booty, with him. As a consequence, Achilles decides not to fight anymore for the Achaeans. Moreover, he asks his mother, the sea goddess Thetis, to plead Zeus in order to bring victory to the Trojans so the Achaeans will see how much they need Achilles. Zeus agrees to Thetis’ request and the Achaeans are in dire need of help. Only Patroclus, Achilles’ beloved friend, feels pity for his comrades in arms and decides, under the will of Achilles, to borrow his weapons and go to the battlefield. Unfortunately, Patroclus is killed by Hector and his fatal death triggers Achilles’ return to war with the sole purpose of avenging his friend. He manages to kill Hector and treats his body with cruelty until Hector’s father, King Priam of Troy, goes to Achilles’ camp to get his son’s body back, so he can give him a proper funeral.

Madeline Miller’s *The song of Achilles* begins many years before the *Iliad*, and everything is narrated from Patroclus’ point of view. This novel can be separated in two parts in relation to the events of the *Iliad*: The first part includes both Achilles’ and Patroclus’ lives before the Trojan War; the second part of the novel focuses on the war and is more similar to the ancient epic poem. After Hector’s death, *The song of Achilles* keeps the story going for a few more chapters and includes a detailed and very dramatic explanation of Achilles’ death and burial. In these final scenes and many others involving Patroclus and Achilles, we see how the author appropriates the ancient traditions and adds more drama and romanticism to those former sources.

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<sup>2</sup> See M. Miller’s personal website at <http://www.madelinemiller.com/the-author/> [24/05/14]

This essay will focus on the analysis of the portrayals of the main characters of the *The song of Achilles*: Thetis, Achilles, Patroclus, Briseis and Agamemnon. We are going to structure our analysis according to three main considerations. First, we will explain how each character is portrayed in the *Iliad* and the so-called *Epic Cycle*. Then we will compare and contrast them with Madeline Miller's version *The song of Achilles*. In addition to this, we will explore which elements belonging to the classical tradition Madeline Miller has appropriated and refigured, as well as which ones she has added, elaborated and/or invented. We will try to find out the available sources from where she might have inspired herself. Moreover, we will also try to explore the reasons for her original novel version of *The song of Achilles*. Finally we will make a critical and literary analysis of the novel and explain its influence on contemporary literature.

We will base our analysis of Madeline Miller's novel on the methodological approaches which belong to the expertise of both Classical Tradition Studies as well as Reception Studies.<sup>3</sup> We have been introduced into these schools of thought thanks to some of the courses which we were able to study in our *Degree of English Studies*, such as 'Greek for English Studies' (first semester in the third year of the Degree), and 'Classical Tradition in English Literature: The Reception of Greek and Roman Theatre' (also first semester in the third year of the Degree).

## **2. Main body.**

### **2.1. Thetis in Greek literature and myth. Classical tradition and reception in M. Miller's *The song of Achilles*.**

Thetis is a recurrent character in the *Iliad*; she is Achilles' mother and one of the Nereides, the goddesses of the sea. Her story is mentioned by Hera in *Il.* 24. 71-3: "*Achilles sprang from a goddess –One I reared myself: O brought her up and gave her in marriage to a man, to Peleus, dearest to all your hearts, you gods.*"<sup>4</sup> *The Oxford*

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the vocabulary which is employed in this essay is proposed by Hardwick 2003: 8-11 Cf., also, Budelmann & Haubold 2008.

<sup>4</sup> The numbers of lines from the *Iliad* correspond to the translation by Robert Fagles, not to the original lines of the Greek poem. We use Fagles' translation because Madeline Miller recommends it at her personal website: <http://www.madelinemiller.com/find-out-more/> [24/05/2014]

*Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion* gives several explanations of her story, taken from *The Cypria*<sup>5</sup> as well as from other ancient sources:

*“The Cypria accounted for her marriage to Peleus by saying that she refused the advances of Zeus to avoid offending Hera and that Zeus, in anger, swore that she must marry a mortal. According to Pindar [Isthmian 8], she was desired by both Zeus and Poseidon, but Themis revealed that Thetis was fated to bear a son stronger than his father, and for this reason she was married off to Peleus.”* [Price, Simon–Kearns, Emily (eds.) 2004: 551]<sup>6</sup>

She appears a few times throughout the *Iliad*, and all her appearances show how desperately she seeks to come to terms with Achilles’ mortality; she is a caring, warm-hearted mother who is always at the side of his son and tries to help him the best she can.<sup>7</sup> She is aware of Achilles’ fate before he goes to Troy and laments about his impending death many times during the poem, e.g. in *Il.* 1. 492-96, where she is talking to Achilles after his confrontation with Agamemnon and says in a despondent way: “*O my son, my sorrow, why did I ever bear you? All I bore was doom... Would to god you could linger by your ships without a grief in the world, without a torment! Doomed to a short life, you have so little time.*” This scene shows her desperation and sadness; her unique concern is her son whom she knows is going to die too soon in life.<sup>8</sup> We see how desperate she feels about saving her son, but it is hopeless since death is part of Achilles’ fate.

The tragic paradox of Thetis in the *Iliad* is that she cannot save her son from death despite the fact that she is a powerful goddess who helped other gods in the past from the

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<sup>5</sup> The *Cypria* belonged to a collection of poems called the *Epic Cycle*. *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion* explains the contents of the *Cypria*: “*The poem dealt with the preliminaries of the Trojan War (births of Achilles and Helen, judgment of Paris, rape of Helen) and all the earlier part of the war down to the point where the Iliad begins.*” Cf. Hornblower *et alii* 2012: 551.

<sup>6</sup> Aeschylus in his *Prometheus Bound* also refers to this mythic tradition, as well as Apollodorus in his mythographic collection. See Slatkin 2011: 65-6.

<sup>7</sup> As Slatkin 2011: 24 explains, “In defining Thetis through a selective presentation of her mythology, the *Iliad* makes explicit, emphatic use of her attributes as a nurturing mother –a *kourotrophos*– and protector. To put it another way, this aspect of Thetis’ mythology –her maternal, protective power– which is adapted by the *Iliad*, makes possible one of the poem’s central ideas: the vulnerability of even the greatest of heroes. Semidivine as Achilles is, death is inevitable even for him.”

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Il.* 1. 416-8. As Slatkin 2011: 30 comments upon the *Iliad*’s presentation of Thetis: “Her presentation of herself is as the epitome of sorrow and vulnerability in the face of her son’s mortality.” See also Slatkin 2011: 72.

most extreme and awful situations.<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, she usually asks favours to those whom she has helped before, as it is made evident in the poem, e.g. when she asks Zeus to help the Trojans in the war so the Achaeans will see how much they need Achilles. In *Il.* 1. 600-02, she says: “*Zeus, Father Zeus! If I ever served you well among the deathless gods with a word or action, bring this prayer to pass: honor my son Achilles!*” The alluded episode, when she helped Zeus, is only mentioned by Achilles in *Il.* 1. 470-3: “*How you and you alone of all immortals rescued Zeus, the lord of the dark storm cloud, from ignominious, stark defeat.*” The *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology: Volume 1* gives a more detailed information about this: “*On one occasion when the Olympian gods were about to put Zeus in chains, Thetis called in the assistance of Aegaeon, who compelled the gods to desist from their intention.*”<sup>10</sup> Another example is seen when she asks Hephaestus for a favour, an episode we will analyse later on.

She does not appear again in the poem until book 18, after Patroclus’ death. This scene again shows how much she is worried about her son. Achilles is devastated by his beloved friend’s death and Thetis rises from the sea with her sisters in order to comfort him.<sup>11</sup> She cries for her son’s sorrow but also because she knows his death is closer; she tries to convince him not to fight for obvious reasons, as she tells him: “*You’re doomed to a short life, my son, from all you say! For hard on the heels of Hector’s death your death must come at once—*” [*Il.* 18. 110-13], but he needs to avenge his friend, so she decides to help him asking Hephaestus for new arms for Achilles, since Hector has taken his armour from Patroclus, who fought in battle with Achilles’ arms.

When she arrives at Hephaestus’ house, his words prove how kind she is to those in need. The god explains that his mother Hera did not want him because he was crippled, so she got rid of him. Thetis and Eurynome –Thetis’ sister–, found him and nurtured him for nine years. Moreover, he learnt his trade with them, to forge bronze to create different

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<sup>9</sup> We agree with Slatkin 2011: 70 on this double depiction of Thetis in the *Iliad* as both vulnerable and powerful: “the epic shows her to us as at once weak *and* powerful: subsidiary, helpless, but able to accomplish what the greatest of the heroes cannot and the greatest of the gods cannot.”

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Smith 1844: 24. Cf., once more, Slatkin 2011: 51, as she underscores “Thus the *Iliad*’s rejection of the possibility of Achilles’ salvation through Thetis results in its emphasis on her helpless status, which is put into relief as a radical contrast to her part in the tradition of divine protectresses –one might even say, to her role as protectress *par excellence*; for the *Iliad*, in such provocative allusions as Achilles’ speech at 1. 394-412, depicts Thetis as the efficacious protectress not of heroes but of gods.” Cf. even *Il.* 6. 130 ff., on Thetis as the protectress of the god Dionysus, as well as Slatkin 2011: 51, n. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Il.* 71-4: “*And I, I go to his side –nothing I do can help him. Nothing. But go I shall, to see my darling boy, to hear what grief has come to break his heart while he holds back from battle.*”



objects: “*Nine years I lived with both, forging bronze by the trove, elegant brooches, whorled pins, necklaces, chokers, chains.*—“[*Il.* 18. 468-70] For this reason, he will help her no matter what. She complains that Zeus chose only her to marry a mortal man, Peleus, and bear a mortal son that would die soon afterwards. Once again we can see the hopelessness in her words when she asks him to create a new armour for her son:

*“I throw myself at your knees, please help me! Give my son –he won’t live long— a shield and helmet and tooled greaves with ankle straps and armor for his chest. All that he had was lost, lost when the Trojans killed his steadfast friend. Now he lies on the ground –his heart is breaking.”* [*Il.* 18. 534-9]

In *Il.* 19. 9-10 she tries to convince Achilles to leave Patroclus’ dead body and rather accept the armour that Hephaestus has made for him to fight in the battlefield. In this scene she talks to Achilles in the way she would to a little child —after all, he is her only son: “*My child, leave your friend to lie there dead—we must, though it breaks our hearts...*”, and she also tries to wipe away all his worries about Patroclus reassuring him she will protect his friend’s body from rotting.

