Ancient Retelling: Examining Appropriation in *The Song of Achilles*

Amelia Usborne, Simon Fraser University

Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is a retelling of the story of Achilles and Patroclus, re-imagined and retold with a focus on their relationship as the duo develops from friends to romantic partners. The retelling is a tragic love story set in Ancient Greece, and follows the duo from childhood to their deaths during the Trojan War. Miller explores the depth of their emotional and physical connection with tenderness and complexity. This interpretation of the nature of their relationship aligns with some ancient sources and scholarly debates about the relationship dynamics of Achilles and Patroclus in Greek mythology. In Homer's *Iliad*, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is described as extremely close; although not explicitly stated to be a romantic relationship, a reader may infer such dynamics. Some readers may perceive Miller's retelling of their story, because she is an apparently heterosexual, female, and white-presenting author, as the appropriation of a Queer Greek story; however, this is not the case. Miller does not appropriate the Greek LGBTQ+ community in *The Song of Achilles*; instead, she re-imagines and retells their story with a focus on their relationship in a respectful, well researched, and sensitive manner that arguably does offer some Queer representation to a country that, in modern times, does not appear to have fully embraced and included LGBTQ+ persons within it.

When discussing the notion of appropriation, it is worth first defining what is meant by the term "to appropriate." Appropriation in a cultural context is when elements of one culture, particularly that of a marginalized or minority culture, are taken and used by members of the more dominant culture ("Appropriation"). Appropriation involves a power dynamic where the appropriator benefits at the expense of the originator and it is exploitative, unethical, or disrespectful to do so. Therefore, we must first examine Miller through a variety of scholarly arguments, and conclude why, or why not, it is appropriate for her to write such a story.

Secondly, we will examine what homophobia in *The Song of Achilles* looks like in the context of ancient Greece. We must also understand that the modern concept of homosexuality and LGBTQ+ in Greece has many differences when compared to what was considered normal and generally accepted in ancient Greece. We will

then analyze these writings contrasted against the environment that LGBTQ+ persons currently experience in Greece and discuss why Miller's interpretation could be viewed as inspirational in how it connects the story of a Greek hero, who happens to be involved in a Queer relationship, with modern-day Greece and the difficulties of having LGBTQ+ representation in a country where it is not entirely safe to do so.

Miller as a Writer

Is it appropriation to write a novel about a Greek Queer couple if you are not a Queer Greek? As we have discussed, the notion of appropriation is the taking and the use of elements of one culture, for use by the dominant culture. In terms of literature, there is no single definition or method of determining how to categorize appropriation. Scholars are constantly debating what qualifies as "appropriation" in literature. Laura Otis discusses the multitude of arguments surrounding this debate. Otis outlines Junot Díaz's, a Pulitzer Prize winner, argument against authors writing about a community they themselves are not a part of. Claiming that it is ethically wrong to take from other minorities' experiences and turn a profit from them (219). However, Otis refutes this definition on the grounds that "restricting authors from writing about things beyond their experience censors artists and discourages them from exercising their imaginations" (222) Otis further argues that readers learn through reading and points out that only a small portion of the population writes and publishes fiction novels (222). Similarly, Paul Haynes, in "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Intertextual Writing," discusses the different approaches to categorizing cultural appropriation and how it is difficult to apply them to literature. Haynes defines cultural appropriation as "an unauthorized use or imitation of characteristics, symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals or technologies derived from these networks, but removed from their cultural setting and original purpose" (292). Despite this inability to universally define "appropriation," all these scholars do share a middle ground of sorts when defining appropriation in literature, stating that it is inappropriate and immoral for these authors to portray any minority character in a way that contributes to harmful and demeaning stereotypes. Haynes's paper has a heavy focus on "minor literature," which is explained as literature that "does not attempt to meet the standard but instead attempts to subvert or revise the standard," with the standard being "white, male, elitist, values" in literature (294–95). He continues to explain how "storytelling as minor literature gives a voice, a collective value, and it recognizes the political and social conditions shaping its characters

that, in turn, serves to rouse its readers" (301), which matches the description of Miller's work. Miller's work is interpreting their relationship, taking the work of Homer and focusing on the story of Patroclus and Achilles; she is providing their relationship its own voice.

