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Soul-searching: Identity in *The Song of Achilles*, Contextualized by Plato's *Symposium*

Exploration of identity is a common theme in LGBTQIA+ literature, with coming to terms with sexuality being parallel to the coming-of-age motif in other novels. Queer Theory states that identity is constructed by the specific period or culture people find themselves in, meaning gender and sexuality are unstable over time — and identities apart from heteronormative society are associated with shame that characters often struggle to overcome. Madeline Miller's free indirect discourse work *The Song of Achilles* is one such novel, where main character Patroclus, who is exiled from his family at age ten, must determine his identity. He does so through self-discovery and the development of his relationship with Achilles, his partner who is the same age he is. Coupled with Patroclus' identity in his sense of self is his identity as perceived by others, where his relationship becomes a taboo against the Ancient Greek same-sex relationship custom of a "mentor-mentee" age gap. In Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, main character Patroclus looks back on his developmental moments, where he comes into his identity through self-exploration and growing with Achilles into love. Plato's *The Symposium* contextualizes their love as the force that unites two souls into one and creates Achilles and Patroclus' everlasting reputation.

The Song of Achilles explores the known story of Greek mythological character Achilles, but twists it by emphasizing Achilles' connection with his companion Patroclus. Achilles, "The Best of the Greeks," was known as the greatest of the Greek heroes of the Trojan War ("Trojan War"). In the myth and Miller's work, Achilles was born to Peleus, king of Pthia, and Thetis, the sea nymph. Achilles' legacy was known only to his mother for much of his life: he would either

live a long, uneventful life or he would have fame but die an early death on the battlefield.

Achilles decided to fight in the Trojan War after being found by Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix on the island of Scyros (Miller depicts Odysseus and Diomedes, King of Argos, as the ones to retrieve Achilles). Menelaus with his brother Agamemnon, arranged an army of Greek leaders, and after they could not get Helen, Menelaus' (king of Sparta) wife, to return diplomatically, the Greeks surrounded Troy for ten years ("Trojan War"). In the tenth year, Achilles quit fighting when Agamemnon took his concubine or "war prize," Briseis. The Greeks' morale went down until Patroclus convinced Achilles to let him wear his armor to make Achilles' presence known on the battlefield. However, Patroclus was then killed by Hector, the Trojans' best warrior. Achilles, heartbroken, returned to battle, killed Hector (and also dragged his body across the battlefield to boast), and then was killed by Paris. After death, Achilles' and Patroclus' ashes were mixed and they were given a shared grave ("Trojan War"). Miller's contemporary work spins-off the classic tale by writing the novel in Patroclus' perspective. It tells the story of Patroclus' banishment at age ten, the development of his relationship with Achilles, his and Achilles' time spent with mentor Chiron as children, Achilles' masquerading on Scyros, the ten-year Trojan War, and both characters' deaths. Patroclus and Achilles find friendship at a young age, and it blossoms into a lifelong relationship, which continues after death through eventual reunion in the underworld. *The Song of Achilles* centers on Patroclus coming into his own identity through the developmental periods of his life and his love for Achilles.

While growing up a prince, Patroclus has a foundation for identity established for him, but he must create his own legacy that dictates his influence on society. However, before Patroclus has the chance to grow into his role in life, his entire sense of self crumbles when he's exiled at age ten for accidentally killing a nobleman's child, and he spends much of his life

building a new sense of self. Many of his younger years are spent pining for Achilles and developing an understanding of love, factors that also mirror Patroclus' pining to understand his true identity. Patroclus finds himself through Achilles, evidenced right at the start of their relationship when Achilles calls his name, "Pa-tro-clus" (Miller 39) and also when the nightmares he has about the dead boy disappear when he sleeps in Achilles' room (43). Unlike Patroclus, Achilles' identity is constructed for him at his birth. He has his own prophecy, where he will be *Aristos Achaion*, the Best of the Greeks, and his life experiences bring him closer to his legacy of being victorious in war (Miller 176). Achilles experiences much outside affirmation that helps him become more sure of himself, such as when Achilles was thirteen years old and Chiron said to him, "You are the greatest warrior of your generation, and all the generations before" (Miller 90). Achilles' identity is rooted in his honor and grows to support itself through Patroclus' love for him.