She finally appears in book 24; Zeus orders her to talk to her son to give Hector’s body back to his family, because the gods are angry with him. When she arrives to Achilles’ camp, she sees him still devastated and suffering for Patroclus’ death. Again, we can see her concern about her son when she tells him:

*“...My child – how long will you eat your heart out here in tears and torment? All wiped from your mind, all thought of food and bed? (...) already I see them looming up beside you –death and the strong force of fate.”* [*Il.* 24. 155-62]

Once she reports her son the will of the gods, he will accept to free Hector’s body.

The *Iliad* finishes with Hector’s funeral rites, so Thetis’ feelings and actions after Achilles’ death are not explained. However, since *The song of Achilles* does not focus so much on the Trojan War as on the relationship between the lovers Achilles and Patroclus, it is the goddess’ feelings about this liaison and its consequences that are vividly displayed in the novel version. The portrait of Thetis in this novel is different from the

*Iliad*; she is depicted as an unsympathetic character, even as the antagonist of the love story because everything is described from Patroclus' point of view and she seems to be against his relationship with Achilles, although eventually it will be seen she only cares about the fate of her son, not his love life.

In *The song of Achilles*, her story is explained in chapter 3, and Madeline Miller gives a subtly different explanation of it, focusing rather on Peleus: He was liked by the gods for his good actions so they gave him Thetis as a reward.<sup>12</sup> Madeline Miller appropriates the mythic tradition according to which Thetis was reported to having desperately tried to escape from him, but to no avail since he finally caught her.<sup>13</sup> However, in her rewriting of the story, it is not said that bearing Achilles was part of her fate. What is clearly underscored is the fact that she was forced to be Peleus' wife for a year and to sleep with him against her will. Once she gave birth to Achilles and after a year had passed, she left the kingdom and the boy was raised by Phoinix and the nurses in Peleus' palace.

She makes her first appearance in chapter 6 and Patroclus says he knows her “*for her reputation of hating mortals*” [Miller 2012:50]. She is presented as a cold goddess whose tone when talking to Patroclus shows her complete contempt for him –and for all humans. Madeline Miller wants to show a side of Thetis that is not seen in the *Iliad*; her unique concern is to make Achilles a god, like in the ancient myth, but in this version she does not care about anyone else except her son and treats mere mortals with coldness and cruelty, which is utterly different from what we have seen above in the analysis of the *Iliad*. I think the reason of this foreignization of Thetis is twofold<sup>14</sup>: on the one hand, it puts emphasis on the radical difference between gods and humans while, on the other, it adds more drama to the story. Notwithstanding, readers should be aware of her real personality and not be influenced by Patroclus's fearful and one-sided portrait of the goddess.

In chapter 7, Achilles and Patroclus kiss each other for the first time. Achilles runs away in embarrassment and suddenly Patroclus sees Thetis standing in front of him; she tells him angrily that Achilles is being sent away to continue his education: “*He is*

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<sup>12</sup> On the Pindaric tradition of Peleus as the most reverent of men and therefore worthy of a marriage to a goddess, see Slatkin 2011: 62-4.

<sup>13</sup> Slatkin 2011: 53 insists upon this unwillingness of Thetis to being married to Peleus.

<sup>14</sup> According to Hardwick 2003: 9-10, the concept of ‘foreignization’ implies “translating or representing in such a way that DIFFERENCE between source and reception is emphasized.” In this particular case, the sweet and sympathetic characterization of Thetis towards those in need as it is displayed in the *Iliad* is completely different from the cold and careless indifference of the same character in *The song of Achilles*.

leaving.’ Her eyes went black now, dark as sea-wet rocks, and as jagged. ‘I should have sent him long ago. Do not try to follow’.” [Miller 2012:61] A few sentences later, Patroclus says something that shows she is not like the mothers of the time, who could not say or do anything concerning their children because they were not as important as men: “A mother’s wishes. In our countries, they were not worth much. But she was a goddess, first and always.” [ibid.] This shows his fear of her because he knows she is not like any other woman; on the contrary, she can do whatever she wants for her son’s sake, including keeping Patroclus away.

A few scenes later, Achilles tells Patroclus he is going to live with the centaur Chiron for a while so he can improve his skills at fighting. In spite of the fact that the education of Achilles under the tutelage of Chiron belongs to the ancient mythical tradition of the hero,<sup>15</sup> Madeline Miller has reelaborated the classical tradition in order to entangle it with the main plot of the novel. Now the traditional motif of bringing Achilles to Chiron for schooling can be considered as Thetis’ ultimate decision in order to separate her son from Patroclus.

Throughout the novel we can see the goddess’ persistent attempts of hiding Achilles – from Patroclus’ loving companionship or his going to the Trojan War— and these episodes show Madeline Miller’s appropriation as well as reelaboration of the ancient sources, such as Achilles’ famous staying at king Lycomedes’ court.<sup>16</sup> In chapter 12, Thetis takes Achilles again and hides him in Scyros, where the young hero agrees to secretly marry princess Deidameia and get her pregnant on the condition that Thetis will tell Patroclus of his exact whereabouts. However, she does nothing of the kind and orders her son to dress up like a girl so he will deceive the Achaeans when they call for him to go to Troy. In this chapter it is made clear she does not care about harming others as long as her son is safe, as she tells Deidameia when the girl threatens to tell everyone about Achilles’ disguise “‘You are a foolish girl,’ Thetis said. Each word fell like an axe blade, sharp and severing. ‘Poor and ordinary, an expedient only. You don’t deserve my son. You will keep your peace or I will keep it for you’” [Miller 2012:125]

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<sup>15</sup> As Hedreen 2009: 44 says, “perhaps the most beautiful extant account of Achilles’ childhood occurs in a poem written by Pindar.” Hedreen quotes Race’s translation of *Nemean Odes* 3. 43-63, and refers also to the iconographic tradition that shows Achilles with Chiron the centaur.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Madeline Miller does not mention anything about the well-known legend about Achilles’ heel because, as she says in her official webpage, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do not mention it, and “Since the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were my primary inspiration, and since their interpretation seemed more realistic, this was the version I chose to follow.” Cf. <http://www.madelinemiller.com/find-out-more/readers-guide/> [24/05/14]

There are many classical sources that report on these events but usually in later versions than the *Iliad*. The *Achilleid* of Publius Papinius Statius, from 1<sup>st</sup> century AD is especially interesting because it was a non-finished poem that was supposed to deal with Achilles' life from his birth till his death in the Trojan War, but the only fragments that remained are the ones of his life with Chiron and the events in Scyros. In this poem Thetis is depicted in the same way as in the *Iliad*, as a desperate mother trying to save her son from his fatal destiny, to the point of convincing Achilles to disguise himself as a girl. In the original fragment it is explained that firstly she tried to convince Poseidon to sink the ship where Paris and Helen were travelling to Troy, but he refused, that is why she decided to take Achilles to Scyros and disguise him as a girl. The difference between the *Achilleid* and *The song of Achilles* is seen in the involvement of Thetis in the events and clearly, in her behaviour. In the original source Thetis deceives Lycomedes telling him she has taken Achilles' sister to Scyros:

*'I present to thee the sister of my Achilles--seest thou not how proud her glance and like her brother's?--so high her spirit, she begged for arms and a bow to carry on her shoulders, and like an Amazon to spurn the thought of wedlock. But my son is enough care for me; let her carry the baskets at the sacrifice, do thou control and tame her wilfulness, and keep her to her sex, till the time for marriage come and the end of her maiden modesty; nor suffer her to engage in wanton wrestling-matches, nor to frequent the woodland haunts. Bring her up indoors, in seclusion among girls of her own age; above all remember to keep her from the harbour and the shore.'*  
[Translated by Mozley, J H. Loeb]

In *The song of Achilles* she does not say anything, but forces Lycomedes to keep her son safe in Scyros, something he has to accomplish no matter what, after all, she is a goddess.

In chapter 15 Achilles is told about half of the prophecy by Odysseus –he tells him he must go to Troy in order to get honour, because the prophecy says that if he does not go, he will die alone and unknown. At that moment Thetis appears with fury and anger against Odysseus, since he was the one who exposed Achilles' real identity in front of Lycomedes. Odysseus tries to protect himself saying Athena is guarding him, to which Thetis responds talking about the prophecy indirectly: "*Athena has no child to lose*" [Miller 2012:157] and then, apparently emotionless, she tells her son the truth: "*It is true. But there is more, and worse that he has not said*". *The words came tonelessly, as a*

statue would speak them. 'If you go to Troy, you will never return. You will die a young man there.'" [Miller 2012:157] A few scenes later she tells Patroclus the other part of the prophecy: her son will die immediately after Hector does.

In chapter 22, when the war has already begun, Patroclus visits sometimes the battlefield where Achilles is fighting, and in one of these visits he sees Thetis surrounding her son and makes a revealing description of both her divine and motherly nature:

*"Sometimes, as I watched him, I would catch sight of a square of ground where soldiers did not go. It would be near to Achilles, and if I stared at it, it would grow light, then lighter. At last it might reluctantly yield its secret: a woman, white as death, taller than the men who toiled around her. No matter how the blood sprayed it did not fall on her pale grey dress. Her bare feet did not seem to touch the earth. She did not help her son; she did not need to. Only watched, as I did, with her huge black eyes. I could not read the look on her face; it might have been pleasure, or grief, or nothing at all.*

*Except for the time she turned and saw me. Her face twisted in disgust, and her lips pulled back from her teeth. She hissed like a snake, and vanished."* [Miller 2012:228-229]

Madeline Miller follows closely the *Iliad* in the depiction of Thetis' concern about her son's fate. However, her face looks indifferent, like in many scenes in the novel. This is different to what we see in the *Iliad*, where she is not afraid to show her sadness and worries to everyone she talks to. In this version, the only feeling we see in her face is anger and contempt towards the ones she thinks are participants in Achilles' fatal ending, like Odysseus or Patroclus. As we have said before, Miller might create this unsympathetic side of her to make the story more dramatic as well as to turn her into the antagonist from the point of view of Patroclus. As a matter of fact, Achilles does not care much about what she says or does concerning his own life or love relationship, while his main antagonist is actually Agamemnon, like in the *Iliad*.

