

He Whom I Loved as Dearly as My Own Life: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Achilles and Patroclus

Hayley Rhodes Wittenberg

ABSTRACT

Homer's *Iliad* has been a pillar in Western literature for centuries. Following the story of the Trojan War, the epic introduces us to Achilles, the greatest warrior of Greece. Although in most of the epic Achilles has abstained from fighting, he rejoins after the death of his dearest companion, Patroclus. Achilles's relationship with Patroclus has been heavily debated since antiquity, with the likes of Plato arguing their status as lovers. Recently, there has been a shift in the accepted dogma, with more historians accepting the fact that Achilles and Patroclus's relationship was more than simply platonic. This analysis lays out the evidence to support this claim and adds to the scholarship on queer interpretations of the *Iliad*. This article compiles direct material from the *Iliad*, information from other scholars, and works from historical figures such as Plato. There are several pieces of evidence that show that Achilles and Patroclus enjoyed a very close, very intimate relationship with each other. It would be inaccurate and a disservice to the works of Homer to assert that there were no romantic attachments between the two.

"Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son, Achilles" (Iliad 1.1). The opening lines to Homer's famous epic, the *Iliad*, start the reader on a journey of rage. Achilles, the fearsome warrior, is known for his godlike fury and prowess in battle. He was the person who defeated armies, bested gods, and almost single handedly caused the fall of Troy. Achilles's famous rage, however, was fueled by grief. This grief was caused by the death of Patroclus: his dearest friend, closest companion, and arguably, his lover. Historians have often branded Achilles and Patroclus as merely close friends, but it is a disservice to the pair to strip their relationship of such an important aspect. Now historians have begun to change their opinions, such as Edith Hall, saying that the *Iliad*, "offered ancient Greek men a model of idealized love between men in the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus" (62).

Assigning sexualities to historical figures is always a point of contention, because in many ways modern terms and classifications hardly capture the variety of ways sexuality was expressed in ancient times. This is largely due to the fact that, as Halperin states, "no single category of discourse or experience existed in the premodern and non-Western worlds that comprehended exactly the same range of same-sex sexual behaviors, desires, psychologies, and socialities, as well as the various forms of gender deviance, that now fall within the capacious definitional boundaries of homosexuality" (89). It would be inaccurate to compare the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus to modern homosexual relationships, or to say they were exclusively gay men. These terms hold very specific cultural meanings and have changed through time in various ways around the world. Having a homosexual/gay label meant something different in London in the nineteenth century, in the United States in the 1980s, and in Greece during the Bronze Age. Being aware of this, using modern terminology offers clarity and is a convenient way to explain the nature of their relationship. However, these labels are not perfect and are not a base evaluation.

Who Were Achilles and Patroclus?

It is important to paint a portrait of who these heroes were individually before analyzing their relationship with each other. Achilles is one of the only heroes whose life is documented quite literally from the cradle to the grave, and he is also such a larger-than-life character in Homer's *Iliad*. Achilles was the son of King Peleus, who ruled over the kingdom of Phthia, and Thetis, an immortal sea nymph (Alexander 29). Within the *Iliad*, much of what is told about Achilles is his fury, and his refusal to rejoin the war effort at Troy. He is sometimes portrayed as extremely egotistical and only worried about his fame and glory, which was promised to him for his participation in the Trojan War (Iliad 9.151). He is extremely strong-willed and obstinate, which is

exceedingly evident in the famous quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon at the opening of the *Iliad*.

Their argument, which sets the trajectory of the entire epic, was over the return of the daughter of Chryses, a priest of Apollo. Because Agamemnon had disrespected the god Apollo by taking his priest's daughter as a war prize, Apollo had sent a plague upon the Greeks. Illness and death would remain until father and daughter were reunited. Angered by having to return Chryseis, Agamemnon threatened to take Achilles's war prize, Briseis. Faced with being dishonored in such a public way, at that moment Achilles swore he would withdraw from the fight if Briseis is taken away from him. Achilles states, "I am returning to Phthia, since it is much better to go home again [...], I am minded no longer to stay here dishonored" (Alexander 18-21). Achilles's quick temper is not only evidenced in the *Iliad* but seems to be a popular trend in epic tradition. Summaries of lost Trojan Cycle poems indicate that Achilles was often quarreling with allied heroes. In *Cypria*, Achilles argues with Agamemnon over a late invitation to a feast, and in *Aethiopis*, Achilles kills Thersites after being insulted by him. The *Odyssey* also mentions a quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus (Alexander 19).

