

Achilles and Patroclus



Notes About This Text

The rainbows you will see in this chapter are links to an appendix which includes additional information. Click on these links to learn more about the topics discussed in the main text.

Teachers, your feedback is crucial to help us understand the impact of the “Queering the Pasts” educational resources. **Please take a few minutes to share your thoughts and experiences via [this survey](#).**

Please refer to the teachers’ guide attached [here](#) for information about teaching this material, additional activities, and other guidance.

If you would like to get in touch with us, please send us an email at qtpcommittee@gmail.com.

Key Questions

What do we know and what claims can we make about men who loved men in the ancient world?

How has Achilles and Patroclus' relationship been presented in different retellings from Homer to the modern day?

Key Terms

The Trojan War: the ten-year war between Greeks and Trojans; in myth, fought over the theft of Helen by Paris from Greece to Troy

The *Iliad*: an ancient Greek poem by the poet Homer, written almost 3000 years ago; it relates the events of the tenth year of the Trojan War; one very famous version of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship is related in this poem

Ancient Greek epic: a long poem that was performed out loud

Key People

Achilles: son of goddess, Thetis; one of the greatest warriors in Greek myth; the best Greek fighter in the Trojan War

Myrmidons: a group of elite soldiers who followed Achilles in the Trojan War

Patroclus: Achilles' childhood friend who fought alongside Achilles in the Trojan War

Agamemnon: commander of the Greek army

Briseis: an enslaved woman and war-prize (firstly, of Achilles; later, of Agamemnon)

Hector: the prince of Troy

Achilles and Patroclus: Who Were They?

In Greek myth, Achilles was one of the greatest warriors who ever lived. He was the best fighter among the Greeks in the Trojan War.

Patroclus fought alongside Achilles in the Trojan War as one of the Myrmidons. Patroclus and Achilles' close relationship is a key part of their story.



Ancient Greek pottery painting of Achilles during the Trojan War

We get one very prominent version of their relationship in the *Iliad*, an ancient Greek epic poem written by Homer almost 3,000 years ago. It relates events in the tenth year of the Trojan War and focuses on Achilles' anger:

**Sing, goddess, the destructive wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus,
which caused the Greeks countless suffering. . .**

Achilles starts the poem angry because Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek army, has taken away Achilles' war-prize – the enslaved woman, Briseis – to keep for himself. Agamemnon has been forced to return his own prize, and feels insulted. Achilles importantly refuses to fight until Briseis is returned to him. The Greeks immediately start losing the war without their best fighter. As the Trojans have almost reached the Greek army camp, Patroclus begs Achilles to let him go fight in Achilles' armour. Achilles agrees, but when Patroclus joins the fight, he is killed by Hector, the crown prince of Troy.



Achilles' surrender of Briseis to Agamemnon, a fresco from the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii

Here is an extract from the poem, relating what happens when Antilochus, a Greek prince and one of Achilles' allies in the Trojan War, tells Achilles that Patroclus has been killed:

Distraught, Achilles was speaking to his great-spirited heart,
Imagining in his heart what had indeed already happened;
"Ah me, why are the long-haired Greeks being turned about again
On the plain, back to the ships in fright?
I pray that the gods have not brought about the evil anxieties in my
heart,
As once my mother told me would happen, and she said to me
That while I still lived, the best of the Myrmidons
Would leave the light of the sun at the Trojans' hands.
Surely excellent Patroclus has died!
Cruel man – I ordered him to come back to the ships once he'd pushed
away destructive fire,
And not to fight Hector."

As he was stewing over these things in his heart and his soul,
Antilochus came up to him,
Shedding hot tears, and delivered his bitter message:
"Ah me, Achilles, I have such sorrowful news for you.
If only it weren't true!
Patroclus lies dead, and they're fighting around his naked corpse;
But Hector has the armour."



