

WHO IS ACHILLES?: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERIZATION OF ACHILLES IN  
CONTEMPORARY RETELLINGS

Eleanor Dushin

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Professor Gaggioli

Brown University

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## Who is Achilles?: An Analysis of the Characterization of Achilles in Contemporary Retellings

The first word of the *Iliad* is “wrath.” The epic portrays Achilles as the epitome of masculinity—an ideal warrior and, by extension, an ideal man. He derives value from the fact that he is stronger than other men and that he can kill more people than other men. Ingrained in his masculinity is the fact that he claims dominance and ownership over women, specifically Briseis. In contemporary retellings, authors take two main views of Achilles: one that idealizes Achilles and one that applies a lens of realism to him. Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* tells the story of the *Iliad* through the point of view of Briseis, giving a voice to the women who were spoken over in the original story. Her words weave a story that focuses on the issues women and girls face and the inability of men to see them as truly human. Madeleine Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*, on the other hand, tells the same story through the point of view of Patroclus. Focusing on the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles and clarifying that relationship as romantic, Miller idealized Achilles and portrays him as gentle and caring. While the *Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles* portray Achilles as a hero, others such as *The Silence of the Girls* apply a feminist lens to the original story and recognize the fact that he was morally corrupt.

Despite the fact that no text exists from the Late Bronze Age from the perspective of Briseis and debates about whether she even existed remain unresolved, the archaeological evidence regarding women’s role in society in Troy indicates that Barker’s retelling is accurate. In the Amarna Letters, evidence of women as ‘gifts’ to be given and received by rulers of countries indicate the literal objectification of women in Late Bronze Age societies (Perazzone Rivero, 2021, p. 144). Thus, men like Achilles did not see women like Briseis and Chryseis as

human. In fact, the *Iliad* begins with Agamemnon and Achilles arguing over the girls.

Agamemnon asks Achilles, “Or do you intend—while you yourself have a prize—that I just sit here without one—are you ordering me to give the girl back?” (Homer, *Iliad*, 1.135). Their reference to the girls as “prizes” solidifies their role in society as objects and gifts with no agency. Their only value is derived from men.

*The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker depicts Achilles in a negative light as an abusive, violent, short-tempered man. In the first sentence of the novel, Briseis notes, “Great Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles... How the epithets pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called ‘the butcher,’” (Barker, 2019, p. 3). The references to quotes from the *Iliad* emphasize the reputation that Achilles gained. Moreover, by saying “we,” Barker underscores the fact that not just Briseis but rather all women in Troy are victims of oppression and patriarchy. Men inarguably do not see them as people but rather as objects and machines to produce babies.

*The Silence of the Girls* speaks to a general trend of valuing women’s perspectives in modern society. From the MeToo movement to the simple acknowledgement of discoveries made by women and co-opted by men (i.e. Rosalind Franklin’s discovery of the double-helix and the subsequent discrediting of her work by Watson and Crick), society—especially U.S. society—is reaching toward a world in which women’s voices are valued (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). Barker’s choice to tell the story through the point of view of an oppressed woman brings the *Iliad* into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the novel’s realistic view of Achilles as more of a “butcher” than a hero reflects emerging views on masculinity. Achilles was

widely considered an ideal masculine figure in Hellenistic and Classical times, but *The Silence of the Girls* contextualizes his actions. Barker portrays his masculinity as a destructive force, much like that of men's rights activists today, a movement which evolved in response and opposition to feminism.

In contrast to Barker's retelling, Madeleine Miller's *The Song of Achilles* neglects much of the misogyny that was core to Greek and Trojan culture. Since Patroclus tells the story and is a romantic partner of Achilles in the book, Miller depicts Achilles as more kind than in other retellings. Patroclus says, "No hands had ever been so gentle," about Achilles despite the fact that he kills people a short time before (Miller, 2012, p. 188). Not only does Miller's depiction of Achilles feed into the stereotype that gay men are more feminine than straight men and thus inherently less misogynistic, but it also blurs a proper view of Achilles since it is written through the point of view of his lover. Miller inadvertently wrote a book with an unreliable narrator, but since she does not acknowledge this in the book itself, Achilles' characterization as "gentle" remains the foremost image. As schools phase the *Iliad* out of their curricula and *The Song of Achilles* becomes one of the most popular books from the last decade, a wide population receives their knowledge of Achilles from an inaccurate source. As such, contemporary interpretations that are not considered problematic intermix with the classical interpretations that depict Achilles as a hero, thereby erasing the true history of the *Iliad*.

