

Degendering the Maternal:

Reading Greek Heroes as Maternal Figures Via Maternal Criticism

A Women and Gender Studies Thesis

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Abstract

Title: Degendering the Maternal: Reading Greek Heroes as Maternal Figures Via Maternal Criticism

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Thesis: Rereading a classic story through a Maternal Critical lens and with the goals of preservation, nurturing, and acceptance in mind has much to offer as we contemplate how these ancient stories have coded structures of authority and power, but also how we rethink our own roles of authority and our connections to others to recreate sustainable peaceful communities.

This analysis proves that retellings of classic stories can be read through a Maternal Critical lens, therefore making the distinction between the maternal authority of characters and the authoritarian systems of the time. My argument is that any gender can, and should, practice mother-work, and that in doing so will also practice vulnerability. Vulnerability is not synonymous with victimhood, and Madeline Miller uses her characters to exemplify this. The maternal authority seeks to preserve, nurture, and respect the conscience of characters, and it focuses on and prioritizes bodies over dogma. A maternal critical reading of *The Song of Achilles* throws into relief the differences between maternal authority and brute authoritarianism.

Degendering the Maternal

This work will analyze a classic work through a Maternal Critical lens with a goal toward discerning a choice that all human characters make, not only over the course of a life, but several times a day. That choice is deciding what to do about their own human condition of vulnerability, on the one hand, we have a choice to embrace our vulnerability and from that position work to preserve, nurture, and respect others—building horizontal relationships, or reject vulnerability and seek power to control others—behaviors that reinforce vertical or hierarchal systems of force. Maternal Critical Theory identifies the first choice—to act toward peacemaking and building community—as exercising one’s maternal authority, and the second choice as acting out authoritarian violence. Maternal Critical Theory advocates for a cultural paradigm shift, recognizing that all such cultural shifts in consciousness have been accompanied by a critical theoretical lens for reading texts from a fresh perspective.

Why call this theoretical practice ‘maternal’? Part I of this paper introduces MCT and the feminist philosophy and literary practices from which this theory derives and further explores the precision of the term’s usage, but at the outset, it is easy to see how the term ‘maternal’ connotes an aspect of the female or feminine experience. To borrow the words of Sara Ruddick, who describes mothering as “a work out of which a distinctive thinking arises” (*Maternal Thinking*). To put it plainly, “mothering” is not work that is done completely by women, rather it is a way to exist in the world. Ruddick goes on to explain that without the context of historical gender roles, there is actually no reason to believe that mothering should be done solely by women and that men, too, have the capacity and responsibility to practice motherwork. Mothering is a human choice that calls for effort, discipline, and conscious choice.

In the context of exploring a classical work, professor of classics at University of Cambridge, Mary Beard, points out that Western tradition has had thousands of years of practice in silencing women (*Women and Power* xi) and thus, denigrating the experiences connected to them. Indeed, she points to Homer's *Odyssey*, as the "first recorded example of a man telling a woman to 'shut up'" (*Women and Power* 3): when Penelope asks the bard to sing a "happier number . . . Telemachus [her son] intervenes: 'Mother,' he says, 'go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff' . . . and," writes Beard, "off she goes, back upstairs" (4). That was about 3,000 years ago, and it was only the beginning . . .

Thus, rereading a classic story through a Maternal Critical lens, as this paper does, and with these goals in mind has much to offer as we contemplate how these ancient stories have coded structures of authority and power, but also how we rethink our own roles of authority and our connections to others to recreate sustainable peaceful communities.

This essay begins with Part I, a review of the goals and practices of a Maternal Critical approach, including a brief sketch of the second-wave feminist thought and critical literary practices in which MCT is situated. Part II of the essay then demonstrates a Maternal Critical reading of Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles (TSOA)* and concludes with a brief reflective analysis.

PART I. How Maternal Critical Analysis Works

Before continuing any further, explaining how maternal criticism works is essential. This approach is unique in that it focuses on characters. This contrasts with other literary frames that focus on theme or style of writing, such as Formalistic criticism, or historical and political context, such as Ethical and Queer Theory. MCT critics know that characters are human — and

even when mythical or super-human, represent aspects of what it means to be human — and therefore, vulnerable, and must make a fundamental choice: to embrace their vulnerability and use it as a springboard to create communities that resist oppression (understood as an exploitation of vulnerability), or to resist their vulnerability and seek power over others. Once the focus is established, the approach has a few facets that must all be understood to grasp the concept entirely.

