

The Marriage of Achilles and Patroclus: Conjugal Bonds and Homoerotic Subtext in the *Iliad*

In this paper I argue that although the *Iliad* does not explicitly depict Achilles and Patroclus as lovers, the poem subtly suggests an erotic dimension to their relationship by assimilating them to husband-wife pairings in Homeric epic. Previous scholars have tended either to deny any erotic component to Achilles' and Patroclus' bond (Levin 1949, Halperin 1990) or to assume that the *Iliad* unproblematically depicts them as lovers (Clarke 1978, Davidson 2007). Others have hinted at the possibility of a deliberate homoerotic subtext between the two heroes, but adduce little specific evidence for this other than the intensity of their emotional connection (Hubbard 2011). I will show that Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad* are analogous to a husband and wife by presenting specific examples from the text of how their relationship structure and affective bond mirror those of Homeric husband-wife couples. I characterize this bond as homoerotic in the sense utilized by Rabinowitz and Auanger, wherein the "erotic" suggests the possibility of desire without consummation (2002). I conclude that the poem portrays Achilles' and Patroclus' relationship in this way in order to highlight Achilles' alienation from traditional social structures as well as the excessive and transgressive nature of his affective responses.

Previous scholars have noted two instances in which the *Iliad* assimilates Achilles' and Patroclus' relationship to that of a husband and wife (Clarke 1978). The first is the parallel between the role Meleager's wife Cleopatra plays in Phoenix's story in *Il.* 9 and the role Patroclus plays in *Il.* 16. The second is the scene in *Il.* 23 in which the grieving Achilles holds the dead Patroclus' head in his hands at his funeral, as Andromache does for Hector at *Il.* 24.723-24. Halperin acknowledges these examples of conjugal subtext but denies any erotic implications. He points out that Achilles and Patroclus are also described in reference to familial

relations, and argues that the poem characterizes their relationship using a combination of conjugal and kinship imagery in order to describe a new kind of “heroic friendship” which does not fit into pre-existing categories.

However, the significance of kinship terminology in portraying conjugal relationships in Homer suggests otherwise. In the ascending scale of affection identified by Kakridis, the love for one’s spouse exceeds and replaces the love for one’s friends and family (1949). For example, Hector says that he loves Andromache more than his comrades, brothers, and parents (6.450-56), and Andromache says that Hector stands in place of her dead brothers, mother, and father (6.429-430). Thus when Achilles says that he loved Patroclus more than a brother, a son, or a father (24.46-49, 19.321-27), he is saying that he loved him the way Hector and Andromache love each other.

Achilles and Patroclus are also assimilated to Odysseus and Penelope, Homeric epic’s other idealized couple. Just as Patroclus acts as a substitute Achilles in *Il.* 16, Penelope plays the role of Odysseus, becoming a substitute king while ruling Ithaca (*Od.* 19.108-114). Penelope’s example suggests that the ability to play the role of one’s spouse in his absence is a trait of a good wife. Similarly, I argue that Achilles and Patroclus can be viewed as possessing the *homophrosynē*, or “like-mindedness,” that defines Penelope’s and Odysseus’ relationship. *Contra* scholars who argue that Patroclus is Achilles’ opposite with regard to temperament (Whitman 1958), I show that they are both characterized by a mix of violent anger and compassion.

Achilles’ formation of a conjugal bond with a man rather than a wife emphasizes his inability to conform to expected social *mores*, exemplified by his rejection of the principles of heroic society in *Il.* 9. Similarly, his non-normative choice of object for the eroticism implicit in

this bond mirrors the often socially unacceptable intensity and direction of his other emotions, as when he feels rage towards his friends and compassion for his enemies. The “marriage” of Achilles and Patroclus can therefore be seen as an expression of Achilles’ fundamental characterization in the *Iliad*.

Bibliography

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