Miller is a white(-presenting) American female writing about an ancient Greek couple that by today's standards would be identified or labeled as "Queer." As of the date of writing this paper, Miller is reportedly engaged in a heterosexual relationship with her husband, Nathaniel Drake (Cochrane and Duffy), so an appropriation of an ancient homosexual relationship, the telling of Achilles and Patroclus's story, may seem to be appropriation on the surface. However, this premise falls apart when we examine Miller's work through Otis's or Haynes's definition of appropriation. If one of the key steps of ensuring that an author is not appropriating is their research and how they present these minority characters, Miller is cautious of how she portrays Achilles and Patroclus, and extremely well researched within the context of their relationship and the history around them. Achilles and Patroclus's relationship does not stir up any distress within what is considered normative in the setting of the novel. In Ancient Greece, male same-sex relationships were considered somewhat normal if they obeyed certain conditions. These relationships were known as pederasty. At the beginning of "Law, Society and Homosexuality in Classical Athens," David Cohen defines these conditions as "a prohibition against males of any age adopting a submissive role" (1), which does not apply to any translations or retelling of Achilles and Patroclus's relationship because neither individual is submissive–neither in Miller's retelling nor in translations of Homer. William Percy discusses how "institutionalized pederasty existed alongside other forms of homosexuality" (16), and he uses Achilles and Patroclus as an example of a same-sex couple that does not fit into the pederasty mold. Percy goes on to describe their relationship as "that form of male love […] not identical with classical Greek pederasty" (19) because they are the same age or too close in age, nor do they meet other criteria for this label.

Miller is historically correct in the sense that not a single character in *The Song of Achilles* labels Achilles and Patroclus's relationship. They were simply Achilles and Patroclus; they were simply in love. This hardly seems to be appropriation, but rather a proper representation of what it means to be in love without placing gender limits or labels on a relationship. Miller's own words refute the idea of her using the story to appropriate: "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 can all aspire to" ("Q & A").

In one of the articles Miller wrote for the *Guardian* about her experience since the release of *The Song of Achilles* and the fears she had while writing it, she explains that her education and love for Greek mythology began as a child after her mother began to read Homer's *Iliad* to her ("it helped"). Miller would later receive a Bachelor's and Master's in Classics, aiding her in the research for *The Song of Achilles* ("The Author"). Her education reveals that Miller is, in theory, very well qualified to take characters from Greek mythology and adapt their story and relationship using the well-known theory that they were lovers. In a Q&A posted on Miller's website, she admits that the idea of Achilles and Patroclus being in a homosexual, or at the very least homo-romantic, relationship is not a new theory ("Q & A"). Miller states that she first saw it mentioned by Plato, presumably in Plato's *Symposium*. Here, Plato discusses the possibility that Patroclus and Achilles were lovers. This reinforces the argument that Miller is not appropriating the Greek LGBTQ+ community, as she is not giving these characters a new identity/sexuality but rather taking them and telling their story while applying an old theory. This retelling provides the reader with more context and explanation as to why Achilles fought so hard to avenge Patroclus and cried with his dead body every night. This demonstration of their love and bond is what drew Miller to the story and characters in the first place ("Reader's Guide").

Homophobia in *The Song of Achilles*

Another factor that contributes to the argument that Miller is not appropriating the Greek LGBTQ+ community is the fact that there is little homophobia in *The Song of Achilles*. As an assumed heterosexual female, Miller would have no personal experience dealing with the challenges of homophobia. Instead, Miller avoids using homophobia in the two major characters who prevent or attempt to prevent Achilles and Patroclus from being together. The first and most predominant character who challenges the pair, both as friends and romantic partners, is Achilles's mother, Thetis. Thetis, a sea-nymph, is constantly trying to separate Achilles and Patroclus and, while at first glance a reader may attribute this to homophobia, that perspective neglects to take into account Thetis's character as a whole. Thetis's actions and words reflect a mother desperate to protect and immortalize her only child, and to separate him from any partner, male or female, and have Achilles celebrated as an individual, without anyone else by his side.