Patroclus experiences much loss of identity at the start of his short life depicted in Miller's work. First, his relationship with Achilles is rooted in deviating from social norms. The most widely accepted form of same-sex relationships in Ancient Greek society were pederastic relationships, where there was a substantial age gap, and the relationship ended when the younger partner became an adult, or old enough to form his own pederastic relationship with a boy. Miller explains this with Odysseus poking fun at Achilles and Patroclus, saying it's common for boys to have a relationship like theirs, and Patroclus later thinks, "Our men liked conquest; they did not trust a man who was conquered himself" (175-176). *The Symposium* also comments on pederastic relationships or "Heavenly Love," where "the boy, or loved one, sexually gratifies the man, or lover, in exchange for education in wisdom and virtue" (Plato). Patroclus and Achilles are the same age and do not separate when they become adults, a factor

that likely influences how Patroclus sees himself as a queer man. It's evident that Patroclus must discover his own queer identity early in life when he cannot relate to the thrill the other boys on Pthia feel about the serving girls. Miller depicts this through Patroclus' thought, "The boys' voices had been sharp with excitement, their color high. But when I tried to imagine what they spoke of, my mind slid away, like a fish who would not be caught" (95). In discovering his identity, Patroclus uses Achilles to understand himself; Achilles serves as Patroclus' comparison standard when looking into his own growth, both physically and personally. This concept comes up when Patroclus says, "There were no mirrors on Mount Pelion, so I could only measure myself by the changes in Achilles" (Miller 93). Patroclus develops as a person through this inherent connection with Achilles, which strengthens with the changing factors of their lives.

In *The Symposium*, Aristophanes addresses identity by considering mortal souls to have been split by Zeus because they threatened the power of the gods. Since then, mortals were said to spend their lives searching for their other halves, so they then could rejoin to achieve wholeness (Plato). That myth can be used to contextualize Patroclus and Achilles' love, as they merge in youth and continue strengthening each other throughout their short lives. Plato speaks often about love, with the text starting with Phaedrus addressing the god of love, saying Love is one of the oldest of the gods, and the one that does the most to promote virtue in people. Plato also speaks of the distinction between the lover and the beloved, as depicted in the text's references to "Heavenly Love," or pederastic relationships. *The Symposium* directly addresses Achilles and Patroclus' love, speaking of Patroclus being the lover, not the beloved, as Achilles was the "fairer of the two," or the most divine. Plato depicts Phaedrus' claim that, "And greatly as the gods honor the virtue of love, still the return of love on the part of the beloved to the lover is more admired and valued and rewarded by them, for the lover is more divine; because he is

inspired by God.” Achilles was loved by Patroclus, rewarded for finding true love by being closer to divinity, and was honored once more for giving his life to avenge his lover by being sent by the gods to the Islands of the Blest (Plato). Achilles as Patroclus’ beloved adheres to Plato’s depicted definition of love as two halves making a whole, where their identities merge to create a complete self, or to at least strengthen each half.

Patroclus and Achilles’ identities develop through shifts in geographic location that signify the time periods of their lives. Patroclus and Achilles have separate childhoods, up to age ten, where they are both princes. Then, Patroclus is exiled and meets Achilles, and they grow together, starting with the Pthia period of their lives, where they come to terms with their feelings for each other and kiss for the first time at age thirteen. The Chiron/Mount Pelion period marks the time the two spent with Chiron, maturing into sixteen-year-olds who then have sex for the first time. This marks the first physical moment their identities merge into one, exemplified by Patroclus’ thought, “We were like gods at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but the other” (Miller 103). This is also the period where they engage in sexual exploration, a facet of identity Achilles and Patroclus did not previously have access to, mainly due to insecurity and the fear of Thetis. The “return to Pthia” period where Achilles is asked if he would fight for the Greeks is when Patroclus begins to develop self-confidence because of his devotion to Achilles, and he asserts himself by putting Achilles’ father, Peleus, into the “pose of supplication” and forces him to reveal where Thetis took Achilles (Miller 122-123). The Scyros period then marks a physical shift in identity for Achilles, who masquerades as a woman to evade going to war, and it also marks Patroclus making an expedition to find his lover, a journey that also helps him find himself in the process. The final period of their lives is

the Trojan war, a ten-year battle for victory for the Greeks and for Patroclus to become his most complete self — and, unfortunately, for Achilles to lose himself.