Stubborn, quick to anger, quick to kill, but above all, great. Repeatedly, Achilles is spoken of in terms of his godlike abilities. His mother, Thetis, had been given the prophecy that she was to bear a son greater than his father, a mortal who would be the best of the Greeks (Alexander 29). However, that greatness would cost his life; another prophecy entailed that if he were to sail to Troy he would be famous, but he also would never return (*Iliad* 9.151). These points played into his anger towards Agamemnon; Achilles had willingly given his life for promised honor, yet by being dishonored he had lost both. Achilles is a complex character in this regard; he is already renowned as the best fighter of the Greeks yet is willing to push that boundary by bargaining his life for fame. He desires it more than anything, but it is also something that brings him immense sorrow. Achilles weeps to Thetis after Briseis is taken from him, and in his sorrow begs his mother to go to Zeus and ask him to make the Achaeans pay deeply for the wrong they have done to him. It is a murderous request; asking for Zeus to "help the Trojans and pin the Achaeans back against the ships and the water" (Alexander 26). He asks for them to pay with their lives, because in a sense, Achilles had done the same.

Patroclus, despite being a key pillar in the *Iliad's* plot, and the driving force behind Achilles's actions, is a side character within the epic. He does not speak until Book 11, when the Trojans have pushed back the Greeks and attacked their ships.

Patroclus's first words ask Achilles what he needs of him, and relatedly, Patroclus's last words are Achilles's name (Clarke 390). His entire existence is within Achilles's orbit, including his death. However, he is undoubtedly one of the most important characters in the *Iliad*, because his death is a direct cause of the climax of the story. If not for the death of Patroclus, Achilles would have never returned to war. He would not have sought to kill Hector so ferociously, and the tides would not have turned in the Greek's favor. The proof of this can be seen in Book 9, when the embassy is sent to try and convince Achilles to rejoin the fight. Instead of naming a price or compromise to make him fight again, Achilles listens to the pleas of Odysseus, and then simply tells Odysseus that he plans to sail back home to Phthia the next day. Achilles states plainly, "Since I have no desire to battle glorious Hector, tomorrow at daybreak [...] you will see my squadron sail at dawn" (*Iliad* 9:434-438). From that moment, Achilles had no interest in war, and only wanted to go home.

Known for being gentle and kind, Patroclus is seemingly an unlikely choice for Achilles's *therapon*, his closest companion (Alexander 147). He is older than Achilles and was told by his father to be good counsel to Achilles as they went to war (Clarke 388). Achilles calls him *illustrious*; it is shown that he is well-liked among the men of their Myrmidon camp and the rest of the Greek encampment (Alexander 131). Patroclus's gentle nature is evident in Book 16, when the Trojans are attacking the Greek encampment. Patroclus is sent by Achilles to gather information from Nestor, yet along the way he stops to help wounded soldiers (*Iliad* 16.193-194). When he returns, he is so overcome by seeing the wounded and dead Greeks that he weeps as he speaks to Achilles (Clarke 391). Throughout the epic, Achilles only speaks of Patroclus as an equal to him (Clarke 192). Though Patroclus is known for being kind, he is also an amazing warrior; since he is the companion of Achilles, that fact is not surprising. Homer even goes so far as to describe Patroclus as looking "like Mars [Ares] himself," the god of war (*Iliad* 1.188, clarification added).

In many ways, Achilles and Patroclus are opposites. Achilles is strong-willed and ill tempered, while Patroclus is cool-headed and affable. But it seems that it is a kind of perfect balance; Patroclus is the only person who can scold Achilles without Achilles lashing out, and Patroclus is calm enough on Achilles's behalf to give him level-headed advice. Achilles and Patroclus often stayed separate from the others in order to converse with each other; when speaking to Patroclus's ghost in Book 23, Achilles tells Patroclus that he misses their private counsel away from the rest of the soldiers (*Iliad* 23). They have a very interesting dynamic; Achilles is brash and bold, but Patroclus is able to steady him, while Achilles is able to bolster Patroclus, who is

content to stay cool and collected. This dynamic works well within the boundaries of companionship, but even more so within the boundaries of lovers.

Achilles and Patroclus: Classical Views

The *Iliad* has been popular since its fruition and has been discussed for centuries among philosophers and literary scholars alike. Among the most popular discussions is that of Achilles and Patroclus, with the nature of their relationship being a matter of contention: was it homosexual or simply friendship? And, if it was indeed homosexual, was it pederastic? Invariably, ancient scholars saw their relationship through the lens of *pederasty*. *Pederasty* in Ancient Greece was a form of socially accepted homosexuality, wherein older men (the *erastes*) shared a romantic and sexual relationship with younger boys (the *eromenos*) (Mariscal and Morales 292). Interestingly enough, much of the debate was on who was the *erastes*, the lover, and who was the *eromenos*, the beloved. This label was used by ancient scholars as a means to explain the relationship Achilles and Patroclus shared but fell apart for many reasons.