Painting of Antilochus
on a Greek amphora



Achilles Lamenting the
Death of Patroclus (1855)
by the Russian artist
Nikolai Ge

Antilochus finished speaking, and a black cloud of pain eclipsed Achilles;
He took dark dust in both his hands
And poured it over his head, and marked his beautiful face;
The black ash sat on his perfumed tunic.
He lay his great body down in the dust, spread out wide,
And marked his hair with his own loving hands, tearing at it...

Antilochus was crying opposite him, pouring out tears
And holding Achilles' hands – his heroic heart groaned.



Inquiry Question

Achilles and Patroclus are probably the most famous LGBTQ+ couple in ancient myth. But they're not explicitly labelled as such in the *Iliad*. Read the extract from Homer's *Iliad* above. How does Homer express the strength of Achilles' emotions? What do you think this shows us about Achilles and Patroclus' relationship?

For the rest of the poem, Achilles grieves for Patroclus and takes his anger out on the Trojans for killing him. Achilles commits mass slaughter on the Trojans until he finally faces and kills Hector on the battlefield. Achilles even threatens to 'behead twelve excellent sons of Troy in front of [Patroclus'] tomb, angered at [his] death'. After killing him, he drags the corpse of Hector behind his chariot. Homer makes it very clear that Achilles' reaction to Patroclus' death is excessive.



The Triumph of Achilles (1892) by Franz von Matsch depicts Achilles dragging the dead body of Hector in front of the gates of Troy.

Were Achilles and Patroclus a gay couple, or were they just comrades?

The *Iliad* is never explicit that Achilles and Patroclus were in a romantic relationship and many have argued that Homer never intended them to be seen as a couple. They are never described kissing, for example. Perhaps they were simply close friends?

However, they were definitely seen as a couple by most later Greek readers. In one of his plays, the Greek playwright Aeschylus retells the story of Patroclus' death. His version has Achilles say over Patroclus' dead body, "I love him".

Plato mentions that Achilles was honoured in the afterlife "because he valued his boyfriend so highly".

But not everyone agreed; the historian Xenophon argued that Achilles became so full of rage in the *Iliad* "not because [Patroclus] was his boyfriend, but because he was his comrade".

Achilles Binds Patroclus' Wounds.
Relief, Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1836-7





Achilles tending
Patroclus
wounded by an
arrow on Attic
red-figure pottery



Inquiry Question

Look at this Greek vase, showing Patroclus treating Achilles' wound. Does it prove that Achilles and Patroclus were boyfriends? Or is there another way of interpreting the pot?



Achilles and Briseis, fresco from the House of the Golden Cupids in Pompeii

Achilles' anger at the beginning of the *Iliad* is, however, due to the loss of a woman.

Agamemnon, the commander of the Greeks, took away Briseis, his "hard earned prize which was a tribute from the army", as repayment for the loss of Agamemnon's war prize, Chryseis. Achilles refuses to fight until Briseis is returned. When defending his decision to his comrades he declares that Agamemnon is greedy and takes more than his fair share of the loot, including Briseis: "I loved that girl with all my heart, even though she was a war-captive. But now he has snatched my prize from my arms and cheated me."

So, does this mean that Achilles was actually in love with Briseis? Or is there an alternative way to interpret his words and actions?

Briseis was a prisoner of war and a slave awarded to Achilles as a war-prize. Achilles responds to her loss as if he had lost a possession, not a romantic partner. One of the uncomfortable parts of reading the *Iliad* is the way it presents women. War-captives like Briseis are regularly dehumanised by the Greeks, including Achilles.

After Patroclus' death, Achilles regrets his quarrel with Agamemnon, blaming it for the death of his companion. Far from calling Briseis a beloved partner, he now declares "I only wish Artemis had killed her with an arrow".

Achilles' relationship with Patroclus is very different. They are close emotionally, which causes Achilles' rage at Patroclus' death. We see this when Achilles dreams of Patroclus' spirit after his death and is devastated that the spirit disappears when he tries to embrace it.