This is evident when she is confronted by Deidameia's pregnancy with Achilles's child. Immediately, Thetis exclaims "you are a foolish girl" (133) because she had hoped that Deidameia would not truly believe herself worthy of Achilles. This is confirmed moments later when Thetis continues to belittle Deidameia, claiming that she is "poor and ordinary, an expedient only. You do not deserve my son" (133), because no mortal deserves her son. Neither Patroclus nor Deidameia is worthy enough to be with Achilles because Thetis believes Achilles will be a God. She even states this directly in an interaction with Patroclus when she declares that "he will be a God" (53). She warns Patroclus that he should stand aside while her son ascends to his destiny.

Classifying Thetis as a homophobe is reductive because it also neglects her natural hatred for mortals, not just those who are homosexual. Further supporting this is an interaction between Chiron, Achilles's trusted Centaur teacher, and Patroclus. After Patroclus ignores Thetis's warning about following Achilles while he trains, Chiron has a private conversation with Thetis. Later in the novel, Chiron claims that "[Thetis] is also young and has prejudices of her kind" (80) referring to her prejudice for mortals. This supports the idea that Thetis does not hate Patroclus because he is homosexual, but rather because he is a mortal.

Her actions are not motivated by homophobia but by the desire to protect her child from death and to establish his legacy. In an act of desperation to prevent him from fighting in the Trojan War, Thetis hides Achilles with King Lycomedes. After Achilles, Thetis, and Patroclus are discovered by Odysseus, he states that "she knows why I am here; she blesses and guards my purpose" (166), and Thetis responds with "Athena has no child to lose" (166).

Miller seems to confirm that Thetis is not homophobic at the end of the novel. Patroclus has been stuck between worlds, unable to join Achilles in the underworld. During this time, Patroclus and Thetis engage in a conversation about Achilles. Thetis admits that "[she] could not make him a god" (368). This confirms that Achilles has been waiting for Patroclus since his death. After their conversation, Thetis is able to free Patroclus from the living world, allowing him to enter the underworld at last, an act that she would not have done if she were homophobic. During Achilles's life, Thetis did not want him to be attached to any mortals out of fear they would be the cause for Achilles' inability to become a God. However, now that she has failed, she has no prejudice to Achilles and Patroclus being together and is able to reunite the partners in the underworld.

An argument that Thetis forced Achilles to marry Deidameia as an act of homophobia is ridiculous and ignores all previously mentioned motivation for her actions. Miller has cleverly taken the stereotypical trope of "mother-in-law from hell" and applied it to a Queer relationship, without needing to rely on homophobia to do the heavy lifting. Had Miller written Thetis to be exclusively against Achilles and Patroclus being together because they were in a homosexual relationship, then yes, Miller would have been appropriating the Greek LGBTQ+ community. This is because a heterosexual person cannot truly experience homophobia and therefore cannot encapsulate how difficult it is to manage.