Plato, through the mouth of Phaedrus in his *Symposium*, speaks of Achilles and Patroclus as undeniable lovers (Jowett 153). Not only does Plato explicitly call them lovers, but he also assigns Achilles the role of *eromenos* and Patroclus the role of *erastes*. He states, "the notion that Patroclus was the beloved one is a foolish error [...], for Achilles was surely the fairer of the two, [...] he was still beardless, and younger far" (Jowett 153). Plato also stated that Achilles's willingness to die to avenge Patroclus's death shows how much Achilles revered his *erastes*. He goes on to say that they were true lovers and were divinely approved because the gods honor the virtue of love. Plato also alludes to Aeschylus' tragedy *Myrmidons* in his *Symposium*. Aeschylus assigned Achilles and Patroclus opposite of Plato, for which Plato called him "foolish". It is very interesting for Plato to categorize them as he did, because it would put Patroclus in a position of power over Achilles instead of the contrary; Achilles, as a prince of higher status and renowned warrior, seems to be the obvious choice as *erastes* (Jowett 153).

Though ancient scholars were willing to openly claim that Achilles and Patroclus shared an intimate relationship, it is not entirely accurate to place them within the confines of ritual *pederasty*. Firstly, Achilles and Patroclus were close in age, which went against the basis of pederasty, as it was meant to be shared between an older man and a younger boy. Also, as was just previously mentioned, Patroclus is technically of lower status than Achilles, which would make his being the *erastes* unlikely. Most importantly, however, is that pederasty was not practiced during the

time period of the *Iliad*; the epic was set within the Greek Bronze Age (1750 to 1050 BC), and *pederasty* was not practiced until the end of the Archaic Period (around the fifth century BC) (Chadwick 37; Mariscal and Morales 292). It should also be added that *pederasty* was not a permanent situation, and most relationships ended once the younger of the two was of marrying age. Achilles and Patroclus were well past marrying age, yet neither of them had taken wives, despite Achilles being the only son and heir of Phthia, and no doubt having plenty of options to choose from for his bride.

Achilles and Patroclus in Love

Much of what there is to be seen about the nature of Achilles and Patroclus's relationship occurs after Patroclus's death. However, there are still examples that show their love for one another in their interactions from when Patroclus is still alive. The best example is from Book 16, when Patroclus comes to Achilles weeping, telling him of the destruction that has befallen the Greeks. Achilles is moved by Patroclus's words and tears, which is the first time since he withdrew from fighting that he has cared about the fate of his compatriots (*Iliad* 16.261). Patroclus convinces Achilles to let him go and fight in his armor, as a way to trick the Trojans into thinking Achilles has rejoined the fight. The following passage shows in simple terms the exclusive intimacy that the pair share; after instructing Patroclus, Achilles tells him wistfully, "let them all perish [...] all the Trojans and yes all the Achaeans too, except *we two*; and may *we two, alone*, then share the ultimate glory of taking Troy" (qtd. in Clarke 385, emphasis added). This passage also shows how highly Achilles holds Patroclus; his ruthlessness and egotism yields only to Patroclus, and not only that, Achilles yields it to him readily and naturally (Clarke 385).

The only parallel we see of such a connection in the poem is that of Meleager, in a parable told by Phoenix. Speaking to Achilles during the embassy to him in Book 9, Phoenix tells the story of a great warrior, Meleager, who withdraws from a war with his wife, Cleopatra, after feeling disrespected (Clarke 394). No one can convince him to rejoin the cause, and in the end, Meleager only yields to his wife, who tearfully begs him to take up arms again to save their city. Achilles, in a rage at Agamemnon, withdraws from the fight with Patroclus. No one, not Achilles's friends or other companions, or Agamemnon or Odysseus, can convince Achilles to rejoin the fight. Only Patroclus's tearful appeal makes Achilles yield, much like Meleager and his wife. It can be said that the implication of comparing Achilles and Patroclus to Meleager and Cleopatra was purposeful on the part of Homer. In plain words, it shows the strength of their bond and the weight of Patroclus's words to Achilles, not unlike that of a wife to a husband.