Seizure of Briseis from Achilles,
The British Museum

Achilles on Skyros

Achilles is often presented as very masculine but there is another myth in which his gender expression is more nuanced.

The story goes that Achilles' mother, the sea-nymph Thetis, was so concerned that Achilles would die at Troy, that she made him dress up as a woman and hide on the island of Skyros, disguised among the local king's daughters.



Achilles at Skyros, fresco from the House of the Dioscuri in Pompeii



Achilles at Skyros
from The House of
Poseidon in Zeugma,
Turkey.

The Greek army, led by the cunning Odysseus, came to Skyros to recruit him into the army, but they couldn't find him. So Odysseus came up with a plan. He brought the women many gifts – dresses, mirrors, jewellery, musical instruments, and also weapons.

Then Odysseus caused the palace alarm to be raised, pretending that they were under attack. Achilles leapt up and grabbed one of the weapons – revealing himself to everyone as a warrior, and not a princess, after all.

It's important to say that this myth does not mean that Achilles was in some ways trans –he briefly wore women's clothes as a disguise devised by his mother in order to hide; in fact, the myth suggests he did not feel comfortable expressing himself as a woman; he could not hide his training as a male warrior, and that's why he was discovered.

But Greek and Roman audiences were clearly interested in the idea of a very masculine figure like Achilles choosing to appear feminine, even if only temporarily and for a specific purpose. The myth can remind us that gender expression, gender and sexuality are not at all the same thing. The great warrior Achilles doesn't stop being a very masculine warrior interested in weapons – even when he is pretending to be a woman. If he had been more feminine, though, he might have been able to avoid going to war!

Likewise, the Greeks understood that being in love with Patroclus would not make Achilles any less of a great warrior.



Inquiry Question

What does this myth suggest about the characteristics Greek and Roman audiences viewed as masculine vs. feminine?

Was there such a thing as “gay” in the ancient world?

Ancient Greeks and Romans didn't have a word for “gay” or “queer”, and would not have identified themselves as LGBT+. But for the Greeks in particular, same-sex attraction was very important, and most men typically experienced and enjoyed romantic relationships with other men at some point in their lives. (For relationships between women, see our sourcebook on Sappho.) Same-sex relationships between men were usually seen as non-permanent, and they would still have been expected to marry women and have children.

Perhaps that's why Homer doesn't make a romantic relationship between Achilles and Patroclus explicit in the *Iliad* – he may not have needed to spell it out, because such a relationship between two men was a normal experience for Greeks.



Inquiry Question

The Greeks concept of same-sex relationships was different to our own. Does this make it difficult for us to understand what Achilles and Patroclus' relationship to each other was? What difficulties are there that limit our understanding?