Another character who challenges the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus, without resorting to homophobia, is Achilles's son, Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus is an interesting character as he never had any direct contact with Achilles or Patroclus. Challenges arise when Pyrrhus refuses to honour his father's last wish to have his burial be with Patroclus, in particular to have their ashes mixed and share a monument. The first half of this final wish was granted before Pyrrhus arrived at the front lines of the Trojan war. One of his first acts is preventing Patroclus from sharing or even having a tombstone. His reasoning for this denial is not because of Achilles and Patroclus's romantic relationship, which it is possible he did not know of (see below), but rather he did not view Patroclus as an equal. Any success Patroclus had was because he was "in my father's armor. With my father's fame. He has none of his own" (Miller 363), and therefore he does not deserve to be treated in a manner that honours him. In his eyes, Achilles was a famed hero among the mortals and to bury him with an exiled prince, who was not even a part of any official army, would be inappropriate. In Miller's version of Pyrrhus's words, "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" (357) because to him Patroclus was nothing more than his father's slave. Pyrrhus is not motivated by homophobia, but rather classism. For it to be homophobic as well, Pyrrhus would have had to know that his father was in a homosexual relationship with Patroclus. In one interaction between Briseis (a sex slave Achilles rescued) and Pyrrhus, she asks him if he knew who Patroclus was. Pyrrhus responds "of course I have not heard of him. He is no one" (359). Not that it would matter if he did know of their relationship: Miller does not present Pyrrhus as a homophobic character but rather as someone who views himself and his father as superior beings. Similar to his grandmother, sexuality has no effect on his treatment of those around him.

I am not stating that Miller's version of Pyrrhus and Thetis are not homophobic at all, but rather that their actions are largely motivated by a shared need to protect Achilles and their classism. They both commit horrible acts that prevent Achilles and Patroclus from being united. However, Miller has not written characters who are solely, even primarily, homophobic. Returning to Haynes's definition of appropriation and comparing it to how Miller presents Thetis and Pyrrhus, it becomes clear that Miller does not change the characteristics of either one of them nor has she contributed to any harmful stereotypes against the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, Miller presents two characters, two antagonists, in a manner that allows for her protagonists and readers to grow and learn from these challenges.

Current Environment in Greece for the LGBTQ+ Community

Is it safe to be Queer or a homosexual in modern day Greece? While discussing Miller's work in terms of appropriation, it is important to consider what current conditions are in Greece for the Greek LGBTQ+ community. As Otis states in her paper, "Only the slimmest fraction of people in any culture publish fiction, and these have not tended to be poor, female, or racially or ethnically marginalized individuals" (222), and, although Otis does not directly mention the LGBTQ+ community, it is common knowledge that the community has a long history of discrimination on the basis of homophobia.

In February 2024, Greece made history by becoming the first Orthodox Christian country to legalize same-sex marriage and parental rights (Gregory). Previously, in late 2015, Greece passed a law allowing same-sex couples to enter civil unions as well as protect their rights to health care. In terms of human rights, nine years is not a long period of time for such progressive changes. However, not everyone in the country was happy or supportive about this new equal marriage bill. Around the time the 2024 bill passed, *NPR* reported polling statistics that 49 percent of the population at the time was against the bill (Lavelle). Considering this is the Orthodox church's stance and an estimated 80–90 percent of the country identifies as Greek Orthodox, it is not surprising, though devastating, that hate crimes against LGBTQ+ community continued following the passing of the bill (US State Department). This legislation granted many of the rights of marriage, such as inheritance rights, but did not equate to full marriage equality. This inequity and unwillingness to allow the same rights to apply to homosexual persons as do heterosexual persons in a relationship exemplify the barriers the

LGBTQ+ community experienced in Greece. Much of this might be imputed to the control the Orthodox catholic church has over the country and its laws. Prior to the most recent legislation ratifying the right of same sex couples, the church had publicly declared that they were against same-sex relationships, especially same-sex parents. *The New York Times* reported that "The Holy Synod, the Greek Orthodox Church's highest authority, argued in a letter to lawmakers this month that the bill 'abolishes fatherhood and motherhood, neutralizes the sexes' and creates an environment of confusion for children" (Kitsantonis). This statement illustrates a shared belief among some of their followers. The response from those opposing the bill was immediate, with demonstrations taking place in Athens (Kitsantonis). These demonstrations send a clear message of hate and unwelcomeness to those directly affected by the bill. However, this did not stop the LGBTQ+ community and human rights advocates from celebrating this victory (Kitsantonis).

