

## Queer Hero: Achilleus and Masculine Gender Norms in the *Iliad*

This paper uses queer theory to investigate Achilleus' character and narrative function in the *Iliad*. I argue that Achilleus takes a norm of male homosociality in deviant directions, and that his queerness is fundamental to the *Iliad*'s epic plot of destructive yet heroic war.

Since antiquity, the nature of Achilleus' erotic subjectivity in the *Iliad* has been an object of interest and debate. As Fantuzzi (2012) has recently explored, Homer is inexplicit about the degree of Achilleus' erotic attachment to Briseis, and thematizes Achilleus' special bond with Patroklos. For classical Athenians, Achilleus and Patroklos were icons of male pederasty, but modern scholars have interpreted their relationship as not pederastic, yet uniquely intimate and possibly sexual (Clarke 1978, Halperin 1990, Davidson 2007, Fantuzzi 2012). Halperin and West (1997) have recognized the pair's place in a Near Eastern epic tradition of "heroes and their pals," while Nagy (1979) and Sinos (1980) have approached Patroklos as Achilleus' epic double and substitute, and Frame (2013) has argued that the two men belong in an Indo-European mythic tradition of hero-twins.

Rather than identifying which particular external historical or mythic model best fits Achilleus' sexuality and relationships, I consider Achilleus within the *Iliad*'s own economy of intimacy using queer theory. Queer theorists interrogate the way that discourses construct certain gendered subjectivities and sexual actors as normative, and others as deviant, or "queer." Individuals labeled as "queer" challenge normative social structures and threaten to undermine existing systems of power through their gender and

sexual difference. This paper asks how “queer” Achilles is within the social and narrative world of the *Iliad*, and what the significance of his queerness might be for the epic’s project.

In an *Iliadic* society dominated by male homosociality, at first Achilles seems to be a normative male hero. Achilles’ status conflict with Agamemnon over possession of concubines reflects the competitive masculine norms of Homeric society. Achilles’ more cooperative relationship with his *therapōn* Patroklos also appears to follow a typical pattern of men in pairs on the battlefield, for which the paradigm may be the fraternal bond, perhaps best represented by the Atreidai themselves.

However, Achilles does move outside of the masculine norm in the intensity and manner of his relations with other men. In the face of Agamemnon’s insult to his honor he leaves the warrior *männerbund* altogether and associates with Patroklos in an alternative relationship that is realized away from, rather than on the battlefield. In his musical passivity in his own tent, Achilles recalls the similarly gender-deviant Trojan erotic hero Paris (Lowenstam 1993). In addition, the relationship between Achilles and Patroklos resembles heterosexual *Iliadic* marriages in the way that Patroklos tends to Achilles’ domestic needs and represents his closest and most compelling family member. Achilles’ loss of Patroklos initiates a second arc of the plot in a parallel to the earlier loss of his female sexual partner, Briseis.

Achilles is particularly queer in his mourning over Patroklos. He is the only man in the *Iliad* to make a lament speech that is specifically termed *goos* (18.316, 23.17); elsewhere it is women who “begin the lament” (Tsagalis 2004). He refuses food, sex, and

baths, and is fixated on blood-thirsty revenge, and the unusual extremity of his abstinent and violent mourning is remarked upon by Odysseus, Apollo, and Thetis.

Achilleus' queerness leads to a collapse of the Greek army and the injuries and deaths of his fellow Greeks when he refuses to fight, and then to havoc and the breakdown of all social norms when he reenters the battle, kills Trojans mercilessly, and mutilates Hektor's corpse. Yet both of these outcomes are at the core of the *Iliad's* plot and essential to the martial heroism that it celebrates. We can therefore conceive of the *Iliad* as a queer epic that is driven by its queer hero.

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