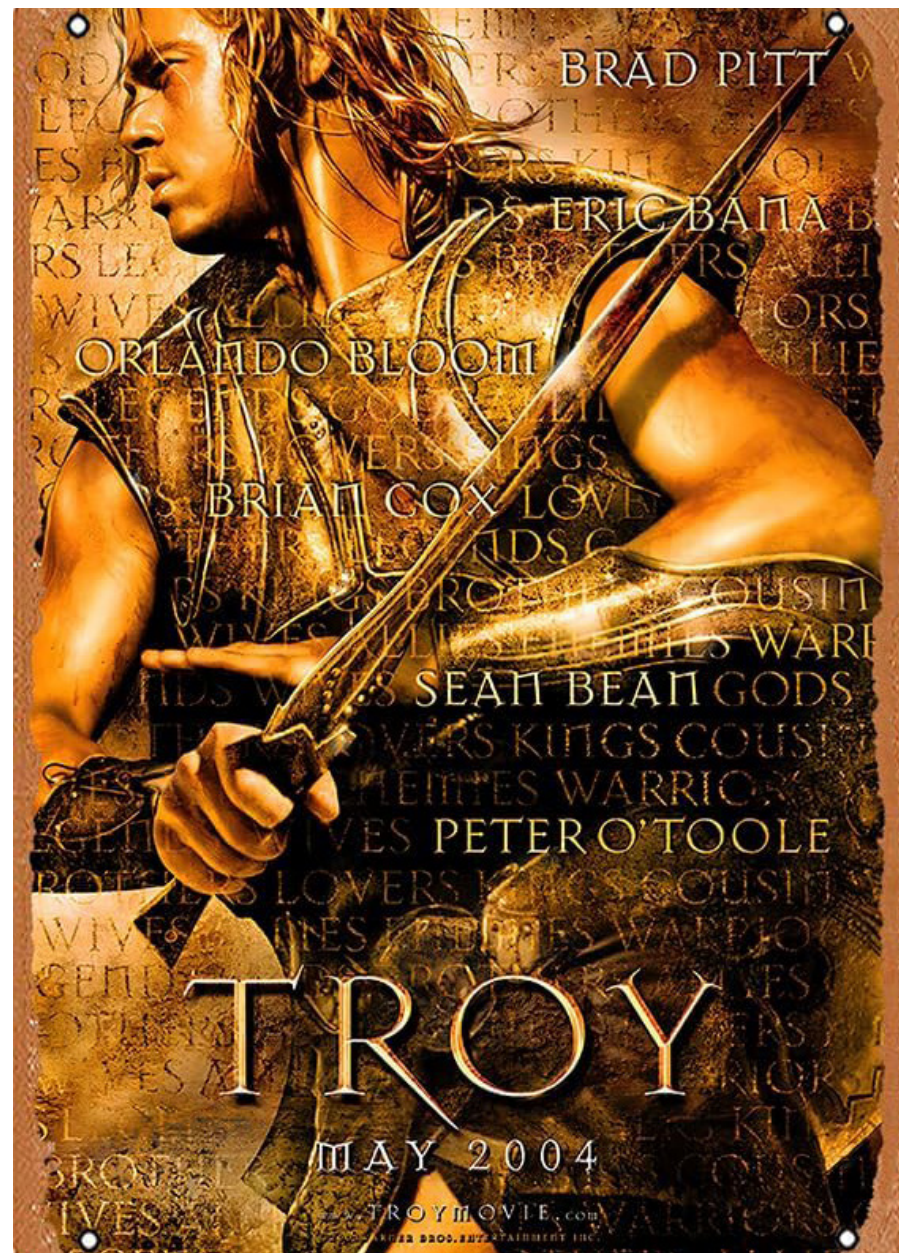
How have Achilles and Patroclus been represented in modern retellings?

Ever since Homer, Achilles has been a popular figure in literature and visual art. Patroclus, while less popular, is often depicted alongside him.