Not until chapter 32 does Madeline Miller follow the same sequence of events that occur in the *Iliad*, where Thetis counsels Achilles to give the body of Hector back to his father, Priam, in order to provide him with a proper burial. The difference is remarkable, again, in the way Thetis expresses herself. In the *Iliad*, she is compassionate about her son's feelings towards Patroclus' death, yet she tells him the truth on behalf of the gods:

they are angry with him and if he does not release Hector's body everything will get worse. She begs her son with sadness and desperation, always worried for Achilles' fate:

*"Listen to me, quickly! I bring you a message sent by Zeus: he says the gods are angry with you now and he is rising over them all in deathless wrath that you in hearsick fury hold Hector's body... O give him back at once – take ransom for the death!"* [Il. 24. 161-7]

On the contrary, in *The song of Achilles* she orders her son to give Hector's body back to Priam and when Achilles refuses to do so, they get involved in a quarrel that ends with a hostile goodbye between them. Once more we can see the cold way Thetis talks to Achilles, although she actually seems worried at the beginning of their conversation: *"You must stop this. Apollo is angry. He seeks vengeance upon you."* [Miller 2012:329] She holds Apollo, not Zeus, responsible.<sup>17</sup> But when she sees her son's stubbornness and how angrily he responds to her, blaming her for Patroclus' death, she says goodbye for the last time in the coldest possible way. Notwithstanding, her words are not probably sincere, but product of her frustration for not being able to save her son.

*"You act like a child. At twelve Pyrrhus is more of a man than you." [...] 'He is the next Aristos Achaion' 'I am not dead yet' 'You may as well be. Do you know what I have borne to make you great? [...] I am done. There is no more I can do to save you' [...] 'I am glad that he is dead,' she says. It is the last thing she will ever say to him."* [Miller 2012:330-31]

She does not appear again until chapter 33, when Achilles has already died and is going to be burned on a pyre. During the war she becomes a secondary character, with less importance than in the *Iliad*, where as we have seen, she desperately asked for favours to the gods in order to help her son. In the novel, when she reappears after Achilles has been burnt, she does not show any feeling of sadness for her son's death, as Patroclus describes: *"Perhaps there is grief in her eyes; perhaps not. It is impossible to say"* [Miller 2012:338] What she says in the following sentences apparently prove so: *"Collect them [about the ashes] Bury them. I have done all I will do' He [Odysseus] inclines his head. 'Great Thetis, your son wished that his ashes be placed -- 'I know what he wished. Do as you please. It is not my concern'"* [Miller 2012:339] At this point we see she is not the person Patroclus should have worried about, because their destiny was

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<sup>17</sup> Madeline Miller is following here the classical tradition of Achilles' myth which made him a *'theomakhos'* of Apollo. For this ritual enmity between Achilles and Apollo, cf. Nagy 1999.

to die in either way. She accepts burying them together and engraving their names on the same monument.<sup>18</sup>

However, Pyrrhus, Achilles' son, appears to win the Trojan War, as the Fates had predicted.<sup>19</sup> He becomes an important character by the end of the novel and is closely associated with Thetis, since she is the one that took care of him. He will play an influential role in the final course of the events. Madeline Miller makes a brief explanation of his mythic portrayal in her blog of *The song of Achilles*, where she explains she has used Virgil's version of Pyrrhus for her novel: "*a sadistic perversion of his father's legacy, heir to his strength and capacity for violence, but not his humanity.*"<sup>20</sup> In *The song of Achilles* she uses his wickedness against Achilles and Patroclus: Pyrrhus refuses to put their names on the same monument: "*A slave has no place in his master's tomb. If the ashes are together it cannot be undone, but I will not allow my father's fame to be diminished. The monument is for him, alone.*" [Miller 2012:341] so this proves that the real antagonist of the lovers is Pyrrhus, not Thetis, as it was thought.

At the end of the novel, when the Greeks sail back home, Thetis visits the tomb of Achilles for the last time, where only Patroclus' soul dwells, since only Achilles' name is written on it and therefore he is now in the underworld.<sup>21</sup> Madeline Miller creates a new conversation between Patroclus and Thetis; he asks her to spread the word concerning the good things her son had accomplished, like giving Hector's body back to Priam or his skills with the lyre. Then she remembers the moment she gave birth to him. The description shows her sadness and regret for having said goodbye to her son in such a cruel way as previously mentioned. One final action shows she is a character who has completely changed by the end of the novel: She writes Patroclus' name on the tomb so

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<sup>18</sup> Madeline Miller re-elaborates here the tradition from *Odyssey* 24. 71-7, where the ghost of Agamemnon speaks the following words to the ghost of Achilles: "When the Hephaestan flames had consumed your body, we gathered your white bones at dawn, Achilles, and steeped them in unmixed wine and oil. *Your mother gave us a golden urn, a gift, she said, from Dionysus, made by the great Hephaestus. In this your white bones lie, my illustrious Achilles, and mingled with them the bones of Menoetius' son Patroclus, dead before you.*" [Translation by E. V. Rieu. Italics are our emphasis] On the location of Achilles' tomb, whether in the Hellespont or in the White Island, see Hedreen 2009: 40-41.

<sup>19</sup> In chapter 31 of the novel Thetis makes a reference to this, telling Achilles "*He [Pyrrhus] will come, and Troy will fall. The city cannot be taken without him, the Fates say.*" [Miller 2012:330]

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.madelinemiller.com/tag/neoptolemuspyrrhus/> [24/05/14]

<sup>21</sup> There is a reference here to the ancient Greek belief of the restless souls of the deads who had not received complete or proper burial rites and were therefore deprived of their afterlife in Hades. This element from the classical tradition allows Madeline Miller to deploy a striking and completely unexpected technique of writing and focalization. The reader wonders who will finish the story once Patroclus dies but it is Patroclus' soul or ghost who will keep on narrating.

the star-crossed lovers can reunite at last. Her last words are “‘Go’ she says. ‘He waits for you.’” [Miller 2012:352]

## **2.2. Achilles in the myth and Greek literature. Classical Tradition and reception in M. Miller’s novel.**

Achilles is the “*greatest of the Greek heroes in the Trojan War; central character of Homer’s Iliad.*” The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* briefly explains how Achilles is described during the poem: “*Achilles’ status as the ‘best of the Achaeans’ is unquestioned. We are reminded of his absolute supremacy throughout the poem, even during those long stretches for which he is absent from the battlefield*” [Hornblower et alii 2012: 6] Homer uses many epithets to name him, a poetic device which contributes to his characterisation. Some of these epithets are “*swift runner,*” “*Peleus’ son,*” or “*The best of the Achaeans,*” an epithet used recurrently along the poem, even by Achilles himself, as he tells Thetis in book 1, when he is explaining his confrontation with Agamemnon: “*How mad he was to disgrace Achilles, the best of the Achaeans.*” [Il. 1.490] This shows that even himself is aware of his greatness over the rest of men. Achilles is very fast –“*swift runner,*” he is strong, and has a striking beauty. Notwithstanding, he is a mortal. He knows he is doomed to die in the Trojan War, although he ignores when this will happen; he was probably aware of his fate before sailing to Troy. This is seen when he talks with Thetis in book 1 and tells her “*Mother! You gave me life, short as that life will be...*” [Il. 1. 416-17] Later on, he reminds Odysseus, Ajax and Phoenix of this in book 9, when they ask him to accept Agamemnon’s gifts:

*“Mother tells me, the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet, that two fates bear me on to the day of death. If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy, my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies. If I voyage back to the fatherland I love, my pride, my glory dies... true, but the life that’s left with me will be long, the stroke of death will not come on me quickly.”* [Il. 9. 497-505]

His confrontation with Agamemnon and his rage are the center of the *Iliad*, as it is explained in the Introduction to the poem by Bernard Knox: “*the tragic course of Achilles’ rage, his final recognition of human values –this is the guiding theme of the poem, and it is developed against a background of violence and death.*”<sup>22</sup> Knox also

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Knox 1990: 61



makes an interesting comparison between him and some characters of the dramas by Sophocles, which explain his personality:

*“Homer’s Achilles is clearly the model for the tragic hero of the Sophoclean stage; his stubbornness, passionate devotion to an ideal image of self is the same force that drives Antigone, Oedipus, Ajax and Philoctetes to the fulfillment of their destinies. Homer’s Achilles is also, for archaic Greek society, the essence of the aristocratic ideal, the paragon of male beauty, courage and patrician manners—”* [Knox 1990: 63]

In the *Iliad*, Achilles’ honour is very important for him; that is why when Agamemnon takes Briseis from him, he decides not to fight anymore for the Achaeans. However, this attitude becomes unreasonable and childish, when he refuses all the gifts given by Agamemnon in compensation in book 9, which included many material gifts, in addition to his own daughter in marriage and also the return of Briseis. This behaviour changes to a complete fury and desire of revenge after Patroclus’ death; he decides not to bury his friend until he has killed Hector. In relation to this, there is a big difference between Achilles’ and Hector’s attitude towards war and death. Hector feels responsible for his actions but always tries to act in a civilized way and when he assumes that he is going to die, he begs Achilles to return his body to Priam. On the other hand, Achilles is only moved by a sense of hate and anger and does not feel any pity for him. In fact, when he kills him, he drags his body around the battlefield as well as inside the Achaeans’ camp. As Bernard Knox says, *“The contrast between the raw, self-absorbed fury of Achilles and the civilized responsibility and restraint of Hector is maintained to the end.”*<sup>23</sup> His cold blood when he kills Hector transpires through the last words he says before killing him *“I am destined to die here, far from my dear father, far from mother. But all the same I will never stop till I drive the Trojans to their bloody fill of war!”* [Il. 19. 499-501]

Nevertheless, in book 24 when Priam enters to his tent, he reminds Achilles of his own father, whom he will never see again, so he feels sad and orders to prepare Hector’s body to give it back to Priam. As Bernard Knox remarks in the Introduction to the poem:

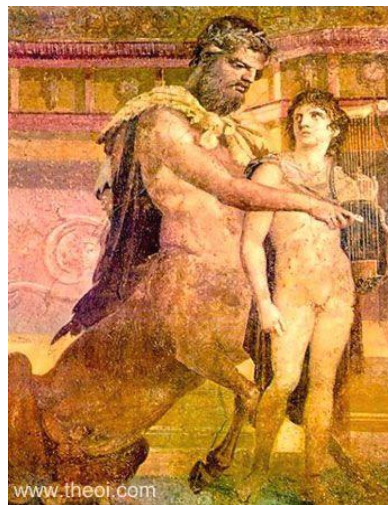
*“This is a new Achilles, who can feel pity for others, see deep into their hearts and into his own. It is as near to self-criticism as he ever gets, but it marks the point at*

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Knox 1990: 56

which he ceases to be godlike Achilles and becomes a human being in the whole sense of the word”<sup>24</sup>

It is also important to analyse Achilles’ life before the Trojan War, especially his education with the centaur Chiron, an episode entirely developed and adapted by Madeline Miller in *The song of Achilles*. In the *Iliad* Chiron is only mentioned by Eurypylos in book 11, when he tells Patroclus to wound his injuries and then makes an allusion to the time when he lived with Achilles and Chiron: “*the powerful drugs they say you learned from Achilles and Chiron the most humane of Centaurs taught your friend.*” [Il. 11. 993-4]. Furthermore, there are many late sources that relate this passage of Achilles’ life. There is an interesting poem that also includes the figure of Patroclus, called the *Argonautica*, by Valerius Flaccus. The selected fragment briefly explains the arts they both learned while living with Chiron: “*Also Actor’s son [Menoitius] leaves his child [Patroclus] in Chiron’s cave, side by side with his dear Achilles, to study the chords of the harp, and side by side to hurl a boy’s light javelins, and to learn to mound and ride upon the back of the genial master.*”<sup>25</sup>:



Lam. I. Kheiron and Achilleus

Source: <http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/F15.1.html> [24/05/2014]

An important relationship in the novel is the one between Achilles and Briseis, because there is an important change in Madeline Miller’s novel version. In the *Iliad*,

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Knox 1990: 60

<sup>25</sup> Cf. <http://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/KentaurosKheiron.html> [23/05/2014] In addition to the literary sources, the iconographic tradition also provides plenty of scenes with Chiron teaching the kid Achilles all sorts of skills, such as hunting or playing the lyre, as we can see in the picture.