Throughout the epic, Achilles states repeatedly that he honors Patroclus above all his other companions, equal only to himself. No other hero makes such a statement about another, and again shows the exclusive intimacy of their relationship. Achilles speaks as if they are one person, which is something that other characters of the *Iliad* also recognize. Besides Patroclus, no other character is related to in terms of their relationship to another person, nor are they referred to as someone's "dearest companion" so often. Though that name does not exactly express a deep relationship, the frequency that it and other terms are used shows the importance of such an emphasis. After Patroclus leaves for battle, Achilles goes and prays to Zeus to bring Patroclus back to him unharmed, which is another unique and unparalleled action in the *Iliad* (*Iliad* 16.267). In an analysis of the men's relationship with one another, Clarke states, "The strength of Achilles's feelings for Patroclus is crucial to the climax of the *Iliad*, [...] for only Patroclus living can persuade Achilles to forgo his determination to keep his men from the fight" (394).

Of course, the best examples overall of the intimacy and closeness of the two are shown through Achilles's grief. When Antilochus comes to Achilles and tells him what has happened to Patroclus—that he was struck down by the Trojan prince Hector—Achilles reacts violently and immediately. Though Achilles is known for a short temper, this outpouring of emotion is pure anguish. When Briseis was taken away from him, Achilles was angry enough to almost kill Agamemnon. In this instance, Achilles is so distraught that the people around him worry he would kill *himself*. After hearing the news Achilles falls to his knees, pours dirt over his head and rips out his hair; wailing so loudly that his mother Thetis hears him in the depths of the sea. Achilles has to be held down as he screams and cries, out of fear that he will slit his own throat. Achilles's mother appears then and asks him what has happened. Groaning, Achilles tells her, "My dear comrade Patroclus has fallen – he whom I valued more than all others, and loved as dearly as my own life" (*Iliad* 18.304). Shortly after, he vows to slaughter Hector, saying, "I will not live nor go about mankind unless Hector fall by my spear, and thus pay me for having slain Patroclus son of Menoetius [...] whom I loved so dearly" (*Iliad* 18.304). Achilles also expresses his consuming guilt, saying that he would rather "die here and now, in that I could not save my comrade. He has fallen far from home, and in his hour of need my hand was not there to help him" (*Iliad* 18.304). Achilles blames himself for not being able to save Patroclus, which only adds to his grief.

There is a fight over Patroclus's body on the battlefield, and it is only because of Achilles that the Greeks are actually able to retrieve Patroclus's body from the

Trojans; being blessed by the goddess Athena, Achilles screams loud enough to scare the Trojans, and send them on retreat. When they bring Patroclus's body back, Achilles washes it and wraps it in cloth. He refuses to eat or drink, and keeps Patroclus's body in their shared tent, where he weeps and does not sleep (*Iliad* 18.310). Achilles describes the grief of losing Patroclus being worse than losing his father Peleus as well as his son, Neoptolemus. Achilles states, "I'm sick with longing for you! There is no more shattering a blow that I could suffer. Not even if I should learn of my own father's death, [...] or the death of my dear son" (*Iliad* 19.382-388). Achilles had prepared for his own death and accepted it, since he was aware of the prophecies surrounding his life, but never had he imagined that he would live, and Patroclus would die. He states as much in Book 19, "Till now I made sure that I alone was to fall here at Troy away from Argos, while you [Patroclus] were to return to Phthia, bring back my son with you [...] and show him the greatness of my house" (19.325, clarification added). Achilles had planned for Patroclus to raise his son, and to live a long life at his father's house in Phthia even if Achilles would die in Troy.

Achilles's most overt act of grief is the brutal killing and abuse of Hector. His grief-fueled rage brings him back to battle, where he kills twelve Trojan princes as he hunts down Hector. Achilles fights the River Scamander in order to reach Hector, and eventually kills Hector by throwing a spear into his neck (*Iliad* 21, 22). Achilles is violent and brutal, and his seething anger is evident as he berates Hector as he lay dying. Achilles says, "the Achaeans shall give him [Patroclus] all due funeral rites, while dogs and vultures shall work their will upon yourself" (*Iliad* 22.365, clarification added). Hector begs Achilles not to let dogs devour his body, and for Achilles to let his family bury him properly. To this, Achilles replies, "Dog, talk not to me neither of knees nor parents; would that I could be as sure of being able to cut your flesh into pieces and eat it raw, for the ill you have done me" (*Iliad* 22.365). The shift in tone within this passage is stark compared to how Achilles addressed Hector in Book 9, when he had no interest in fighting the "glorious" Hector. The rage and bloodlust Achilles now possesses stems from the untimely death of his mate. Though Achilles has guilt because he had not been there to protect Patroclus in his final moments, Hector is the reason why, and so that blame fuels Achilles's punishing vengeance.