Borrowing from philosopher Martha Nussbaum's discussions on vulnerability as the human condition, Charlyn Ingwerson, MCT's originator, points out that the goal of reading characters is "recognize oneself as a member of this universal vulnerable human tribe" (4). Recognizing and responding to shared vulnerability allows us, as readers, writers, and sometimes characters, to connect in ways that destabilize authoritarian systems that exploit vulnerability. *Resistance* defines maternal authority. That is the resistance that comes from a place of recognized vulnerability to resist authoritarian violence. Sara Ruddick defines maternal goals as preservation, as nurture, and as respect for individual conscience. These goals, focused on the physical body, are why the maternal in Maternal Critical Theory matters.

To be clear, vulnerability is not equivalent to victimhood. This is a vital distinction to make. When fused with Ruddick's argument that vulnerability makes demands for preservation, nurture, and acceptance, then this position of vulnerability — which Nussbaum says is the human condition — is one of agency, resisting erasure, oppression, and violence.

Finally, the ability to recognize the maternal self as a connected self and not isolated and lost to the world of rugged individualism as patriarchal systems would advocate is an attribute of MCT. Ingwerson says, "This is the change the world aspect," that maternal critical theorists are working toward with this lens; recognizing the maternal authority in oneself and others is a way

toward building peaceful communities. In conversation with Sara Ruddick, Andrea O'Reilly paraphrases the philosopher herself and says, "Until we truly have shared parenting, we use the word mothering because women are the ones who are mothering and they are the ones who paid a huge cultural price for that" ("A Conversation About Maternal Thinking"). This is not to erase the work women have done by introducing men into the conversation. This also does not erase men who have done work as fathers, rather it calls for both men and women to practice preservation, nurturing, and respect for conscience and embrace the term "maternal"¹.

This approach, though unique in focusing on characters, derives and is situated in feminist thought and in feminist literary criticism. It most explicitly draws from philosopher Sara Ruddick. In 1989, Ruddick predicted, "There will be mothers of both sexes who live out a transformed maternal thought in communities that share parental care—practically, emotionally, economically, and socially. Such communities will have learned from their mothers how to value children's lives" (Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in *Women and Values: Readings in Recent Feminist Philosophy*, 378).

A more recent feminist critic, Julie Stephens, is concerned about what she calls a feminist 'forgetting' of care both as an ethic (drawing heavily from the works of Anne Manne and Eva Feder Kittay) and as clear-eyed realism—her concern is that feminism has exchanged practices of interdependency for the "illusion of self-sufficiency" advertised by capitalism (Stephens 59)! Ingwerson's concern is that an "untethered self" is valued by authoritarian systems because such people are exploitable. Ingwerson writes that "maternal criticism, a community-oriented reading of texts, interprets attention to vulnerability as reading the world as it is, and the wish for invulnerability as a wish for another kind of world" (Ingwerson "Maternal Criticism" 37).

¹ The focus on gender specifically is outside the scope of MCT. Maternal critics will argue that not only *can* any gender practice mothering, but *should*.

MCT is also situated in feminist literary criticism, a rich legacy sparked by Judith Fetterley's observation (1978) that:

To read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is to identify as male. The female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify against herself" (qtd. in *Gender and Reading*, 290).

Though MCT draws explicitly from Patrocinio Schweickart, the critical approach stands in this tradition of thought begun with Fetterley and others including Annette Kolodny, (*Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism*, 1980) who observed:

"three crucial propositions . . . underlie feminist criticism: (1) literary history is a fiction; (2) insofar as we are taught how to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms; (3) since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must reexamine not only our aesthetics but, as well, the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape our aesthetic responses" (qtd. in *Gender and Reading* 292-3).

In its most basic terms, feminist theory and critical practices are premised in a belief in the political potential of reading.

PART II: Applied Literary Analysis

In this analysis, I am focusing on the works of author Madeline Miller, specifically her debut novel, *The Song of Achilles*. This is a retelling of Homer's *Iliad*, the story of the war at Troy and the epic battle between the two best warriors of the time, Prince Achilles of Phthia

(Greece) and Prince Hector of Troy. The legend says that Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, was stolen from her husband and home by Hector's younger brother, Paris. Helen's husband, Menelaus, calls on his brother Agamemnon to gather an army to storm the gates of Troy and get her back. Agamemnon gathers an army of over ten-thousand men from the kingdoms of Greece. However, there is a prophecy that says they will not win without the Best of the Greeks – *Aristos Achaion* – fighting with them. Another prophecy names this person to be the demigod son of King Priam of Phthia. After much convincing, Achilles and his faithful companion Patroclus make their way to Troy. The war lasts for ten years and only comes to an end after Hector slays Patroclus and Achilles infamously allows his rage to overtake him and he kills Hector. Paris then uses an arrow to shoot Achilles from a distance, the only way anyone could have a chance, and he finally dies on the battlefield.