Many contemporary romance novels involving two men falling in love are written by straight women. The general fetishization of gay men by straight women, and in particular by young, straight, white women, is common in many corners of the internet. A search on Pinterest

for “*The Song of Achilles*” yields hundreds of photos and digital paintings portraying men in ancient clothing in sensual or sexual positions. The book has become an outlet for the fetishization of gay men by predominantly women. In this sense, the *Iliad* becomes a background into which the fetishization of gay men can blend. With speculation about their relationship already a topic of conversation, Miller escapes backlash. However, popular responses to *The Song of Achilles* reveals the broader problem that straight women do not truly see gay men as individuals. Rather, their existence as a gay man gives women the perceived excuse to treat men as objects of desire rather than real people. Thus, not only the book itself but also reactions to the story serve to demonstrate the normalized homophobia of contemporary society.

In the 2004 film *Troy*, Achilles falls in love with Briseis after saving her (Troy, 2004). Having been oppressed, raped, and mistreated by men, the likelihood that Briseis would have fallen in love with Achilles is practically nonexistent. The belief that the *Iliad* and the Trojan War as a whole can be considered a love story is thus damaging, as it spins the narrative to make abuse and love synonymous. The idea of the *Iliad* as a love story can be attributed to many aspects of the story, including but not limited to Briseis and Achilles, Achilles and Patroclus, and Helen and Paris. All of these pairings either directly correlate abuse with love or have been spun to do the same.

While novels such as *The Silence of the Girls* address the struggles of typical women in Troy, they fail to see the other side of the coin: Helen. In the *Iliad*, Helen is not a slave in the sense that Briseis and Chryseis are, but she lacks agency. In her article “Helen in the *Iliad*; *Causa Belli* and Victim of War: From Silent Weaver to Public Speaker,” Hanna Roisman writes about

Helen, “She is a captive and possession in a world in which women are possessions,” (Roisman, 2006, p. 2). Neither *The Silence of the Girls* nor *The Song of Achilles* truly address the oppression that Helen faces. As a woman of privilege, she does not face struggles as harsh as those of slave girls, but her struggles are widely comparable to those of women today. She feels immense shame for the events that have occurred, feeling that the war is her fault. She wishes that “some foul-weather storm of wind carrying me had borne me / to a mountain or a swelling wave of the tumultuous sea, / where the wave would have swept me away before these deeds had happened,” (Homer, *Iliad*, 6.344-348). She is, in fact, “not the loving and caring wife that Paris depicted her as being but rather a wife consumed by guilt and self-revulsion and reviled by those around her,” (Roisman, 2006, p. 26). Her feelings of shame for something that is largely out of her control is reminiscent of the shame forced upon women in contemporary society. Patriarchy often degrades women who act a certain way or have agency over their bodies. For example, men often use the sexual liberation movement against women to undermine their worth. Despite the fact that Helen has very little agency in the matter, she is made to think that she does and that the war is her fault.

While both the original text of the *Iliad* and 2012 novel *The Song of Achilles* portray Achilles as a hero, other sources such as Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* tell a story more based in the truth of the Trojan War and more in-tune with modern feminist beliefs. In *The Song of Achilles*, Achilles is characterized as being a good person while archaeological evidence indicates that this is not the case. The fetishization of gay men along with the glorification of Achilles in part due to his identification as homosexual demonstrates the homophobia that runs

rampant in contemporary society and especially in online communities. *The Silence of the Girls* takes an alternate approach to retelling the *Iliad*, as Pat Barker uses evidence from the Amarna Letters to reveal the true oppression of women, reflecting the forward-thinking feminist values of today. The two novels tell two completely different stories about the Trojan War. This raises the question, should archaeologists and other classical scholars trust past versions of the *Iliad* to depict an accurate overall view of the culture? If one were to just read *The Song of Achilles*, they may not understand that many *do* perceive Achilles as more of a “butcher” than a hero. Looking at a single version may sway our view of the overall culture of a time and place. Hence, when studying Bronze Age, Hellenistic, and Classical receptions of the *Iliad*, looking at pottery and art can tell us more about the values of the culture than the *Iliad* itself. Applying this to other archaeological sites and stories, no one story should be taken at face value. Corroboration through multiple media and perspectives can yield a more complete view of stories and histories.

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