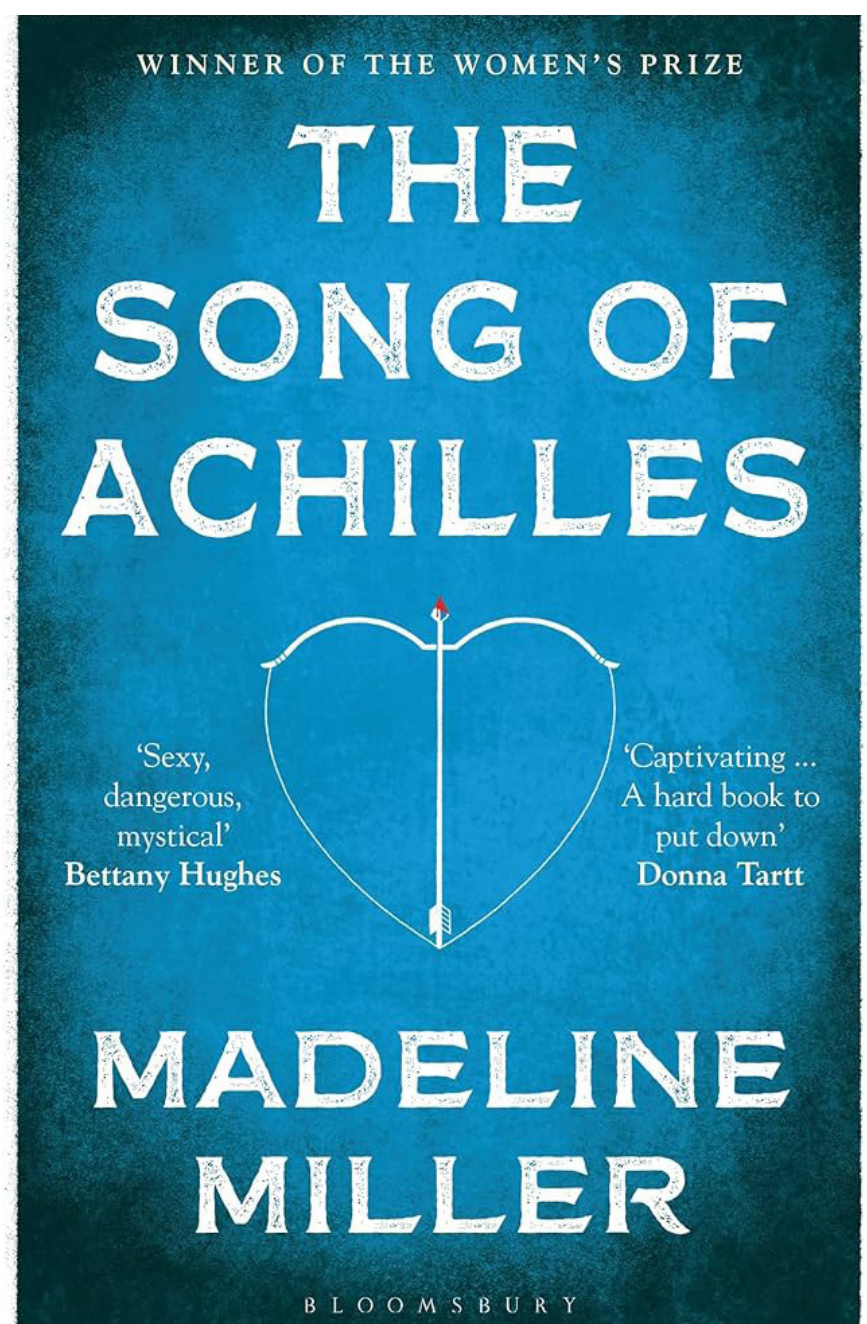
In these modern versions of Achilles' story, how 'masculine' is Achilles presented?

The 2004 film *Troy*, which cast Brad Pitt as Achilles, emphasised the hero's masculinity. Click [this link](#) and watch the clip to in order to see how the film portays Achilles and Patroclus.

In the ancient world, where same-sex experiences were common, it was not assumed that being in a romantic relationship with another man would make a person any less masculine. Achilles, whose masculinity is in no doubt throughout the *Iliad*, is an excellent example of this. But in the modern world, homophobic assumptions about gay people often focus on their femininity. Many gay men do embrace their femininity, but being gay does not mean you have to act in a particular way. Even so, the film *Troy* makes Achilles hypermasculine, suggests he is in love with Briseis, and introduces Patroclus as his cousin, not his partner, as if it would be a contradiction to be masculine and love men.



The Song of Achilles (2011) by Madeline Miller is a beautiful and powerful Young Adult novel about Achilles and Patroclus growing up together and facing the horrors of war side-by-side. In the book, Achilles is again shown to be a great warrior. By focusing on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, and by making the pair act and sound like teenagers rather than adults, Miller emphasises their queerness but also de-emphasises their masculinity. In fact, the portrayal of Patroclus is particularly feminine – in the novel, he decides to become a healer rather than a fighter.