Miller uses her literary voice and agency to retell Greek myths with violence and war as the main themes, like the story of the Trojan War. Indeed, most epic stories are set in times of war and violence. Humanity's history is steeped in bloodshed, and if we listened to the stories, by all accounts, humanity should long be extinct. How is it then, that we are still standing? Still fighting our wars? Patroclus is a shining example of the answer: characters – and people – who practice mother work. Those who practice preservation, nurturing, and respect for conscience. These are the characters who keep society together and soldiering on – excuse the pun.

Miller actively chooses characters to tell their story from a unique perspective, using “weakling” and Achilles' sworn companion and lover, Patroclus, as opposed to the famed warrior himself. Patroclus had been considered a weakling since birth by any who met him. He was smaller, slower, and not as brash as the other noble boys his age. Yet when he enters the camp at Troy, Miller shows Patroclus step into his humanity and share vulnerability with every

soldier in the Greek army via the medical tent. He would go on to be considered the “best of the Myrmidons” by the end of the decade-long war. Miller uses her already well-known protagonists and their stories to insert vulnerability, compassion, and nurturing in an otherwise cold landscape of death and valor.

TSOA follows the life of Achilles, “*Aristos Achaion*” (translated, Best of the Greeks). The story is told from the point of view of Patroclus, who has been described over the centuries as Achilles’ relative, squire, servant, friend, council, and possible lover. Miller tells the story that makes the two irrevocably in love, writing Patroclus to describe Achilles as “half of my soul, as the poets say” (284). These characters are thrown together as children by fate. Patroclus was the exiled prince who was “small, slight. ... not fast ... not strong ... the best that could be said about me was that I was not sickly” (1). He was exiled by his father and sent to the palace of Peleus, who was known to take the exiled sons of nobles. Peleus was Achilles’ father, and so it was in this setting that the two met.

The juxtaposition of finding mothering characters in a book containing very few women as characters and in a retelling of one of the most infamous ancient wars, the Trojan War. This novel shows kings, princes, and warriors struggling against the culture of the time, which revolved around power gained through violence. Early on, Miller expresses that the kingdoms of Greece “prevailed only when no man was allowed to be too much more powerful than another” (13). Ingwerson reminds us that these types of “power-seeking systems are authoritarian” and that Maternal Critical readers will argue that when reading narratives that feature these types of power structures and systems, the stories “focus on the violence of power, missing the authority of maternal resistance” (1).

Miller herself asks the question, “What does it mean to try to be an ethical person in a violent world?” I propose that “ethical” could stand, or it could be replaced with “maternal” to have an equally provocative and relevant question. The use of ‘maternal’ is deliberate.

Ingwerson would argue that the difference between maternal and ethical is the presence of a body. “Maternal” connotes the physical presence, while “ethical” is an abstract idea that can be hijacked and exploited by authoritarianism. Maternal is the acceptance of the body, preservation of the body, and nurturing of the body. The Greeks enjoyed abstract terms and ideas because they were easy to twist around and exploit in various degrees. However, you cannot exploit the *idea* of a body, because a body is *not* an idea, it is a physical thing. Therefore, there are no degrees of exploitation or abuse of bodies. It either exists, or it does not.

Miller highlights the “other” present in Greek mythology. Patroclus was an outsider, a lowly, exiled prince who found himself standing alongside the Great Achilles. Miller saw a story in Patroclus that focused not on gaining muscle and power, but on gaining empathy, compassion, and skills that allow life to flourish, rather than skills to decimate enemies. Before Miller, Patroclus’ name has been associated with being weak or unworthy, depending on which iteration is in question. Miller’s Patroclus stands as an embodiment of someone who practices mother-work but has been “stripped of [his] authority” because he is gentle and silent when others are vicious and screaming (3).

