THE LGBTQ+ HISTORICAL IMAGINATION AND ITS NARRATIVES: The Reception of *The Song of Achilles* by Online Readers

A IMAGINAÇÃO HISTÓRICA LGBTQ+ E SUAS NARRATIVAS: A Recepção de *A Canção De Aquiles* por Leitores Online

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Abstract: Drawing on methods from Reception Studies, this investigation seeks to understand the impact of the historical fiction *The Song of Achilles* (Miller, 2011) on its readers and on their understanding of the past and the Historical discipline. We argue that the LGBTQ+ historical imagination and the cultural products it generates can be used to legitimize a contemporary identity, and serve as points of affective and historical identification for the community. The study demonstrates how the novel functions as a platform for readers to critique the course and to demand greater representation for LGBTQ+ subjects in narratives about the past, whether fictional or historical, while also considering the emotional impact of positive representation of marginalized communities in History and Literature.
Keywords: The Song of Achilles, historical imagination, historical fiction, LGBTQ+, reception.

Resumo: Utilizando métodos dos Estudos de Recepção, esta investigação procura entender o efeito que a ficção histórica *A Canção de Aquiles* (Miller, 2011) teve em seus leitores e em seu entendimento sobre o passado e a disciplina Histórica. Argumentamos que a imaginação histórica LGBTQ+ e os produtos culturais criados por ela podem ser usados para legitimar uma identidade contemporânea e como pontos de identificação afetiva e histórica para a comunidade. Mostramos como o romance está sendo utilizado como uma plataforma para leitores criticarem a disciplina e para demandar maior representação para sujeitos LGBTQ+ em narrativas sobre o passado, sejam históricas ou ficcionais, e consideramos o impacto emocional da representação positiva de comunidades marginalizadas na História e na Literatura.
Palavras-chave: *A Canção de Aquiles*, imaginação histórica, ficção histórica, LGBTQ+, recepção.

Introduction

For LGBTQ+ subjects, looking at the past more often than not means looking at stories of suffering, alienation, and exclusion. Because evidence has been either destroyed (Greenberg, 1988; Norton, 1997) or has come from hostile sources (Foucault, 1977), LGBTQ+ people have had their history either denied or made into a tragic narrative. In this context, very few historical narratives mean something positive for the LGBTQ+ community.

Classical Antiquity is, however, an important political and affective point of identification for queer subjects of the past couple of centuries and — as we argue — still has its relevance to the contemporary LGBTQ+ historical imagination. This can be recognised in the reception of the 2011 historical fiction novel *The Song of Achilles;* more

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specifically, in the discourses it allowed and encouraged its readers to share in online settings. Readers often say that they feel comforted by the story, not only for its charming and refreshing LGBTQ+ romance, but for its ability to make them feel seen, recognised as part of something bigger and older than what contemporary society makes of them.

Unexpectedly, however, the novel has also made possible the sharing of particular arguments about the queer past and the Historical discipline that deserve a closer look. That is, the use of a contemporary reinterpretation of a fictional historical relationship as "proof" of the historicity of queer existence, and its supposed denial by traditional historians. In other words, readers of *The Song of Achilles* seem to agree that Achilles and Patroclus were a romantic couple and that queer couples have existed since at least Ancient Greece, where they were relatively common and accepted by society. Historians, however, supposedly have either not realised this or actively denied the fact, resulting in the negligence and marginalisation that LGBTQ+ History has been subjected to, and still is to this day.

In this article, we argue that fictional representations of history have a considerable impact on how the LGBTQ+ past is perceived by modern subjects and how history is used for socio-political ends. With a study of the reception of the queer historical fiction novel *The Song of Achilles,* we will take a closer look at how the past — specifically Ancient Greece — is used by modern LGBTQ+ subjects as a point of identification and as a source of longing and desire, and consider its impacts on contemporary discourses on history, the discipline, and the LGBTQ+ community. The focus on a specific novel about a specific historical period can help us understand further how Classical Antiquity impacts modern publics: how the *Iliad* is being reread and reinterpreted in our modern world, and how this particular community receives Greek Antiquity.

Greek Antiquity in the LGBTQ+ historical imagination

As several authors have shown (cf. Bravmann, 1997; 1994; Waters, 1995), there is a specific historical time and place that seems to be a constant in LGBTQ+ representations of the past, and that is Ancient Greece. The LGBTQ+ historical imagination is filled with marble statues and myths of young heroes and their lovers, and it has been since at least the late 19th century. Ancient Greece, therefore, can be considered a cultural touchstone (Jenkins, 2015) and seems to be ever-present in creative

self-representations of LGBTQ+ history (Bravmann, 1997). It is one of the main narratives LGBTQ+ people tell themselves *about themselves* — and their past.