Briseis is Achilles' war captive and concubine. She is the ultimate reason why Achilles decides not to fight anymore for the Achaeans, since her kidnapping by Agamemnon represents an insult to Achilles' honour. Despite the fact that she appears only a few times in the *Iliad*, she is mentioned even when she is not present, by Achilles and the epic narrator, and these words show he loves her, e.g. "*All for Briseis his heart was breaking now...*" [Il. 2. 790-91] When, in book 9, Agamemnon is desperate and wants Achilles back in the battlefield, he assures he has not touched Briseis, to make it clear that he prefers him over Briseis. What is surprising is Achilles' reaction. As we have said before, his heroic pride is so badly injured that he still holds a grudge against the commander in chief and refuses all his gifts as well as Briseis herself in compensation: "*he seizes, he keeps the bride I love... Well let him bed her now—enjoy her to the hilt!*" [Il. 9. 405-08] These words show he loves her but she also represents his honour, which is more important in his life. As he later says:

*"I loved that woman with all my heart, though I won her like a trophy with my spear... But now that he's torn my honor from my hands, robbed me, lied to me – don't let him try me now. I know him too well –he'll never win me over!"* [Il. 9. 415-20]

His relationship with Patroclus is one of the main topics to analyze in this essay. As we said in the Introduction, there is no evidence in the *Iliad* that they are in love, only suggestions.<sup>26</sup> There are also many ancient pictures that represent implicitly their love, through the sexual elements included, e.g.:

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<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding, as Davidson 2007: 256-7 remarks, "*Clearly the love of Achilles and Patroclus is central to the plot of the Iliad (...). The relationship is by far the most emotionally intense in the poem, and the climax of the Iliad is engineered around it*"



Im. II. Achilles bandaging Patroclus after a battle.

Source: [http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/achilles/ss/082109AchillesPhotos\\_5.htm](http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/achilles/ss/082109AchillesPhotos_5.htm) [24/05/2014]

Throughout the poem, there are some scenes between them that suggest Patroclus is Achilles' friend as much as his assistant, since the former always asks the latter for favours, e.g. in book 9, when Ajax and Odysseus pay them a visit, Achilles tells Patroclus "*Come, a bigger winebowl, son of Menoetius, set it here. Mix stronger wine. A cup for the hands of each guest—*" [Il. 9. 242-44] or in book 11: when Achilles sees many Achaeans wounded, asks Patroclus to see who they are<sup>27</sup>; moreover, Patroclus always obeys. Besides, they have their own concubines, as it is explained later in book 9, when they all go to sleep in the tent "*Achilles slept with the woman he brought from Lesbos, Phorbas' daughter, Diomedes 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*" [Il. 9. 810-15]

In book 16, Patroclus, influenced by Nestor, decides to fight against the Trojans with the armour of Achilles. The way Patroclus asks him for permission is quite hostile, because although Patroclus loves his friend, he does not understand why he is letting his comrades die, so he tells him:

*"Healers are working over them, using all their drugs, trying to bind the wounds—*

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Il.11.722-2

*But you are intractable, Achilles! Pray god such anger never seizes me, such rage you nurse [...] What good will a man, even one in the next generation, get from you unless you defend the Argives from disaster? You heart of iron! [...] Your temper's so relentless[...] But still, if down deep some prophecy makes you balk, some doom your noble mother revealed to you from Zeus: at least send me into battle, quickly"* [Il. 16. 31-43]

Achilles is surprised by his words but accepts it because he thinks *"you [Patroclus] can win great honor, great glory for me in the eyes of the Argive ranks, and they, they'll send her back, my lithe and lovely girl"* [Il. 16. 97-99] However, he orders him not to fight too far, only to trick the Trojans into thinking he is Achilles so they will run away, an order he does not obey. There is an incidental but interesting scene in which Patroclus is dressing Achilles' armour, but he cannot take his spear, since it is such a heavy weapon that only Achilles can hold it; this proves Achilles' superiority over the rest of men.<sup>28</sup>

When Achilles finds out about Patroclus' death, his words openly show not only his sorrow but also his love for him: *"My dear comrade's dead—Patroclus, the man I loved beyond all other comrades, loved as my own life"* [Il. 18. 94-96] and, as we said previously, the hero feels devastated and prefers to die. In addition to this feeling, he also feels anger and an implacable desire for avenging his friend. It is Patroclus he remembers when he manages to kill Hector: *"Patroclus... I will never forget him, not as long as I'm still among the living [...]. Though the dead forget their dead in the House of Death, I will remember, even there, my dear companion."* [Il. 22. 456-609]<sup>29</sup> He prepares funeral games in honour of Patroclus, while he mistreats Hector's body. Finally, Patroclus talks to Achilles in his dreams in book 23; this conversation between them proves the suggestion of mutual love we mentioned: *"Never again will you and I, alive and breathing, huddle side-by-side, apart from loyal comrades, making plans together [...] Never bury my bones apart from yours, Achilles, let them lie together... just as we grew together in your house"* [Il. 23. 92-101] and Achilles gladly accepts: *"I'll do it all. I will obey you, your demands. Oh come closer! Throw our arms around each other, just for a moment—take some joy in the tears that numb the heart"* [Il. 23. 113-16]<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Il. 16. 167-73.

<sup>29</sup> As a matter of fact, Achilles has always Patroclus in mind when he slaughters all the Trojans that come into his way.

<sup>30</sup> In the original, the dual is emphasized in both quotations, underscoring the complicity between the two of them. Cf. Davidson 2007: 257-8.

As we said previously, the *Iliad* consists only of Achilles' life in Troy and finishes after Hector's death; *The song of Achilles* explains his life from his infancy until his death in the Trojan War. The Achilles created by Madeline Miller has a similar personality to the adult Achilles of the *Iliad*; furthermore, the narrator, Patroclus, is always reminding the reader about his power, beauty and strength; but in this novel, his greatness is not only a fact, but also what Patroclus says about the person he admires and is in love with. About the prophecy concerning Achilles' death, he already knows –as he did in the *Iliad*– that he will die in the Trojan battlefield. Similarly, Madeline Miller explains exactly the moment when Achilles is told he is going to die, so he makes the decision of dying with honour instead of living a long life amongst the anonymous. More importantly, she adds a foreshadowing of Hector's death in Achilles dreams, a few chapters before the confrontation between the latter and Agamemnon. He says:

*“I can see it. That’s the strange thing. Like a dream. I can see myself throwing the spear, see him fall. I walk up to the body and stand over it [...] I look down at his blood and know my death is coming. But in the dream I do not mind. What I feel, most of all is relief.”* [Miller 2012: 233]

During the war he has the same attitude we see in the *Iliad*, he only cares about his honour and reputation and only decides to kill Hector after Patroclus' death, so before that he is not considered a violent man at all. As a matter of fact, he says many times *“what has Hector ever done to me?”* [Miller 2012: 230] and he does not want to kill him.<sup>31</sup> He will kill Hector with cruelty and the episode with Priam is briefly explained; Priam is not afraid and Achilles is moved by his words: *“It is worth my life, if there is a chance my son’s soul may be at rest.’ Achilles’ eyes fill; [...] ‘I don’t want you to be in danger as you travel home. I will have my servants prepare your son’s body.’”* [Miller 2012: 334]

Achilles is presented as the kind of person Patroclus wants to be: He is strong, fast, beautiful and confident. During the novel there are many moments when we see how sure

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<sup>31</sup> In dialogue with the hypotext of the *Iliad*, Madeline Miller underscores the heroic and martial values of young men as Achilles and Patroclus. In contrast, Madeline Miller's appropriation of the myth of the Trojan War highlights the Achaeans' greed for Troy's gold and treasures, so coveted by Agamemnon and his peers. The figure of Achilles is enhanced in Madeline Miller's version as an idealistic hero who takes part in the war just for the sake of glory, yet, Achilles will turn into a somber and sinister figure after his quarrel with Agamemnon and the irresponsible behaviour of the commander in chief. Patroclus' death will only trigger his own fury and rage.

he is of what he thinks. When he becomes Patroclus' friend, he takes him wherever he wants to and does not care about what the others may say. Madeline Miller has even adapted some of the epithets applied to Achilles in the Homeric tradition, such as "*Pelides*," son of Peleus, or "*Aristos Achaion*," the best of the Achaeans.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from the few days of war narrated in the *Iliad*, in *The song of Achilles* we can also see all the previous years of fighting in the Trojan War. Achilles is courageous and enjoys fighting. He even convinces his comrades to continue fighting when they think that all those years have been wasted in vain, so he tells them: "*I am here because I believe that we will win. I am staying until the end.*" [Miller 2012: 244]

Chapters 8 to 11 are devoted to Achilles' education with the centaur. Chiron has an important role in Achilles' and Patroclus' relationship, since he accepts them and does not let Thetis intervene. Madeline Miller probably made an appropriation of sources like the ones we mentioned previously to explain this episode of Achilles, and in the novel we see they both learn medicine, riding, hunting and fishing... There is an interesting scene in which Achilles shows his skills in fight, and Chiron replies: "*There is nothing I can teach you. You know all that Heracles<sup>33</sup> knew, and more. You are the greatest warrior of your generation, and all the generations before.*" [Miller 2012: 85]. This shows Achilles was "*Aristos Achaion*" since he was a child.