Miller sees what maternal critics will also see in her characters, *vulnerability*. Even Achilles practiced sharing his vulnerability with Patroclus, as well as with their teacher, Chiron. Critic Hamutal Minkowich praises Miller’s attention to this detail, saying, “Miller’s novel valorizes ... male vulnerability. Achilles is allowed to waver”. It seems Miller and Ingwerson would agree that *vulnerability* gives a person authority, not the might of their arm, the volume of

their voice, or the power of their position. Her characters Chiron, Achilles, and Patroclus practice shared vulnerability; they nurture, preserve, and respect others' consciousness in ways their counterparts do not.

PART 2.1 Song of Achilles Analysis

In this novel, maternal authority is passed on through a chain of events. It begins with Chiron. Just after turning thirteen, the two boys were sent to be taught by Master Chiron, a centaur who trained all the most revered Greek heroes. He shows Achilles and Patroclus that there is more to life than training to be a lethal weapon for kings. Achilles begins to practice mothering while on Mount Pelion with Chiron. He continues his practice until they can see the shores of Troy. When he sends his first spear flying into the chest of an enemy soldier, his maternal side is quickly silenced. At this point, Patroclus takes on the role and becomes the central maternal figure for the novel; Miller's compassion, empathy, and vulnerability incarnate.

Chiron

Chiron is a weapons master, an expert in healing and surgery, and a teacher of those who seek him out. For Chiron, teaching is the most important, as he introduces himself simply as "a teacher of men," though all know of his great deeds within the realm of heroes and war (Miller 72). Chiron values knowledge and how others use this knowledge. He is very stoic but never misses an opportunity to teach the boys anything they wish to know, and also offers covert lessons in empathy and understanding that the boys did not receive in their childhood homes. When Achilles asks Chiron to teach him how to play the lyre, "Chiron's stern face softened. 'That is why you have been sent here, so that I may teach you what I know'" (76). Over the three years Patroclus and Achilles' were with Chiron, this teaching would include healing with herbs,

how to perform surgery while making it as painless as possible, hunting and gathering, and music.

A 13-year-old Patroclus describes Chiron as:

There was something in Chiron's face, firm and imbued with authority, that made us children again, with no world beyond this moment's play and this night's dinner. ... Even our bodies felt smaller beside the centaur's bulk. How had we thought we were grown? (Miller 77).

Chiron makes the two future war heroes feel *safe*. His authority is one that "attends the suffering of others," inviting them in and creating a space where those around him look to him for comfort and guidance (Ingwerson 2). He is not worried about accolades or rewards past that of passing on his knowledge to the next generation ("You do not mind that the snake gets all the credit?" Chiron's teeth showed through his dark beard, a smile. 'No, Achilles, I do not mind" Miller 85).

At sixteen, Achilles and Patroclus were summoned back to Achilles' home. Patroclus, once shy and reserved, had grown into a person who went after what he wanted with vigor. Being asked to return to a place where he had felt insecure in himself and his desires, Chiron parted with Patroclus by giving him a warning and a gift:

"Patroclus," he said, a summons.

I walked forward, and he placed his hand, large and warm as the sun, on my head.

His voice was quiet. "You do not give things up so easily now as you once did," he said.

I did not know what to say to this, so I said, "Thank you."

A trace of a smile. "Be well." Then his hand was gone, leaving my head chilled in its absence. (Miller 108).

When they were summoned to return to Phthia, he knew they were going to Troy to fight at Agamemnon's side. Chiron also knew the prophecy naming Achilles *Aristos Achaion*, the best of the Greeks, and he knew this fame would be won at the tip of Achilles' spear. Before the two leave, Chiron's last words are filled with hope, encouraging Patroclus not to let go of what is his without a fight and to "be well." This last line is the gift he gave Patroclus, as he was wishing him well on his way to war. His own father had not done that when he exiled his son at only ten years old.

Achilles

Achilles had the misfortune of being born under two different prophecies. The first was given to his mother, Thetis, who claimed that "her son would far surpass his father," and the second named him the future *Aristos Achaion* (Miller 19). In a society that valorized violence, the only conclusion for Achilles becoming *Aristos Achaion* would be through war. "War was what the world would say Achilles was born for" (Miller 113).

However, at an early age, Achilles tended to care for others. This is not something a warrior should focus on in ancient Greece. At the age of ten, a young Achilles hears that Patroclus, also ten, had been absent from his fighting drills. Worried for Patroclus' safety and well-being, Achilles seeks him out before the arms master can find and punish him:

"No, I came on my own." Achilles' voice was cool, but I saw his jaw tighten just a little. "I overheard them speaking. I have come to see if you are ill."