The LGBTQ+ historical imagination expresses itself in different forms, and many of its narratives are derived from myths and fantasies that often hold greater importance than what documentation can prove, relying more on fictive pasts than traditional heterosexual history (Dunn, 2016). As Gilad Padva argues, "subaltern sexual communities can be empowered by a glorified past and its mythic playgrounds, role models and halls of fame" (Padva, 2014, p. 8). Therefore, fictional and imagined pasts are an important part of LGBTQ+ worldmaking.

References to Antiquity are very common in between the pages of almost every novel that today forms the canon of Western LGBTQ+ Literature: names like Oscar Wilde and E.M. Forster are considered must-haves on every LGBTQ+ shelf, and their works often used Antiquity as a code to talk about homosexuality while concealing it from the general public (Heacox, 2004). The term "Sapphic" itself, as a reference to the poet Sappho from Lesbos, started being used to refer to lesbian women at around the same time (Jenkins, 2015). Classical texts were appropriated by readers and writers to "voice their own contemporaneous interests, perspectives, and anxieties" regarding same-sex attraction (Summers, 1992, p. 4). This resulted in the establishment of a collection of references that codify elements of Classical Antiquity as something distinctively queer and helped form a public that knows and makes use of these references in different forms of communication and cultural productions.

Ancient Greece is often imagined as a place of freedom for gay men, where homosexuality was not only allowed but associated with a high social, spiritual, and moral value. This narrative is very old and has been used in different ways. As early as 1883, for example, John Addington Symonds argued that Ancient Greece was proof that homosexuality "could be noble and dignified when valued by society rather than repressed" (Greenberg, 1988, p. 4). Classical Antiquity was not just used as a codified language for LGBTQ+ people, but as a political and social defence of the community in the present.

History, as a legitimising discourse, is able to offer proof that LGBTQ+ people "have always been here", and that they "have a history as ancient, rich, and honourable as the heterosexual history" that rarely, if ever, mentions them (Fone, 1980, p. xvii). To relate LGBTQ+ existence to a past that is often considered the epitome of democracy also gives an additional layer of legitimation to queer politics in the present, because "inscribing 'homosexuality' within the sexual practices of the Romans and Greeks

provides a past to a community that often appears past-less and therefore frighteningly revolutionary" (Jenkins, 2015, p. 33). Doan and Waters (2000) have argued that, because of this narrative about the past, homosexual men today often feel nostalgia for Ancient Greece and imagine themselves as being part of this long historical tradition. This is reflected in much of the artistic productions created by this imaginary.

This narrative about Ancient Greek sexuality can and should be contested. As Queer Theory developed, we've become increasingly aware of the differences between sexual practices and sexual identities and have come to the general agreement that Greek pederasty was quite different from our modern idea of homosexuality (Escoffier *et al*, 1995). And, as Scott Bravmann has shown, these modern images of Ancient Greece are neither innocent nor neutral and can be challenged for their implications on gender, race, and class relations. In other words, the Greek past is not — and should not be considered — a universal past for LGBTQ+ subjects in the present (Bravmann, 1994; 1997).

These interpretations, nonetheless, have made an impact on much of LGBTQ+ — or LGBTQ+ coded — contemporary art and media. The movie *Call Me By Your Name* (dir. Luca Guadagnino, 2017), for example, tells a story of a homosexual romance in 1983 Italy. To set the tone, the first images on the screen are of Ancient Greek statues, which direct the viewer on what to expect when watching the movie.

Another great example of this is the historical fiction genre. See, for example, Mary Renault's series on Alexander the Great (Renault, 1969; 1972; 1981), which has had great circulation and influenced much of later LGBTQ+ literature (Waters, 1995). Historical fiction can and has been used to make sense of the past and to write marginalised narratives back into history (Groot, 2010), and it is a genre that has been increasingly gaining attention in the past decades. Art, however, is not always received exactly as the author intended. This means that interpretations can be very different, and the text can take unexpected forms. That is what happens with an important historical text: Homer's *Iliad.*

The Song of Achilles as an adaptation

Historical figures from Antiquity had a vital role in the construction of modern queer identities, and in the LGBTQ+ collective historical imagination, the mythological figures of Achilles and Patroclus are perhaps the most memorable. The intensity and the definition of their relationship have been put to debate for centuries, often rekindled by later adaptations of Homer's work, with different degrees of success and reach.

One of these adaptations is *The Song of Achilles*, a romance novel that offers to retell the happenings of the *Iliad* and the Trojan War from the point of view of Patroclus, Achilles' companion in the poem. It was the first novel of American author Madeline Miller, originally published in 2011, but it gained enormous popularity and turned into a bestseller almost a decade after its release. The novel follows Patroclus and Achilles' lives, from infancy to adulthood, while developing their relationship as an explicitly romantic and erotic one. Both characters are defined in the story as best friends, comrades, and soulmates: "He is half of my soul, as the poets say" (Miller, 2011b, p. 284), Patroclus says about Achilles; "I could recognize him by touch alone, by smell, I would know him blind, by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth. I would know him in death, at the end of the world" (*Ibid.*, p. 126). All in all, it is a charming Young Adult historical fiction that makes use of themes from History and Mythology to present these characters to a modern audience.