His relationship with Briseis is the one that is completely different from what it is seen in the *Iliad*. As we know, in the poem she was taken by him as a prize of war, he sleeps with her and takes care of her, to the point that he stops fighting, although he does so because she represents his honour. This Homeric tradition is foreign to Madeline Miller's appropriation of their relationship in *The song of Achilles*. Achilles does not love her; he actually feels indifferent towards her and it is Patroclus the one who asks Achilles to take her out of sympathy as well as in order to prevent her from being raped by the soldiers. When Agamemnon takes her, Achilles gets really angry, but the way Miller explains this confrontation between them shows Achilles is way more intelligent and

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<sup>32</sup> These epithets are actually quoted in Greek probably as a way of Hellenizing the story but also as a tribute to the learned reader, familiar with the original and with the cluster of associations that this formula '*aristos Achaion*' displays along the poem.

<sup>33</sup> In the novel, Chiron taught Heracles before Achilles, who killed his wife and children when he became mad and then died. However, there are many ancient sources that relate Heracles killed Chiron accidentally during Achilles' education, like it is explained in Ovid's *Fasti*, he had his arrows poisoned with Hydra poison and "*while the old man fingered the shafts clotted with poison, one of the arrows fell out of the quiver and stuck in his left foot.*" Cf. <http://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidFasti5.html> [26/05/2014]

witty than Agamemnon so his only way to win this is to argue that Achilles is not that important for the Achaeans' victory, since he has not killed Hector yet –which he has not because he knows he will die afterwards; and then he declares “*You are a traitor to this army, and will be punished like one. Your war prizes are hostage, placed in my care until you offer your obedience and submission. Let us start with that girl.*” [Miller 2012: 267]<sup>34</sup> In this conversation Achilles' outrage rises because Agamemnon ridicules him in front of the army, who do not do anything about it, so it is not exactly because of Briseis. She becomes a good friend of Patroclus' and in this case, he is the one she falls in love with, not Achilles. When Patroclus dies, we see the contempt she feels towards Achilles:

“*You care more for him [Patroclus] in death than in life, her voice is bitter with grief. [...] He was worth ten of you. Ten! And you sent him to his death!*’ *He fought to save you, and your darling reputation [...] you have never deserved him. I do not know why he ever loved you. You only care for yourself!*’ [...] *I hope that Hector kills you.*” [Miller 2012: 323-324]

Finally, regarding Achilles' relationship with Patroclus Madeline Miller makes a refiguration. She uses many ancient sources like Plato, as she mentions in her webpage: “*I stole it from Plato! The idea that Patroclus and Achilles were lovers is quite old. [...] We even have a fragment from a lost tragedy of Aeschylus, where Achilles speaks of his and Patroclus' “frequent kisses.”*”<sup>35</sup> Of course, she also uses the original poem of the *Iliad*, where there are many suggestions of their love, as it has been explained. During the novel, there are many scenes in which it is seen how much does Patroclus admire Achilles. Their love is developed throughout the novel since they were teenagers. Achilles' different attitude towards women and towards Patroclus deserves to be highlighted. He feels absolutely indifferent about women while he is inseparable from Patroclus. One example of this is his sexual involvement with Deidameia. According to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*: “*Later his mother Thetis [...] hid him at the court of King Lycomedes on Scyros, disguised as a girl. There he fell in love with the king's daughter Deidamia, who bore him a son, Neoptolemus.*” [Hornblower et alii 2012: 3] But this relationship is relaborated in the novel, where Achilles gets Deidameia pregnant

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<sup>34</sup> Agamemnon's strategy is very similar to the one devised by Ulysses in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Madeline Miller is well acquainted with Shakespeare's plays as we are informed at her personal website. <http://www.madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/> [24/05/14]

<sup>35</sup> Cf. <http://www.madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/> [25/05/2014]



because he is deceived by Thetis (see page 8). He does not feel anything for her, only for Patroclus, who even feels sorry for the girl and shows his sympathy for her in spite of her jealousy and contempt.

Achilles' and Patroclus' love scenes are openly described in the novel. They are full of romance, eroticism and poetic beauty:

*“Our mouths opened under each other, and the warmth of his sweetened throat poured into mine. I could not think, could not do anything but drink him in, each breath as it came, the soft movement of his lips. It was a miracle [...] I will never leave him. It will be this, always, for as long as he will let me.”* [Miller 2012: 94-95]

When Achilles decides not to fight anymore in the war, Patroclus feels bitterly disappointed with him because his companion does not do anything to help Briseis. This is a side of Achilles he had not seen before, the unyielding and inflexible hero we find in the *Iliad*. *“My stomach feels burned to cinders; my palms ache where my nails have cut into them. I do not know this man, I think. He is no one I have ever seen before.”* [Miller 2012: 274] Madeline Miller creates a real love relationship between the two companions, with good and bad moments. Although he is angry with Achilles, Patroclus is faithful to him and the sequence of events is the same as in the *Iliad*: Patroclus is killed by Hector, so Achilles feels hopeless and wants to die, but also to avenge his beloved friend, so he kills Hector. Madeline Miller makes reference to what Achilles says to Hector in the *Iliad* a few moments before killing him: *“There are no binding oaths between men and lions—wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds—they are all bent on hating each other to the death.”* [*Il.* 22. 310-12] In *The song of Achilles*, he says *“There are no bargains between lions and men. I will kill you and eat you raw.”* [Miller 2012: 328]. Despite the fact that in the novel the funeral games are not included, their meeting in dreams is mentioned. Notwithstanding, in this adaptation Patroclus only asks his partner to bury him as well as Hector. It is Achilles' idea to be buried together, a wish accomplished by Thetis in the end.

During the novel, Achilles and Patroclus are sometimes mocked by the Achaeans due to their homosexual relationship, e.g. in chapter 15 Odysseus talks to them about their sleeping in tents and says *“One tent's enough, I hope? I've heard that you prefer to share. Rooms and bedrolls both, they say' [...] 'there is no need for shame—it's a common enough thing among boys. Though you're not really boys any longer.”* [Miller

2012: 165]. This makes them feel embarrassed, especially Patroclus, who tells Achilles: “*Your honor could be darkened by it*” [Miller 2012: 166], but Achilles does not care about it, as we said, he is true to what he believes. This situation appeals to what we see nowadays, when people are still rejected for their sexual orientation or to the debate in many countries about gay marriage; through literature we can change the way many people think about homosexuality. Madeline Miller also briefly explains this in her blog and says “*I hope too that it might help to combat the homophobia that I see too often.*”<sup>36</sup>

### **2.3 Patroclus in Greek literature and myth. Classical tradition and reception in M. Miller’s *The song of Achilles*.**

Patroclus is the main character and narrator of *The song of Achilles*. As Madeline Miller explains in her webpage: “*He is a secondary character in the Iliad, but his fateful decision to try to save the Greeks by dressing in Achilles’ armor sets in motion the final act of the story.*”<sup>37</sup> Therefore she gives him a more important role in her version of the poem.

In the *Iliad* Zeus foreshadows Patroclus’ death when he announces Hera the moment Achilles will return to the battlefield: “*This powerful Hector will never quit the fighting, not till swift Achilles rises beside the ships that day they battle against the high sterns, pinned in the fatal straits and grappling for the body of Patroclus.*” [Il. 8. 546-551] Madeline Miller expands this: During the novel Thetis tells Patroclus he will die, but he does not know how it will be<sup>38</sup> until chapter 15 when they discover Achilles will die in Troy; then Patroclus is guaranteed he will die too when Thetis tells him: “*You are a fool (...) Your half-wit death will not save him.*” [Miller 2012: 160]

In the *Iliad* Patroclus’ father is the only member of his family who is mentioned, and it is only a way of addressing him, “*Son of Menoetius.*” [Il. 9. 243] Clearly, Patroclus is the son of a noble man, friend of Peleus, Achilles’ father. Menoetius is mentioned again in book 11 when Nestor encourages Patroclus to fight with Achilles’ armour. He reminds him the words Menoetius told his son before sailing to Troy: “*My child, Achilles is nobler than you with his immortal blood but you are older. He has more*

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. <http://www.madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/> [26/05/2014]

<sup>37</sup> Cf. <http://www.madelinemiller.com/the-song-of-achilles/mortals/> [06/06/2014]

<sup>38</sup> In chapter 6, when Patroclus is a teenager, Thetis tells him “*You will be dead soon enough*” [Miller 2012: 51]. He takes this as a threat until he finds out Thetis only wants his son safe from going to Troy and that he does not want to kill him.

*power than you, by far, but give him some advice, guide him, even in battle. Achilles will listen to you –for his own good.” [Il. 8. 938-42]*

Patroclus’ family is explained in detail by Madeline Miller in *The song of Achilles*, where she makes up his life since he was a child and lived in Menoetius’ kingdom with his mother. In this version, Menoetius is depicted as a strict king, who feels embarrassed by the simplicity of his son and wife. He wants a strong and brave son, what Patroclus is not, so when they see Achilles, Menoetius says “*That is what a son should be.*” [Miller 2012: 3] He only thinks about what is best for his kingdom and himself, that is why he takes Patroclus to Sparta as a suitor of Helen.<sup>39</sup> Later on, when Patroclus accidentally kills a kid Menoetius decides to exile him to King Peleus’ kingdom, as Patroclus explains: “*In our day, death was preferable. But my father was a practical man. My weight in gold was less than the expense of the lavish funeral my death would have demanded.*” [Miller 2012: 17]

Patroclus’ mother is an important element of *The song of Achilles*. While she is not even mentioned in the *Iliad*, in Madeline Miller’s version she is an interesting character to analyse. Throughout the novel, Patroclus’ descriptions and Menoetius’ disrespectful behaviour towards her show there is something different in her; there is a suggestion that she is mentally disabled:

*“He (Menoetius) did not find out until the wedding that she was simple. Her father had been scrupulous about keeping her veiled until the ceremony (...) When at last they pulled off the veiled, they say my mother smiled. That is how they knew she was quite stupid. Brides do not smile (...) When I was delivered, a boy, he plucked me from her hands, and handed me to a nurse. In pity, the midwife gave my mother a pillow to hold instead of me. My mother hugged it. She did not seem to notice a change had been made.” [Miller 2012: 1]<sup>40</sup>*

Menoetius does not feel any pity towards her. As a matter of fact, we see how in chapter 2 he explains he wants to make Helen the queen of his kingdom<sup>41</sup> through his son’s wedding with her. Furthermore, Patroclus’ mother does not even have a name,

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<sup>39</sup> In chapter 2, many suitors go to Sparta to marry Helen, daughter of Tyndareus, King of Sparta. This scene was probably taken by Madeline Miller from *Apollodorus*, 3 which mentions the name of all Helen’s suitors. Cf. *Apollod.3.10* <http://www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus3.html> [08/06/2014]

<sup>40</sup> It is also suggested in chapter 21, when Patroclus compares her with Briseis “*There was a peace in sitting beside her, her waves rolling companionably over our feet. Almost, it reminded me of my mother, but Briseis’ eyes were bright with observation as hers had never been*” [Miller 2012: 218]

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Miller 2012: 9

which could mean that women at that time were not considered as important as men, but women like her were even less important. Miller adds an intellectually challenged woman probably with the purpose of making people aware about this issue; but also she might have added her for sensitivity —perhaps due to some personal experience, or just for ‘political agenda’ or simply in order to add a striking element.