In this extract, Patroclus and Achilles have just been told that Achilles has a choice; go to Troy, earn ever-lasting fame, but die young – or live a long and unimpressive life. Patroclus is the narrator.

You must not go. I almost said it, a thousand times. Instead I held his hands fast between mine; they were cold, and very still.

“I do not think I could bear it,” he said, at last. His eyes were closed, as if against horrors. I knew he spoke not of his death, but of the nightmare Odysseus had spun, the loss of his brilliance, the withering of his grace. I had seen the joy he took in his own skill, the roaring vitality that was always just beneath the surface. Who was he if not miraculous and radiant? Who was he if not destined for fame?

“I would not care,” I said. The words scrabbled from my mouth. “Whatever you became. It would not matter to me. We would be together.”

"I know," he said quietly, but did not look at me. He knew, but it was not enough. The sorrow was so large it threatened to tear through my skin. When he died, all things swift and beautiful and bright would be buried with him. I opened my mouth, but it was too late.

"I will go," he said. "I will go to Troy."

The rosy gleam of his lip, the fevered green of his eyes. There was not a line anywhere on his face, nothing creased or graying; all crisp. He was spring, golden and bright. Envious Death would drink his blood, and grow young again.

He was watching me, his eyes as deep as earth.

"Will you come with me?" he asked. The never-ending ache of love and sorrow. Perhaps in some other life I could have refused, could have torn my hair and screamed, and made him face his choice alone. But not in this one. He would sail to Troy and I would follow, even into death.

"Yes," I whispered. "Yes."

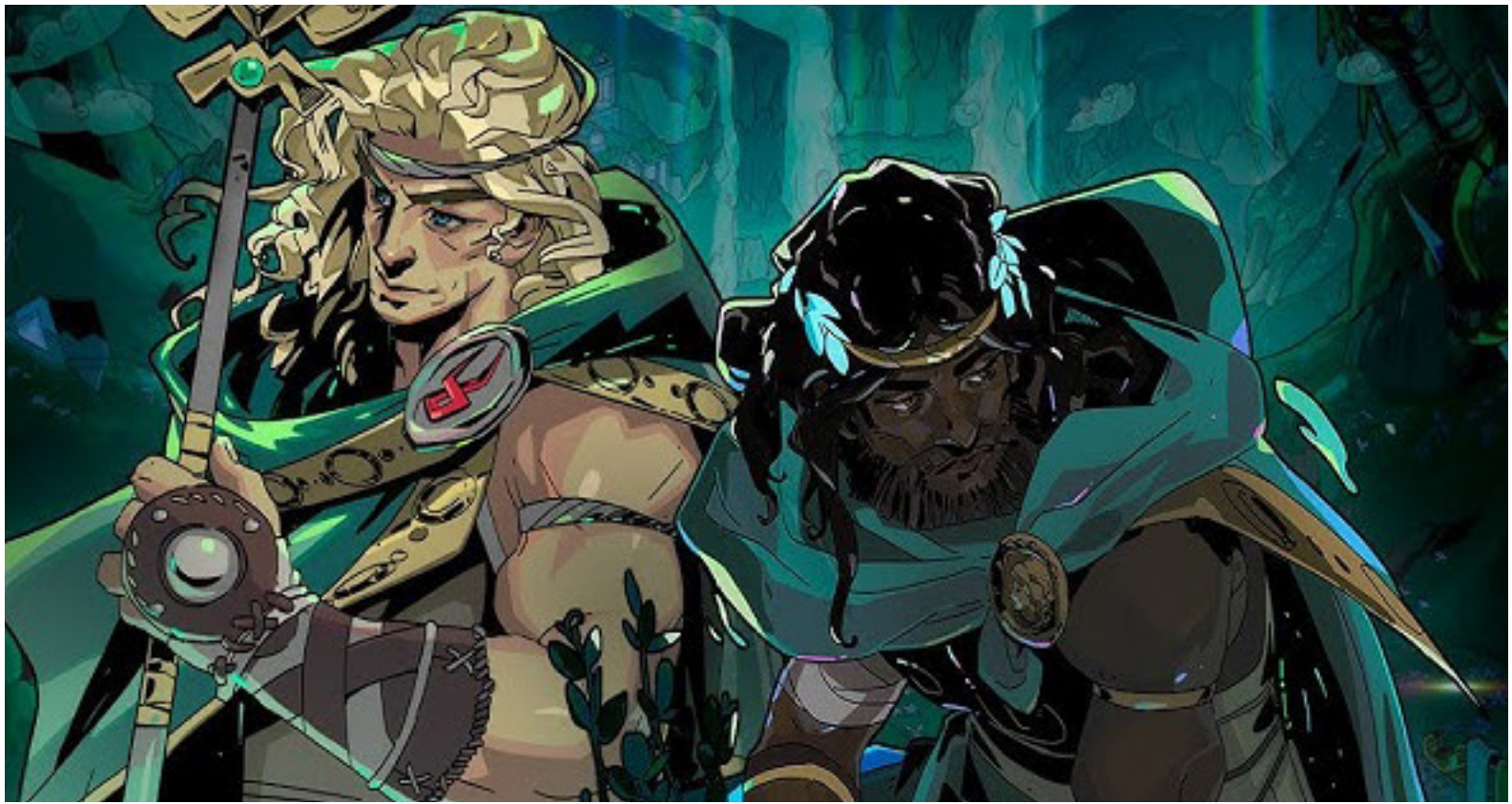
Relief broke in his face, and he reached for me. I let him hold me, let him press us length to length so close that nothing might fit between us.