I did not answer. He studied me a moment.

"My father is considering punishment," he said.

We knew what this meant. Punishment was corporal and usually public. A prince would never be whipped, but I was no longer a prince. (Miller 31).

Achilles had no reason to try to help Patroclus, as he was only one of the dozens of boys in his father's palace. He knew the rules about attending lessons and knew Patroclus was breaking these rules. However, he made the decision to prioritize Patroclus as a person over the system that called for harsh reprimands that amounted to beating subjects into place (Ingwerson 2). He saw vulnerability and chose to embrace it instead of calling attention to it in a savage way to attract repercussions.

Achilles begins his spiral into a more authoritarian headspace when they arrive at Troy eight years later. This is where he has his first real taste of violence, and he "flourished. He went to battle giddily, grinning as he fought" (Miller 240). He did not revel in the act of killing as much as he did in finally being able to show his true strength and abilities. Achilles spends the next ten years of war withdrawing into his warrior-self to the point that when his pride is wounded by Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek armies, he intentionally allows Briseis, a woman in his care to be taken from him knowing Agamemnon would ravish her violently.

When this happens, Achilles is livid. In his rage, he loses all sense of his former, connected-self, and threatens Agamemnon, saying:

Without me, your army will fall. Hector will grind you to bones and bloody dust, and I will watch it and laugh. You will come, crying for mercy, but I will give none. They will all die, Agamemnon, for what you have done here. (Miller 283).

The boy who risked his father's wrath for another has been twisted into a man willing to sacrifice the entirety of the Greek armies in the name of pride. Agamemnon had publicly shamed Achilles, a severe offense in ancient Greece, and, as Ingwerson said, "the wish to transcend shame might be a predictor of violence" (5). By using Briseis - his war prize - as a pawn in this

game he and Agamemnon were playing, he relinquished his maternal authority to embrace his violent side.

Patroclus demanded Achilles save her, recognizing her position as the most vulnerable in the camp as a woman and as a war prize. He urged Achilles to stop Agamemnon's men from taking her. But Achilles was focused on his pride and honor, ignoring the baseline fact that Briseis was a *person*. She was a body, a human being. She was not a token of war or a piece to be moved at the will of the men around her. He was then using a "vulnerable person as a means to [his] own ends" (Ingwerson 2). In this, he also failed to recognize *himself* as a member of the universal human tribe. He forgot his own vulnerability and thus, his humanity.

Patroclus

Patroclus becomes Ingwerson's vision of someone who practices mother work. He was raised partially by an unloving father who forced Patroclus into a place of vulnerability as early as five years old. When his family took their turn in hosting "the games," Patroclus was not allowed to race as he was "too slow to race in even the youngest group" (Miller 3). And when seeing how brilliantly the other boys performed – namely a young Achilles – his father stares and says, "That is what a son should be" (3).

Patroclus does not fully step into his maternal authority until the war at Troy is well underway. He found himself at home, not on the battlefield, next to his glorious and terrifying partner, but in the medical tent at camp. He embraced Chiron's training on how to heal and how to perform surgery. The moment he stepped into the tent, he also stepped into his element and "surprised [himself] with the brisk authority in [his] voice, the instant obedience it provoked" (Miller 250).

Patroclus had been trying to find his place his whole life. Until this moment, he assumed his place was simply at Achilles' side, allowing him to take all the fame and glory. The medical tent provided something Patroclus had only ever experienced with Achilles so far – open vulnerability. The men brought into this space were injured, and some were preparing to die. Patroclus saw this and inserted himself, knowing he could help heal them.

One soldier came through his tent with an arrow in his shoulder. Patroclus tried a technique that was new to Machaon and his brother Podalierius, who supervised the medical tent. Instead of aggressively yanking the arrow out of the shoulder, Patroclus prioritized the soldier as a person. He wanted the extraction to be as painless as possible and the healing to be quick and free of infection. Patroclus recalls the events saying:

Later Podalierius would tell me that I was insane to have done what I did, to have cut so slowly, at such an angle – a good wrench, he said, and the end would have broken.

Jagged wound, and splinters inside be damned, there were other men who needed tending. But Machaon saw how well the shoulder healed, with no infection and minor pain, and next time there was an arrow wound, he called me over and passed me a sharp blade, looking at me expectantly. (Miller 250-51)

Podalierius and Machaon saw Patroclus's focus and one brother responded impatiently, saying there were more soldiers to tend to. They must work quickly, regardless of the risks and harm to others. But Machaon appreciated Patroclus' approach and sought him out from that point on.