As part of identity, gender is also played with in *Song of Achilles*. Achilles experiences a shift in self when he masquerades as a woman on the island of Scyros. He becomes Pyrrha, meaning *fire-hair*, and gender becomes a performative form of identity, literally and figuratively. As Pyrrha, Achilles learns the dances of the Princess Deidameia's girls and performs with them as a woman. He also experiences a changed lifestyle as a woman, where he must be subservient, a role much different than his experiences as a prince, exemplified by dinners on Scyros being quiet to "maintain the fiction of Achilles as [Patroclus'] wife and the king's ward (Miller 140). Philosopher Judith Butler originally theorized that gender is performative and comes from gender norms created through repeated customs becoming associated with a gender. For Achilles to correctly "pass" as a woman, he needed to take on a new identity and the gender norms with it, which Butler defines as the traits that make a person recognizable as part of a gender identity (iv). Achilles sought recognition as a woman to avoid becoming part of the Trojan War, but he did not fully comply to the rules of womanhood when he fell for Odysseus and Diomedes' false distress horn and took up a sword (Miller 161). The gender dynamics between heterosexual and same-sex couples also hint at gender being performative in Miller's work. Patroclus likely witnessed the treatment of women, like his mother whom his father thought was insane, and built a negative connotation to romantic relationships. The dynamic vastly changes when he falls in love with a man, a completely new experience for him. That dynamic is reversed once more, when Patroclus spends time on Scyros with Achilles as his wife while out in public, thus making Patroclus experience being in a heterosexual relationship, albeit not real.

The war offers the biggest identity change in Patroclus and Achilles' lives, apart from it being their most consistent time period. Patroclus fully transforms into himself during the years of the Trojan War. He gains his own notoriety when he serves as a medic under the camp physician, Machaon, and feels like his work is his own for the first time in his life (Miller 260-261). Patroclus' most defining moment is when he volunteers to go to war in Achilles' armor after Achilles refuses to fight, his own struggle with identity. Patroclus becomes "Achilles reborn, phoenix-like" (Miller 330) for a moment, even developing Achilles' fatal pride, which costs him his life. However, Patroclus becomes a hero for starting the conclusion to the Trojan War with his return to the battlefield as "Achilles," finally creating a legacy for himself. In *The Symposium*, Diotima of Mantinea described love as a form of identity that leads to immortality, saying people go through changes in identity, as their beings and souls are always changing (Plato). Love and identity are coupled as factors that influence a mortal's ability to achieve immortality through reputation, like Achilles does when he could have refused to kill Hector and lived a long life, but, instead, he wanted to avenge Patroclus' death for the sake of love. It could be argued that doing so also helped Patroclus achieve an immortal reputation as the influence that brought Achilles back to war. Conversely, Patroclus' noble act of taking on Achilles' identity, killing Sarpedon, and ultimately losing his life to Hector are more likely the moments that created his eternal reputation. Academic John A. Scott explored identity in Patroclus and Achilles' relationship, questioning why Achilles did not put on Patroclus' armor to take on Hector after losing his own when Patroclus was killed (also a sign of loss of identity, or a piece of himself), which would have effectively completed a double merge in identity (682). Achilles' shift in self is the opposite of Patroclus'. His and Patroclus' identities work in juxtaposition with each other, with Patroclus finding himself and Achilles losing himself at Patroclus' death.

Achilles could have put on Patroclus' armor for his final fight (although it's difficult to tell whether Automedon typically wore Patroclus' armor when Patroclus wasn't on the battlefield), but he did not (Scott 684), avoiding an opportunity to use armor as a further unifier of their identities. Achilles comes to rely on Patroclus to know who he is as a person, but they experience differing opinions about whether to fight in the war that set them apart, and Achilles loses the opportunity to find himself once more when Patroclus dies in battle.

In Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus and Achilles develop their own (and later almost shared) identities through self-exploration and accepting their love for each other. Their identities work in contrast with each other, with Patroclus spending his life finding himself and Achilles slowly losing himself — finally becoming fully separated from his ideal self when Patroclus dies. Plato's *The Symposium* explores the ideology of love as the key to immortality through everlasting reputation, which Patroclus and Achilles achieve with their heroic deaths. Achilles and Patroclus' selves almost unite at a god-like level when Patroclus puts on Achilles armor, literally masquerading as his beloved, adding another depth to his soul-searching journey. Patroclus merges in identity with Achilles in the final moments of his life, and after Achilles' death, their ashes are combined, forever uniting them in the underworld. Just as Aristophanes described it in *The Symposium*, two half-souls join to become whole.

Works Cited

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