As we said before, in *The song of Achilles*, Patroclus is exiled to King Peleus’ kingdom because he has killed a boy. Madeline Miller reports this episode of his life in correspondence to the *Iliad*, where in book 23, Patroclus explains Achilles in his dreams what happened: “*Menoetius brought me there from Opois, and only a boy, but banished for bloody murder the day I killed Amphidamas’ son. I was a fool—I never meant to kill him—quarreling over a dice game.*” [Il. 23. 103-06] The innovation of Miller is that she recreates the accident and makes the reader feel pity towards Patroclus, since the other kid awakens his hatred and fury on him by mentioning his father’s disappointment about him. Patroclus does not kill the boy on purpose, but unintentionally:

“‘Coward.’ (...) ‘Your father thinks you are.’ His words were deliberate, as if he were savouring them. ‘I heard him tell my father so’ (...) I could imagine the way my father would have said it. Coward. I planted my hands on his chest and shoved (...) His head thudded dully against stone, and I saw the surprise pop of his eyes (...) I stared, my throat closing in horror at what I had done.” [Miller 2012: 16]

Due to this episode, the other children in Phtia are afraid of him because they consider him to be very violent: “*fear and fascination blooming on their faces as I passed.*” [Miller 2012: 28] Notwithstanding, Patroclus is the noblest character in both the novel and the poem. In the *Iliad*, many characters consider him the kindest warrior,<sup>42</sup> who sacrifices his life for the Achaean army: “*In tears they gathered their gentle comrade’s white bones*” [Il. 23: 288-89]. Even for Agamemnon, Patroclus is the best of the Achaeans, as he says when Patroclus dies “*Our best Achaean’s dead—Patroclus, a stunning loss to all our armies!*” [Il. 17: 775-6] When he dies, Briseis mourns over his body and her words show how noble he was, for supporting her when no other man would do it for the simple reason of being a woman and slave:

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<sup>42</sup> “It is the current of compassion (...) that sends Patroclus to his death. In the *Iliad*, pity advances suffering as well as to some extent redeeming it.” (Taplin 1992: 177). Also, “The epithet ἐνῆης (‘kind’) is especially his [Patroclus’].” [Taplin 1992: 192]

*“You, Patroclus, you would not let me weep, not when the swift Achilles cut my husband down, (...) you vowed me you’d make me godlike Achilles lawful, wedded wife, you would sail me west in your warship, home to Phtia and there with the Myrmidons hold my marriage feast. So now I mourn your death –I will never stop— you were always kind.” [Il. 19. 348-356]*

In *The song of Achilles*, Miller focuses on his kindness to emphasize the contrast between the impression he gives, since he seems to be violent for what he did, and the person he really is, the only character who represents reason and goodness, in contraposition to most of the men of the novel, who are really violent and moved by anger and revenge. His kindness is also made evident when he feels pity towards Deidameia (see page 22) and Briseis (see page 20) while the rest of men, e.g. Achilles, do not feel any sympathy for them.

Finally, Patroclus is also characterized by his expertise in medicine. In the *Iliad*, he helps the main healers, Podalirius and Machaon, when most of the Achaeans are hurt in battle (see page 15). In this scene of book 11, there is a description of what Patroclus does to Eurypylos’ wound, which makes clear his ability in medicine: *“He crushed a bitter root and covered over the gash to kill his comrade’s pain, a cure that fought off every kind of pain... and the wound dried and the flowing blood stopped” [Il. 324 1012-15]*

Furthermore, in the poem he is not only good at healing, but he is also skillful at fighting, as it is observed in book 16, when Patroclus suggests Achilles he will fight with his armour to deceive the Trojans, and Achilles orders to fight only to keep the Trojans apart from the ships and then to come back. He forbids him to continue fighting because if they found out about his real appearance, Achilles would be deprived of honour:

*“Patroclus, fight disaster off the ships, fling yourself at the Trojan full force –Before they gut our hulls with leaping fire and tear away the beloved day of our return. But take this command to heart –Obey it to the end. (...) Once you have whipped the enemy from the fleet you must come back Patroclus. Even if Zeus the thundering lord of Hera lets you size your glory(...) you will only make my glory that much less...” [Il. 16 92-106]*

During the battle, he does not obey Achilles’ command and continues fighting until he is killed by Hector –with Apollo’s help. This moment of climax is called

*'Aristeia,'* as the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* explains, it is “*An individual warrior’s glorious rampage.*” [Hornblower *et alii* 2012: 696]

Like in the *Iliad*, Patroclus is also a good healer in *The song of Achilles*; it is Chiron the one who encourages him to learn the art of healing with his instruments and stories<sup>43</sup>; he uses this knowledge about medicine in Troy, where, instead of fighting, he prefers to heal the Achaeans’ wounds. Miller makes a refiguration of this to underscore that his ability is helping others, instead of killing, which is the main duty of a soldier. In opposition to the *Iliad*, in Madeline Miller’s version, Patroclus is not good at fighting. This is made clear since he is a kid, when he and Achilles are living with Chiron. Patroclus shows Chiron his skills at fighting, and the centaur tells him honestly: “*you will never gain fame from your fighting. Is this surprising to you?’ ‘No’ I said truthfully.*” [Miller 2012: 85] The purpose of this foreignization of making Patroclus unable to fight might be to emphasize Patroclus’ kindness, and probably also his love for Achilles, since even when he is not good at it<sup>44</sup> in the end he decides to fight for him and his army. This decision shows that another important characteristic of him is his courage. He usually sacrifices himself for others, *e.g.* in chapter 26, he is so worried about Briseis being Agamemnon’s captive, that he decides to injure himself in front of Agamemnon. This action is an oath, and since “*he (Agamemnon) has always been superstitious*” [Miller 2012: 276] Patroclus makes sure Agamemnon will not touch Briseis by saying “*He (Achilles) let you take her. He knows you will not resist bedding her, and this will be your downfall. She is his, won through fair service. The men will turn on you if you violate her, and the gods as well.*” [Miller 2012: 276] The other example is his latest sacrifice, as we said, for Achilles and the Achaeans, which eventually leads him to death. This act of courage reinforces again the fact that he is different from the rest of soldiers; he is not moved by anger nor revenge, but by his love for Achilles and sympathy for his army. It is interesting to point out the difference between the poem and the novel in the

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<sup>43</sup> In chapter 8, when Patroclus arrives at Chiron’s cave, he is delighted to see so many interesting instruments, and when he asks Chiron what are they used for, he replies “*Healing (...)* Do you wish to learn medicine?’ (...) I stammered a little. ‘Yes, I would like to learn. It seems useful, does it not?’ [Miller 2012: 71]

<sup>44</sup> Another scene when it is made evident that he is not good at fighting is when, in chapter 22 he describes one of the moments he joins the army in the battlefield: “*I did not kill anyone, or even attempt to. At the end of the morning hours and hours of nauseating chaos, my eyes were sun-blind and my hand ached with gripping my spear –though I had used it more often to lean on than threaten (...)* Constant terror had siphoned and drained me, even though somehow I always seemed to be in a lull, a strange pocket of emptiness into which no men came, and I was never threatened. It was a measure of my dullness, my dizziness.” [Miller 2012: 226-7]

moment Patroclus fights with Achilles' armour. As we explained, in the *Iliad* he is always a soldier who has his climax during this battle. Nevertheless, in *The song of Achilles*, he only becomes a soldier in this episode, because wearing Achilles' armour makes Patroclus feel identified with him. Another difference with the *Iliad* is in the order which Achilles gives him, who commands Patroclus not to fight, but only to show himself to trick the Trojans into thinking he is Achilles and then to return to the camp. However, Patroclus feels a desire of fighting during the battle and understands Achilles' anger, so he continues fighting and that is the moment when he feels like a soldier:

*“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. It was higher, stronger, a perfect balance. And then, before I could think about what I did, I threw—a long straight spiral into the breast of a Trojan.”* [Miller 2012: 312]

#### **2.4. Briseis and Agamemnon in Greek literature and myth. Classical tradition and reception in M. Miller's *The song of Achilles*.**

In addition to the main characters in both the *Iliad* and *The song of Achilles* that we have analysed, there are two other figures who also observe to be examined due to their important roles in the Trojan War: Briseis and Agamemnon.

Briseis, “*daughter of Briseus of Lyrnessus and widow of Mynes*”<sup>45</sup> is, as it was previously said, Achilles' war captive and concubine. She only appears a few times throughout the epic poem but her role is so important that she is the reason of Achilles' anger against Agamemnon and the rest of the Achaeans.