Patroclus saw these soldiers as men and not simply as cannon fodder for Agamemnon's war. At this moment, he also recognizes that he, too, is a part of their world. If he were in a different role and needed medical attention, he would want to be treated by a surgeon such as himself. Patroclus had found his place amongst warriors and kings by being vulnerable and practicing

sharing vulnerability. He learned the names of every man and their individual ails and preferred remedies. And due to this, the men began to trust Patroclus and “turned hopeful faces towards me for comfort” (Miller 261).

Toward the end of year ten of the war, Briseis is taken from Achilles by Agamemnon, and Achilles loses himself to his rage. Achilles could have easily stopped Agamemnon but *chose* to let him take Briseis. Patroclus saw this, and in a moment of horror, realized that in his rage, Achilles wanted Agamemnon to take Briseis so that he would ravage her. If Agamemnon does this, Patroclus knows that “to violate her is a violation of Achilles himself” and that Achilles could go as far as to kill him for it, and even Agamemnon’s brother would “call it fair” (Miller 292).

After delivering his warning to Agamemnon, Patroclus tells Achilles what he has done. The two have a brief conversation that involves Patroclus making a crucial distinction for Achilles:

“You chose her,” (Achilles) says. “Over me.”

“Over your pride.” The word I use is *hubris*. Our word for arrogance that scrapes the stars, for violence and towering rage as ugly as the gods. (Miller 295, italics original to the text).

He knew Achilles was not operating from a safe place inside his own mind. He saw that Achilles was not the same man who had cared so deeply for him and for those around him, “You left yourself today” (Miller 296). Achilles had allowed his *hubris* to take control of his body, and he was willing to sacrifice Briseis to give him an excuse to fight Agamemnon. Patroclus made an equally enormous sacrifice by warning Agamemnon.

Patroclus knew that Achilles was not his pride, his *hubris*. Though Achilles forgot this about himself, Patroclus saw that Achilles was still a part of the universal, vulnerable human tribe. He

goes against his love for Achilles to save another vulnerable human being by making himself vulnerable to Agamemnon (“You betray him by warning me” Miller 292).

The tension between Achilles and Agamemnon does not end with Briseis. Both men refuse to be moved by the other: Agamemnon refuses to yield to Achilles and Achilles refuses to fight for Agamemnon. Due to Achilles’ absence, more and more Greeks are dying on the battlefield. As Patroclus feared, they begin to harbor resentment toward Achilles, who responds:

“They should hate Agamemnon. It is his pride that kills them.”

And yours. But I know the look on his face, the dark recklessness of his eyes. He will not yield. He does not know how. I have lived eighteen years with him, and he has never backed down, never lost. What will happen if he is forced to? I am afraid for him, and for me, and for all of us. (Miller 317, italics original to the text).

Patroclus saw Achilles being pushed closer and closer to the edge of his humanity. Achilles wanted so desperately to be *Aristos Achaion*, and due to yet another prophecy, he knew he would not survive Troy (Thetis, speaking of the third prophecy says to Achilles, “If you go to Troy, you will never return. You will die a young man there” Miller 166), so Achilles felt that he had nothing to lose. But no matter how much Patroclus loved Achilles, he would not sacrifice another person in the name of Achilles’ honor and pride.

Briseis was no longer the only person in immediate danger. Because Achilles refused to fight for so long, the Trojans were on the brink of tearing down the Greek camp’s walls and slaughtering everyone. They would blame Achilles, hate him, and because of this, he would lose his eternal glory. Ingwerson points out, “It’s really, really important for folks who have political goals to remember that if people don’t regard you as human, political goals become impossible” (Ta-Nahisi Coates, qtd. In Ingwerson). And one of the most basic human traits is caring for the

safety and well-being of your family – in this case, comrades-in-arms. By choosing this route, Achilles' inaction is causing more harm and violence than his fighting would have.

Patroclus and Achilles fully embrace the roles of mother and foil when the Greek army is at its most vulnerable. This presents a conundrum due to the lack of choice for Achilles. Achilles refuses to fight, yet Patroclus continues to help the sick and wounded, tending to and assisting them in the only way he can. He also continues to beg Achilles to change his mind, to find his compassion if not for all the Greeks, then at least for his own men, the Myrmidons. Achilles is steadfast in his decision not to fight, saying that if he did, Agamemnon could dishonor him whenever he felt like it, and he would also lose the respect of the men. Achilles fully prioritizes dogma over the people around him.