A time that should have been filled with celebration of equal human rights was tainted by a series of hate crimes. In March 2024, a large group of people harassed a transgender couple in Thessaloniki (Vourlias). During this attack, Thessaloniki was hosting their annual Documentary Festival, which is a LGBTQ+ friendly film festival (Vourlias). The group reportedly "cursed, spat, and threw bottles as they pursued the young couple" for no other reason other than that the couple was transgender (Vourlias). Despite the legalization of same-sex relationships, these hate crimes demonstrate an unwillingness to accept the direction the country is headed in for equality. This attack led the United Kingdom to release, in April 2024, a travel warning for Queer couples touring in Greece (O'Donoghue).

These hate crimes are not new in Greece. In fact, the country has a history of attacking and murdering Queer folks. In September 2018, a LGBTQ+ and HIV activist, Zacharias (Zak) Kostopoulus was murdered by two men in a public store while a crowd of bystanders watched on (Smith). It was later revealed that the two men lied to police, stating that Zak had attempted to rob the store at knife point, prompting police to put a dying Zak in handcuffs (Smith). Why these police officers decided to place Zak in handcuffs is still not public; however, we can assume it was because Zak was Queer. In an interview with the *Guardian*, Zak's brother Nikos said, "Zacharias was a victim of prejudice. He was very open, very expressive. He'd walk down the street and often people would hurl abuse at him" (Smith) which indicates that Zak encountered abuse on a regular basis. Zak's murder demonstrates how easily these verbal attacks on Queer persons can turn

deadly. Especially if these attackers feel validated in believing they are protecting the beliefs of their church.

In an article Miller wrote for the *Guardian* titled "It helped people come out to their parents," Miller shares her experience of writing *The Song of Achilles* and the fears she had, and she makes an interesting statement. Miller writes, "I've heard from people who said it helped them come out to their parents, and others who said it inspired them to get their PhDs, or to start their own novels" ("It helped"). Literature is one of the most influential forms of media, and *The Song of Achilles* was translated into over twenty-five languages, including Greek (Amazon). In a praising review for *The Song of Achilles*, McLendon explains what the novel means to them:

> I can only speak from my experience, but something I remember in particular is substituting myself in place of a girl character so I could imagine myself with the boy characters I liked. Imagine having to spend your life substituting yourself with someone who isn't even your identifying gender, because there was no representation for you to see yourself in. And I'm sure other people who aren't represented have had to do something similar. Even if this book weren't as great as it is, I'd still be grateful for it, because it means I'm being seen. (McLendon)

The Song of Achilles is a piece of literature that allows for a Queer person to picture themselves as the masculine hero, in mythological Greece. McLendon's review provides us with some insight as to how impactful the representation of a same-sex couple is in *The Song of Achilles*. It is even more impactful when we consider how important this story might be to a Queer person in Greece.

Conclusion

Miller, although an outsider, is providing hope and the chance to read literature in Greek (and other languages) with proper Queer representation. To have a novel that represents a positive Queer relationship in a country where it is not entirely safe or welcoming to be Queer is critical. By taking Achilles and Patroclus and developing and highlighting their relationship based on Homer's *Iliad*, Miller has provided the LGBTQ+ community with more representation in literature. As a result, Miller was able to publish a novel that is inspirational, especially considering the current environment Greek LGBTQ+ community have to withstand, and perhaps there is a lesson in her work that everyone can learn from, that ancient Greece was more tolerant of a variety of sexuality and gender identity

than modern Greece and than many nations around the world today. Miller's education in Greek mythology allows her to properly place these characters in Ancient Greece while still having a positive effect on the modern world. We can hope that perhaps one day human rights will prevail, and Greece will be a safe environment for all to freely express themselves. Until then, it is good for writers like Miller to continue supplying proper representation.

Works Cited

Amazon. "Madeline Miller: books, biography, latest update." *Amazon*, https://www.amazon.ca/stores/author/B005GG116K/about. Accessed 16 July 2024.