The only moment she speaks in the *Iliad* is in book 19, when she is mourning over Patroclus' death. In this speech she explains her story: She was married to the king of Lyrnessus<sup>46</sup>. The Achaeans burnt the city, killed her family and Achilles took her as his prize of war. Her words show how desperate she feels since her life is an endless tragedy. She first lost her family and now Patroclus, the only friend who always comforted her:

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<sup>45</sup> [Price, Simon–Kearns, Emily (eds.) 2004: 251]

<sup>46</sup> The name of the city is not mentioned in this speech but in *Il.* 19: 68

*“So grief gives way to grief, my life one endless sorrow! 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...” [Il. 19: 342-47]<sup>47</sup>*

Furthermore, this lament can be considered also as a foreshadowing of Achilles’ death. As Dué 2010: 100 explains: “Briseis’ lament for Patroclus mourns in advance her would-be husband Achilles –much as Andromache laments Hector while he is still alive.”<sup>48</sup> As she explains about their laments:

“(They) have a dual function (...) they are laments for the dead, the warrior husbands and sons who inevitably fall in battle. They protest the cruel fate of the women left behind, and narrate the bitter consequences of the war. (...) But for the audience of ancient epic the laments for these husbands and sons are also the prototypical laments of heroes, who, for them, continue to be lamented and mourned.”<sup>49</sup>

Briseis is one of the few female characters who appear in the poem besides Thetis, Helen or Andromache. They represent different types of women: First, Thetis is a strong goddess weeping for her son’s fate. Nevertheless, she makes her own decisions because she is a powerful deity. Moreover, Helen is considered as a woman whose beauty is worthy of a war.<sup>50</sup> She decided to run away with Paris and then she regretted it for being the cause of the war<sup>51</sup>. Therefore, she can be considered a god-like woman. On the contrary, Briseis is a slave; she is like many other women of her lot, vulnerable and subdued. It is interesting how much she wants to be Achilles’ wife despite all the harm he caused her –killing her family and letting Agamemnon take her: “Briseis is a woman of royal birth who has been widowed by Achilles and made his captive concubine, and yet in her lament of *Iliad* 19 she constructs him as an erotic figure and indeed her bridegroom-to-be.” [Dué 2010: 114] She has this misconception because Patroclus, who only wants to make Briseis feel better, makes her believe Achilles will marry her and

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<sup>47</sup> Her speech also shows, as Dué 2007: 100 says, quoting Simone Weil’s essay *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*: “the passage shows us that slaves are not given the opportunity to weep for their own cares except when their masters suffer loss.” This is made clear when later Briseis says “*You, Patroclus, you would not let me weep, not when the swift Achilles cut by husband down...*” [Il. 19: 348-49]

<sup>48</sup> “*Reckless one, my Hector—your own fiery courage will destroy you! Have you no pity for him, our helpless son? Or me, that the destiny that weighs me down, your widow, now so soon.*” [Il. 6: 482-86]

<sup>49</sup> Dué 2010: 98

<sup>50</sup> “*And catching sight of Helen moving along the ramparts, they murmured one to another, gentle, winged words: ‘Who on earth could blame them? Ah, no wonder the men of Troy and Argives and their arms have suffered years of agony all for her, for such a woman. Beauty, terrible beauty! A deathless goddess – so she strikes our eyes!’*” [Il. 3: 185-190]

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Il. 6: 407-19



they will come back to Phtia together (see page 26). These feelings also represent the rest of slaves, as Dué 2010: 110 says “all the outlets of emotions are barred (from them). And in part because the master can offer the hope of becoming a person again (instead of an object), a slave like Briseis is able to forget the horrors inflicted upon her”.

In *The song of Achilles* she has a more participative role. Madeline Miller makes up a new life for her. The only mention she makes about her life before becoming a captive of war is in chapter 23, when she is talking about Andromache with Achilles and Patroclus, suggesting she comes from Cicilia.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Miller describes her physically and creates her personality through her actions, since in the *Iliad* these elements do not appear. First, she is described by Patroclus in chapter 21, when he and Achilles take her:

*“She was beautiful, her skin a deep brown, her hair black and gleaming. High on her cheekbone was a spreading bruise where a knuckle had connected. In the twilight her eyes seemed bruised as well, shadowed as if with Egyptian khol.”* [Miller 2012: 216] *“I saw how dark her eyes were, brown as richest earth, and large in her almond-shaped face.”* [Miller 2012: 215]

In relation to her personality, she grows into a mature and different woman due to the events which happen throughout the novel. Since the beginning she is depicted as a shy and scared girl, all alone surrounded by warriors who want to rape her.<sup>53</sup> However, with Patroclus’ help she begins to feel comfortable, he teaches her Greek and she becomes a support for the new girls in the camp. She falls in love with Patroclus, an element of foreignization added by Madeline Miller (see page 21). As a matter of fact, in chapter 24 Briseis kisses him and offers him to have a child together, even when she knows Patroclus loves Achilles, as Patroclus explains: *“She had offered me all of it, herself and the child and Achilles too.”* [Miller 2012: 254]

Notwithstanding, her attitude becomes sadder and more pessimistic the moment Agamemnon takes her with him. She feels relieved when Patroclus saves her with the blood oath (see page 27). In relation to Achilles, she feels indifferent and, when Patroclus dies, she shows courage and anger towards him in their conversation: *“‘You are the one who made him go.’ Briseis steps towards him. ‘He fought to save you’ [...] Achilles buries his face in his hands. But she does not relent. ‘You have never deserved him [...] Achilles’ gaze meets hers. She is afraid, but does not draw back.”* [Miller 2012: 324]

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Miller 2012: 239.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Miller 2012: 215-6.

She finally appears in chapter 33, when Phyrus comes to win the war. In this scene, she proves what is suggested in the *Iliad*, that Achilles, in spite of loving her, he sees her as his personal honour in the first place. In the novel, she says: “*I was a war prize, and Agamemnon dishonoured him in taking me. That is all.*” [Miller 2012: 342] She also tells Phyrus innocently about Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship, which provokes his anger and desire to rape and hurt her, so she tries to kill him but since she cannot do it, she escapes. Patroclus explains her getaway. This scene shows she has become a courageous woman:

*“She erupts from the tent, past the too-slow hands of the guards, down the beach and into the sea. (...) She has always been the strongest swimmer of the three of us. She used to swear she’d gone to Tenedos once, two hours by boat. I feel wild triumph, as she pulls further and further from shore. The only man whose spear could have reached her is dead. She is free.”* [Miller 2012:343-4]

Agamemnon is another important character in the *Iliad*, as the *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion* explains: “*Homer depicts Agamemnon as a man of personal valour, but lacking resolution and easily discouraged. His quarrel with Achilles (...) supplies the mainspring of the Iliad’s action.*” [Price, Simon–Kearns, Emily (eds.) 2004: 11]

Since the beginning of the poem, Agamemnon shows through his actions that he is selfish and arrogant and does not apologize for his mistakes. This behaviour is the main cause of the quarrel between him and Achilles, because Achilles advises him to give Chryseis back to her father and Agamemnon refuses to do so. As a matter of fact, he tells her father: “*The girl, I won’t give up the girl. Long before that, old age will overtake my house, in Argos, far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth as the loom, forced to share my bed!*” [Il. 1: 29-36] These words prove how proud and immoral he is. Agamemnon goes a step further and takes Briseis as compensation for giving Chryseis back to her father, because as he declares before his quarrel with Achilles, if he gives her back but does not get anything in return he feels dishonoured:

*“I am willing to give her back, even so, if that is best for all. What I really want is to keep my people safe, not seeing them dying, But fetch me another prize, and straight off too, else I alone of the Argives go without my honor. That would be a disgrace. You are all witness, look—my prize is snatched away!”* [Il. 1: 135-41]

During the argument between him and Achilles, Achilles shows how Agamemnon really is: He does not really care about his army, only about his personal honour and getting wealth:

*“We all followed you, to please you, to fight for you, to win you honor, back from the Trojans—Menelaus and you, you dog-face! What do you care? Nothing. You don’t look right or left. (...) My honors never equal yours, whenever we sack some wealthy Trojan stronghold—my arms bear the brunt of the raw, savage fighting, true, but when it comes to dividing up the plunder the lion’s share is yours, and back I go to my ships, clutching some scrap, some pittance that I love, when I have fought to exhaustion.” [Il. 1: 186-99]*

Then, Achilles says he will return to Phtia because he will not stay there as Agamemnon’s servant<sup>54</sup> and since Agamemnon is only moved by his pride and fury, he says: *“You are nothing to me—you and your overweening anger! (...) I, I will be there in person at your tents to take Briseis in all her beauty, your own prize—so you can learn just how much greater I am than you, and the next man up may shrink from matching words with me, from hoping to rival Agamemnon strength for strength!” [Il. 1:213 -221]* What is interesting is that when it comes to take Briseis, he sends Talthibius and Eurybates to take her, which shows he is scared of Achilles because he knows the hero is greater than him.

Notwithstanding, his egoistic attitude changes when he notices his army is losing the war, and he regrets about what he did: *“Mad, blind I was! Not even I would deny it. Why look, that man is worth an entire army (...) but since I was blinded, lost in my own inhuman rage, now, at last, I am bend on setting things to rights: I’ll give a priceless ransom paid for friendship.” [Il. 9: 138-46]* However, later he says *“Let him submit to me! Let him bow down to me! I am the greater king. I am the elder-born, I claim—the greater man.” [Il. 9: 189-93]* he does not apologize and again he sends Odysseus and Ajax to Achilles’ tent instead of going himself. This shows Agamemnon does not feel any regrets; he only wants Achilles’ loyalty. This is made clear again in book 19 after Patroclus’ death: Achilles feels regret for what happened between him and Agamemnon

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<sup>54</sup> *“I have no mind to linger here disgraced, brimming your cup and piling up your plunder.” [Il. 1: 201-2]*

since there have been fatal consequences; however, Agamemnon again justifies himself and blames the gods:

*“But I am not to blame! Zeus and Fate and the Fury stalking through the night, they are the ones who drove the savage madness in my heart, that day in assembly when I seized Achilles’ prize—on my own authority, true, but what could I do? A god impels all thins to their fulfillment: Ruin, eldest daughter of Zeus, she blinds us all.”* [Il. 19: 100-06]

The *Iliad* only deals with his quarrel with Achilles in the ninth year of the Trojan War; nevertheless, there are many other poems where other episodes of his life are explained, e.g. the *Cypria* and the *Odyssey*, poems that relate his life before and after the war respectively. Madeline Miller makes a refiguration of all these sources in *The song of Achilles* to emphasize his arrogant character.