Conclusion

The maternal authority in *The Song of Achilles* is present through the characters of Chiron, briefly Achilles, then Patroclus becomes the central maternal figure during the ten years at Troy. It is in Troy that Achilles loses his maternal authority and begins to act instead as a foil to Patroclus' maternal authority. Achilles lost sight of his vulnerability and his connection to those around him. He saw Briseis' vulnerability and powerlessness of her position and thought to exploit it brutally for his own gains. As Achilles cut off these connections, he could fully become the weapon they said he was born to be. As soon as Patroclus dies, so does the last bit of Achilles' maternal nature.

After his death, Patroclus is able to have a conversation with Achilles' goddess mother, Thetis, and reveals his true heart for Achilles and his anger at how his story ended. He chastises her for her disappointment in her son:

You said Chiron ruined him. You are a goddess, and cold, and know nothing. You are who ruined him. Look at how he will be remembered now. Killing Hector, killing Troilus. For things he did cruelly in his grief. (Miller, 365-66, italics original to the text).

Though he felt Thetis cared more about Achilles' potential glory than Achilles himself, ("Do you know what I have borne to make you great? And now you would destroy it for this?" Miller 347), Patroclus still clings to who Achilles was before Troy.

Then, in a true show of how highly he values connection, vulnerability, and compassion, Patroclus sits with Thetis and shows her who her son truly was through his memories. And though she despises Patroclus due to his mortality, his softness allows her to feel safe enough to open herself up a miniscule amount. He tells her stories of their adolescence together, and when he stops:

Her mouth tightens. "Have you no more memories?"

I am made of memories.

"Speak, then."

Patroclus shows his own vulnerable side, the side he guards against Thetis with a jealous fervor, the secret place where he held the memories of him and Achilles. He lowers his guard and allows Thetis to view his memories of Achilles. At this moment, Patroclus brings together the three main goals of mothering.

He is preserving Achilles' true memory and sharing that memory with his mother, to whom he owes absolutely nothing. He is nurturing her as well as himself, and I would propose the spirit of Achilles. He allows himself and Thetis to grieve over the loss of Achilles together and creates a space for Thetis to feel comfortable showing a hint of her own vulnerability. Finally, he respects her individual consciousness by letting go of his anger toward her and

relinquishing the blame he had held her to for how Achilles' life ended. This is the first moment that Patroclus sees Thetis for what she is: a heartbroken mother who just lost her son after a lifetime of not really knowing him.

Patroclus's beauty was that he could use his vulnerability to break through to others. He urged them to open up as well, and in doing so, he made the violent world around him a little more tolerable. He was the soft side of the famed Achilles, *Aristos Achaion*, and treated kings, soldiers, and goddesses equally: as *people*. He sought to preserve those around him, nurture them in every sense of the word, and respect them as individuals with their own lives, dreams, and problems. In doing this, he is rewarded in Thetis, providing him with what he was missing in his death, peace.

In ancient Greece, it was not uncommon for younger boys to sexually experiment with each other, nor was it abnormal for an adult male to be with servants of the same sex, but they never made true commitments to them. These types of behaviors were expected to be left in adolescence. Patroclus knows this and after arriving at camp, knowing men would gossip about him and Achilles, he remarks "Our men liked conquest; they did not trust a man who was conquered himself (Miller 176). Because of this mindset, so many around them did not honor the connection Patroclus and Achilles shared, and though Achilles asked that their ashes be mingled in an urn, they only carved Achilles' name in the monument. This was highly disrespectful to Patroclus, as in their belief, one could not find rest without a proper grave marking their name.

So, in death, Patroclus was doomed to roam the earth and never make it to the Underworld to reunite with Achilles. This is when he begins to speak with Thetis about her son. Thetis had worked throughout their relationship to convince Achilles to leave Patroclus, "I thought of Thetis

who would take him from me, if she could” (Miller 91). But Patroclus saw her pain and recognized his own. He told her stories of their life together, forging a connection that had not been there previously. In doing this, Thetis practiced compassion for an instant and made it so that Patroclus could finally join Achilles in the Underworld, saying, “Go’ she says. ‘He waits for you” (Miller 369).

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