Although it has been made clear that if Achilles were to kill Hector he would also die, Achilles kills him without a second thought to self-preservation. Achilles is immediately at peace with that fact; after Hector has died, Achilles tells his corpse, "Die; for my part I will accept my fate whensoever Jove [Zeus] and the other gods see fit to send it" (*Iliad* 22.366, clarification added). Achilles then proceeds to desecrate

Hector's body by tying it to his chariot, with a rope that was strung through the sinews of Hector's ankles. He drags Hector's body around the battlefield while Hector's father Priam looks on helplessly, distraught and mortified. Back at the camp, Achilles still has not buried Patroclus. Achilles has refused to bathe, even though his body is sullied from battle, and states he will not do so until he has properly buried Patroclus (Clarke 393). He also says he will shave his head as a public act of mourning, "for so long as I live no such second sorrow shall ever draw nigh me" (*Iliad* 23.372). As stated before, Patroclus's demise has struck Achilles worse than if his father and son had both died, a type of despair that is deeper than anything else he has ever felt or could ever feel.

What is striking about Achilles's violent grief is how it is contrasted by the tenderness in which he handles Patroclus's body, and his allusions to their shared past intimacy. The closeness shared by Achilles and Patroclus is unique among the heroes of the epic; the only similar acts of physicality we see between other men are in rare situations, such as the hand holding between Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus when Menelaus was wounded (*Iliad* 4.71). Also, the other companions closest to Achilles outside of Patroclus, Automedon and Antilochus, are not evidenced to share this same form of intimacy. When Thetis comes to Achilles in his tent, he is embracing Patroclus; he lays his hands on Patroclus's breast; he holds Patroclus's head (Clarke 393). Patroclus, in ghostly form, also speaks of familiar intimacy between them: "you were not uncaring of me"; "hold my hand, I am grieving"; and, in simple words, "a last request – grant it, please. Never bury my bones away from yours, Achilles, let them lie together" (Clarke 391). Of all the unparalleled moments in the *Iliad*, Patroclus's request of Achilles is the most poignant, and implies that they were so closely bonded in life that even in death they cannot be separated. Achilles, in reply, tells Patroclus he will do everything he asks, and says, "Draw closer to me, let us once more throw our arms around one another, and find sad comfort in the sharing of our sorrows" (*Iliad* 23.373). Achilles then opens his arms to embrace Patroclus, but Patroclus's ghost disappears. He spends the rest of the night weeping. This level of loyalty and devotion between brothers in arms is unique within the *Iliad* and Greek culture. It is not paralleled until centuries later with the Spartans, but they too are seen as unique, isolated incidents within the composite culture of classical Greece (Hall 170).

When the time finally comes to bury Patroclus, Achilles cuts off a lock of his hair and places it in Patroclus's hands. This lock of hair is significant, not only because it is another unparalleled action on Achilles's part within the *Iliad*, but because it is the lock that Achilles had promised to his father Peleus (*Iliad* 23.374). Achilles was only supposed to cut this lock of hair when he returned home from war so that he could

offer it to the river Spercheius, one of the main rivers that fed Phthia. Achilles seems to sacrifice this piece of himself to Patroclus instead, because Patroclus's death is now the main force driving Achilles's actions, not the promise of going home and living a comfortable life. He states, "now, therefore, that I shall see my home no more, I give this lock as a keepsake to the hero Patroclus" (*Iliad* 23.374). Achilles, resigned, is ready to die.

Conclusion

Ancient scholars were correct in believing that Patroclus and Achilles were more than just companions. While one cannot discredit the importance of platonic relationships, it is quite clear from the source material that Patroclus and Achilles were lovers. Divinely approved, and equally matched as half of the other. Achilles's emotions, his love and grief, drive the story of the *Iliad*. Patroclus lived his entire life within the life of Achilles, and in turn he is the only person more important to Achilles than himself, his own life, his ego, and honor. As Aeschines stated, any "educated man" can clearly see what Homer meant by the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus, even though it is never explicitly stated within the *Iliad* (Clark 396). After looking at ample evidence, it is safe to assume that they enjoyed a relationship that transcended friendship, that they loved each other in life with promises to continue to do so even after death. Achilles and Patroclus live on in a memory that is fitting for them; one cannot be separated from the other, and they will continue to remain together, just as their ashes and bones were laid together, in the underworld and beyond.

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