Tears came, and fell. Above us, the constellations spun and the moon paced her weary course. We lay stricken and sleepless as the hours passed.



Inquiry Questions

How does Madeline Miller present Achilles' and Patroclus' relationship?
How does she portray Achilles and Patroclus differently from how Homer portrays them? In what ways are the two characterized as masculine or feminine in this extract?



Finally, in the 2020 videogame *Hades*, Achilles and Patroclus appear as lovers separated from each other in the underworld, and a major side-quest sees the player character reunite them after many years apart. The character designs make it clear that these are two great warriors – they are both very muscular, and they wear armour and carry weapons. But they also get a queer love story. What makes *Hades* stand out is that it is able to acknowledge both Achilles and Patroclus' masculinity, and their sexuality at the same time.

Contributors

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Image Credits

Page 4: Achilles fighting Memnon, Ancient Greek polychromatic pottery painting on a grave amphora, southern Italy, 330 BCE

Page 6: Achilles' surrender of Briseis to Agamemnon, from the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii, fresco, 1st century AD, National Archaeological Museum, Naples

Page 8: Antilochus on an Attic red-figure amphora ca. 470 BC from the Louvre, Paris, France

Page 9: Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus (1855) by the Russian artist Nikolai Ge, Belarusian National Arts Museum, Minsk, Belarus

Page 11: *The Triumph of Achilles* (1892) by Franz von Matsch, the Achilleion, Corfu, Greece

Page 13: Achilles Binds Patroclus' Wounds. Relief, Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1836-7, Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark

Page 14: Achilles tending Patroclus wounded by an arrow. Tondo of an Attic red-figure kylix, ca. 500 BCE. Vulci, Italy.

Page 16: Achilles and Briseis, from the House of the Golden Cupids in Pompeii, fresco

Page 18: Seizure of Briseis from Achilles, Marble Roman Relief c. 30 BCE - CE 80. British Museum.

Page 19: Achilles at Skyros, fresco from the House of the Dioscuri in Pompeii, National Archaeological Museum, Naples

Page 20: Achilles at Skyros, The House of Poseidon in Zeugma, Turkey. 2nd-3rd century CE. Zeugma Mosaic Museum.

Page 27: Poster from the film *Troy*.

Page 28: Cover Illustration from *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller.

Page 32: Art from the 2020 video game *Hades*.