"Appropriation." *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/appropriation_n?tab=meaning_and_use#165018.

Cohen, David. "Law, Society and Homosexuality in Classical Athens." *Past & Present*, vol. 117, 1987, pp. 3–21. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/650786.

Cochrane, Kira, and Austin Duffy. "The Saturday Interview: Madeline Miller, Orange Prize Winner." The *Guardian*, 2 June 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/02/madeline-miller-orange-prize-achilles.

Gregory, James. "Greece Legalises Same-Sex Marriage." *BBC*, 15 February 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68310126

Haynes, Paul. "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Intertextual Writing: Cultural Appropriation and Minor Literature." *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2021, pp. 291–306

Kitsantonis, Niki. "Greece Becomes First Orthodox Country to Legalize Same-Sex Marriage." *The New York Times*, 15 February 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/15/world/europe/greece-same-sex-marriage.html.

Lavelle, Moira. "Greece Same-Sex Marriage Bill Comes up for Vote in Parliament." *NPR*, 14 February 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/02/14/1231145167/greece-same-sex-marriage-vote-lgbtq-rights.

McLendon, Hunter. "*The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller — Shelf By Shelf." *Shelf By Shelf*, 18 June 2019, https://www.shelfbyshelf.com/new-blog/2019/6/18/the-song-of-achilles-by-madeline-miller.

Miller, Madeline. "Q & A with Madeline Miller." *Madeline Miller*, https://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/.

Miller, Madeline. "Madeline Miller on *The Song of Achilles*: 'It Helped People Come out to their Parents.'" *The Guardian*, 27 August 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/27/madeline-miller-on-the-song-of-achilles-it-helped-people-come-out-to-their-parents

Miller, Madeline. "Reader's Guide." *Madeline Miller*, http://madelinemiller.com/find-out-more/readers-guide/.

Miller, Madeline. "The Author." *Madeline Miller*, https://madelinemiller.com/the-author/.

Miller, Madeline. *The Song of Achilles*. Harper Collins, 2011.

O'Donoghue, Saskia. "Travel Warning Issued for LGBTQ+ Tourists in Greece. Where in Europe is Safest for Queer People?" *Euronews*, 17 April 2024, https://www.euronews.com/travel/2024/04/17/travel-warning-issued-for-lgbtq-tourists-in-greece-where-in-europe-is-safest-for-queer-peo.

Otis, Laura. "Whose Spirit?: Literature, Appropriation, and the Responsibilities of Artists." *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift Für Literaturwissenschaft Und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 97, no. 1, 2023, pp. 217–22, https://doi.org/10.1007/s41245-023-00181-1.

Percy, William Armstrong. "Reconsiderations About Greek Homosexualities." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 49, no. 3–4, 2005, pp.13–61, https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v49n03_02.

Smith, Helena. "'Zak's an Icon': The Long Fight for Justice over Death of Greek LGBT Activist." *The Guardian*, 20 December 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/20/long-fight-for-justice-over-death-of-greek-lgbt-activist-zak-kostopoulos.

US State Department. "Greece: United States Department of State." 2022, https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/greece/.

Vourlias, Christopher. "Thousands Rally for Trans Couple Attacked During Thessaloniki Doc Fest." *Variety*, 10 March 2024, https://variety.com/2024/film/global/trans-couple-attacked-thessaloniki-documentary-festival-1235936616/.

Acknowledgments

There are several folks I owe a great amount of thanks and acknowledgment to. First and foremost, thank you to my classmates and professor Nicky Didicher for all their support and countless sessions of editing. An even bigger thank you to Professor Didicher for taking the time to sit down with me on multiple occasions and go over my

paper. My paper would have been a mess without you all. Thank you to my family members for proofreading my paper. I would also like to thank Madeline Miller and all the other authors I cited in my work. Thank you for educating me throughout this process. I would like to acknowledge that I used Grammarly to check my spelling.