First, Patroclus’ description of Agamemnon reflects his personality: *“His nose was curved and sharp like an eagle’s beak, and his eyes glittered with a greedy intelligence.(...) He opened his hands in a gesture of welcome and stood regally expectant, waiting for the bows, obeisance, and oaths of loyalty he was owed.”* [Miller 2012: 182-3] Miller also suggests the tension between them that will burst in the quarrel in the Trojan War: *“He (Achilles) did not kneel (...) His face seemed cut from stone as he stared his warning at the King of Mycenae—you do not command me. The silence went on and on, painful and breathless, like a singer overreaching to finish a phrase.”* [Miller 2012:183]

The episode of Iphigenia is added by Madeline Miller in order to make a refiguration of all the events prior the Trojan War. In the *Cypria*, the sacrifice of Iphigenia by his father Agamemnon is explained: *“Agamemnon caught a stag, then he boasted that he was a better huntsman than Artemis, whereupon the offended goddess held the Greek fleet wind-bound at Aulis. Calchas told them to appease her by sacrificing Iphigenia, whom they sent for on the pretext of marriage to Achilles.”* [Price, Simon–Kearns, Emily (eds.) 2004: 11]<sup>55</sup> In *the song of Achilles*, her dreadful sacrifice is performed by Agamemnon. He does not feel any pity towards his daughter:

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<sup>55</sup> There are different versions about what happened when the girl was going to be sacrificed. Some of them argue that she was saved by Artemis, who put a deer in her place. Some others say she was killed and that

*“Agamemnon yanked something from his belt. It flashed in the sun as he swung it. The knife’s edge fell on to her throat, and blood spurted over the altar, spilled down her dress. (...)At last her struggles grew weaker, her kicking less; at last she lay still. Blood slicked Agamemnon’s hands. He spoke into the silence: ‘The goddess is appeased’”* [Miller 2012: 192]

In chapter 25, Patroclus describes Achilles and Agamemnon before their confrontation and it is made clear that Agamemnon only wants to be superior to the rest of the army: *“The contrast between the two had never been more sharp. Achilles relaxed and in control, with an ease that denied the funeral pyres and sunken cheeks; Agamemnon with his face tight as a miser’s fist, louring over us all.”* [Miller 2012:263]

Agamemnon is angry due to the prophecies, because he killed his own daughter to please the gods and now he has to give Chryseis back.<sup>56</sup> However, he is moved by his arrogance and sense of superiority, and what he says makes the Achaeans feel offended: *“Am I not your general? And do I not see you fed and clothed and honoured? And are my Mycenaeans not the largest part of this army? The girl is mine, given to me as a prize, and I will not give her up. Have you forgotten who I am?”* [Miller 2012: 265] As we said on page 20, during his quarrel with Achilles, he shows he is not as intelligent as Achilles, he is only moved by force and anger, and because of it he loses Achilles, without whom they cannot win the war.

Agamemnon is not a very important character in *The song of Achilles* but he is used by Miller as an element to criticize materialistic wars. With the novel she creates a dichotomy between Achilles and Agamemnon; each of them go to war for different reasons: while the former goes for honour, the latter only goes because he wants the city and everything it has, he does not feel any pity towards anyone, a feature present in most of the warriors of the time.

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is why Clitemnestra, Agamemnon’s wife, never forgave him. Cf. Price, Simon–Kearns, Emily (eds.) 2004: 11. In the *Odyssey* Nestor tells Telemachus –Odysseus’ son– what happened to Agamemnon after the war: He returned from Troy and was killed by Aegisthus, Clytemnestra’s lover, because she ordered him to do so. Cf. *Od.* 3: 193-200. Cf. Also *Od.* 1:35-44. The tragic versions by Aeschylus and Euripides on Iphigenia, Clitemnestra and Agamemnon are also undeniably important.

<sup>56</sup> *“Thank you, Calchas, ’Agamemnon said, his voice splintering the air. ‘Thank you for always bringing good news. Last time it was my daughter. Kill her, you said, because you have angered the goddess. Now you seek to humiliate me before my army.’”* [Miller 2012: 265]

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the first idea we would like to remark is the excellence of the *Iliad* as a source of inspiration. It is one of the greatest epic poems –with the *Odyssey*– in history and its influence in literature, art and film industry continues nowadays. The *Iliad* is a poem of war that portrays part of the Trojan conflict explicitly.<sup>57</sup> It is interesting how it does not try to find a good and a bad alliance, since they are all victims; as Dué 2010: 94 says, it “has a remarkable appreciation for the consequences of war for both sides, and especially for its victims: the warriors on the losing side, the women that get captive, and their children.”

One of the best examples of the *Iliad*'s impressive impact on later literature is the novel here analysed, Madeline Miller's *The song of Achilles*. She is very well acquainted with ancient Greek mythology and literature and that is seen in her novel. Furthermore, as we have explained, she relaborates and makes up not only the events of the *Iliad* but also what happens before Achilles and Agamemnon's confrontation and the episodes after Hector's death –the beginning and ending of the *Iliad* respectively. To describe these episodes she uses her knowledge in the tradition of ancient Greek mythography (the representation of myths in art and literature) in general and of the Trojan legends in particular. One example of this is Achilles' education with the centaur Chiron. Madeline Miller probably used ancient sources like the *Argonautica*, by Valerius Flaccus. Also, it is clear she has studied plenty of other myths apart from the myth of Troy since she mentions other heroes, e.g. when in chapter 5 Patroclus describes Achilles' divine heritage: “Divine blood flows differently in each god-born child. Orpheus' voice made the trees weep, Heracles could kill a man by clapping him on the back. Achilles' miracle was his speed.” [Miller 2012: 42]

Since the novel is focused on Achilles and Patroclus, when we read it, it is made clear that Miller has analysed both characters in depth. First, Achilles has a complex personality: He is the strongest of the Achaeans, he has a striking beauty as well as remarkable values since he goes to the Trojan War seeking glory, honour and justice, not any material rewards. This is emphasized when Agamemnon takes Briseis from him;

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<sup>57</sup> As we have said previously, it begins with Achilles and Agamemnon's confrontation and ends with Hector's death, when the war actually lasted 10 years. That is why Bernard Knox says in the Introduction to the poem that it should probably be called as the first line of the poem says “*The rage of Peleus' son Achilles.*” [Knox 1990: 3] This passage clearly echoes *Il.* 1:123-6

after she is taken, he says he feels betrayed and angry not because he had been deprived of his booty, but because she represented his honour (see page 20). However, Achilles' resentful rage takes control over him and that leads to devastating consequences, *i.e.* Patroclus' death, as well as many innocent victims together with the destruction of an entire city. Madeline Miller adapts Achilles' personality in the *Iliad* to her novel, where we see how since he is a child he knows he is meant to be "*the best of the Achaeans.*"—*Aristos Achaion*. Miller makes interesting refigurations, *e.g.* in chapter 15 when Odysseus persuades Achilles to go to Troy twisting his arm on the grounds most cherished by this young and idealistic Achilles, *i.e.* the values of honour and glory:

*"What is more heroic than to fight for the honour of the most beautiful woman in the world, against the mightiest city of the east?(...) we will master Anatolia all the way to Araby. We will carve ourselves into stories for ages to come."* [Miller 2012: 155]

When later Achilles is told by Thetis that he will die in Troy, first he doubts, but immediately afterwards he decides to go in order to get honour as well as an imperishable fame through glory (see page 19), which shows the values of a real hero.

The other character Madeline Miller has analysed in detail is Patroclus. He is the narrator and the main character of *The song of Achilles*, and in both the *Iliad* and Miller's version, he is famous for his kindness, sweetness and his sacrifice for the Achaean army. The refiguration of Madeline Miller is that Patroclus in the novel is not a good warrior, only a good healer. He also feels pity for the girls he meets throughout the novel: Deidameia, Iphigenia and Briseis. As a matter of fact, Briseis falls in love with him because he is so kind and helpful to her, a foreign element added by Miller, since in the *Iliad* she is in love with Achilles.

We can see that the main originality of Madeline Miller's version resides in the reelaboration of Achilles and Patroclus' qualities. She reworks them in order to adapt the *Iliad* to a different literary genre, the novel. To achieve this, she uses their main attributes, greatness and kindness respectively, and modifies them by adding other different aspects, so the novel includes the war plot from the original poem, but it also adds a new and foreign element to the *Iliad*: the erotic love between the two young boys.

Some examples of these changes are Achilles' indifference towards women; Patroclus ineptitude at fighting and of course, their physical as well as spiritual love for each other.

For me, the most important values to be seen in *The song of Achilles* are the following ones: To begin with, the novel is since the beginning engaging and gripping. Madeline Miller blends ancient sources with her original and creative writing, which captivates the readers because we always are eager to see which elements have been changed and which ones have remained. Moreover, her narrative style is very poetic and beautiful. The best examples are seen in Patroclus' descriptions of some romantic moments in pure lyrical style, full of metaphors and compelling comparisons, e.g.:

*"I shift, an infinitesimal movement, towards him. It is like the leap from a waterfall. I do not know, until then, what I am going to do. I lean forward and our lips land clumsily on each other. They are like the fat bodies of bees, soft and round and giddy with pollen. I can taste his mouth—hot and sweet with honey from dessert."*  
[Miller 2012: 60]

Another important element has to do with the ethical values of the novel. First, it is an antiwar novel that condemns specifically materialistic wars, which only seek getting profits and material rewards. The best example in the novel is Agamemnon. As we mentioned before, he goes to the Trojan War for the sake of money and he is the main cause of Achilles' rage because he does not want to give Chryseis back to her father and then takes Briseis from Achilles. Another character who is also only moved by his materialistic ambition is Pyrrhus. He destroys Troy, kills Andromache's son in the cruelest way<sup>58</sup> and takes the women as slaves. As regards to the innocent victims, Dué 2010: 95 explains, "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." That is why Miller condemns senseless violence as well as the collateral damage in her novel, which are exemplified by women like Briseis or Iphigenia. She condemns this in favour of a war of values such as democracy, justice and honour. This is represented, as we have said, by Achilles and Patroclus. This dichotomy can also be related with her

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<sup>58</sup> *"The prophecy told truly. Now that Pyrrhus has come, Troy falls. He does not do it alone, of course. There is the horse, and Odysseus' plan, and a whole army besides. But he is the one who kills Priam. He is the one who hunts down Hector's wife Andromache, hiding in a cellar with her son. He plucks the child from her arms and dashes his head against the stone of the walls, so hard the skull shatters like a rotted fruit. Even Agamemnon blanched when he heard."* [Miller 2012:344]



purpose of making people aware of nowadays materialistic wars; she is an American writer contemporary to the Iraq war, and probably wanted to condemn the arrival of the American troops to Iraq with the hidden purpose of getting petrol. What she actually explains in her webpage is that nowadays we are surrounded by episodes like the ones that occur in the *Iliad*: “Every day on the front page of the newspaper is an *Iliad* of woes—from the self-serving Agamemnons to the manipulative, double-speaking Odysseuses, from the senseless loss of life in war to the brutal treatment of the conquered. It is all there, in Homer too: our past, present and future, inspiration and condemnation both.”<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the most outstanding element of the novel is the love relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. She explains why she wanted to focus on their relationship:

“I think the culture is ready for the kind of love story that transcends gender and time. I did not deliberately set out to tell a deliberately “gay” love story; rather, 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.”<sup>60</sup>

It shows this novel is committed with fighting against homophobia, which still makes a lot of people feel rejected in an apparently modern society. To my mind, what is most interesting is the fact that she wrote this novel to show that Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship is the kind of love we should seek despite our sexual orientations. As she says, they respect each other and support each other no matter how hard the circumstances are.

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<sup>59</sup> <http://www.madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/> [20/06/2014]

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/> [20/06/2014]

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