Words might not be enough for us to comprehend the absolute literary phenomenon that is *The Song of Achilles.* Worldwide, it sold over 3 million copies as of 2025. The feedback was majorly positive, reaching an average of 4.6 stars on *Amazon* and 4.3 on *Goodreads*. Miller's work has been received with high praise by critics and readers alike, and has been the subject of many academic works around the world (cf. Jokivuori, 2023; Santos; Almeida, 2022; McKenna, 2015). The work was not contained by its pages: it soon became thousands of fan art, fanfiction, and video reviews; even inspiring several artistic performances, including music and dance, for example (cf. Svelstad, 2024). This success was greatly affected by social media, especially after going viral on the platform *TikTok* in a trend that showcases the emotional reactions the book caused in its readers, in which hundreds of people recorded themselves reading the climax of the novel and crying over Patroclus and Achilles' deaths (Rocha, 2023).

One of the reasons the book was successful was because it portrayed a homoaffective and homoerotic couple in a historical setting in a positive way, which is generally an outlier for LGBTQ+ fiction, and especially for LGBTQ+ historical fiction. Literature has a long history of giving its queer characters unhappy and unsatisfying endings, if not killing them off entirely, and often they were used as a means to warn the readers of the tragic consequences being queer might lead to (Garden, 2014).

The Song of Achilles doesn't try to escape the *Iliad's* tragic ending, and Patroclus and Achilles still perish by the end of Miller's novel. What *The Song of Achilles* manages to offer, however, is the portrayal of a lifelong committed relationship between two men, heroes in their own right and respected amongst their peers, who die for each other and

find each other in the afterlife: "In the darkness, two shadows, reaching through the hopeless, heavy dusk. Their hands meet, and light spills in a flood, like a hundred golden urns pouring out the sun" (Miller, 2011b, p. 352). Not many — if any! — early 2010s, Young Adult LGBTQ+ Fiction has managed to deliver such a satisfying ending for its queer readers.

The success of the novel might also be related to the conditions of possibility that allowed the text to exist. Every work is a product of the society that surrounds it, and therefore, popular novels can be considered a reflection of social-political insights, and in the discussion each society wants to have (Maurice, 2017). The decriminalisation and further social acceptance of homosexuality, the diversification of reading publics, and the new possible forms of publishing and access to literature have made an impact on how the story was created and thereafter received.

Achilles has had many lovers in the past centuries (cf. Fantuzzi, 2012), but for our modern eye, none of them is as important as Patroclus. Each society through time has reinterpreted Homer's work differently, and has produced reception pieces that reflect that. As David Delbar has argued,

> it is impossible to avoid some projection of present mores onto the past, particularly when the past's ability to speak to itself is limited. (...) Therefore to make sense of ancient sexualities, interpreters inevitably fill in the gaps with their own sexual mores, often without noticing what themselves are doing. In this sense all interpretations of ancient sexualities are acts of reception, and the shifting horizon of expectation from generation to generation — or even reader to reader — can yield very different results (Delbar, 2023, p. 23).

This means that, for modern readers of the *Iliad*, it is very easy to read Achilles and Patroclus' relationship as a romance. As an adaptation, *The Song of Achilles* reinterprets the relationship for it to make sense to these modern readers who are used to — and generally very accepting of — seeing two men in love.

Readers transform the text, and the *Iliad* is not an exception. Just as Miller received and adapted Homer's work, so do *The Song of Achilles*' readers adapt and interpret what Miller has written. Because of this, reception theory can be a useful methodology for us to understand how a text is effectively received, given meaning, and transformed by its audiences through time and space. The ample circulation of *The Song of Achilles* has given us an enormous amount of evidence for its reception: thousands of reviews shared online in different social media and retail websites, hundreds of different fan-created art and commentary in video and text, and dozens of press articles detailing the impact of the novel and debating its literary merits. Within these texts, we were able

to find common expressions and ideas that reveal some of the readers' perceptions of LGBTQ+ history, including a general agreement on the definition of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, and some shared beliefs on History and its professionals' role in the interpretation of the poem over time.

The evidence of history

The historical fiction genre makes use of historical knowledge to lead its narratives. The novelists' obligation for historical authenticity, however, is not a consensus amongst scholars of the genre (cf. Weinhardt, 2011), and much less among its writers. Readers, however, tend to believe that at least some of the story is historically authentic (Brown, 1998; Brown; St. Clair, 2006).

Miller offers a well-researched retelling of the *Iliad*, appropriating and adapting elements of Greek-roman mythology from several sources into something comprehensible to twenty-first-century young adult readers (Rocha, 2023). She makes heavy use of the Ancient Greek reception of the poem, produced a couple of centuries after Homer. Ancient Greeks, however, interpreted the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus based on the experiences of their time, to elaborate and discuss the idea of pederasty and who, specifically, would take on what role (Breitenfeld, 2023). Some authors even agree that, for the Ancient Greeks, they were unambiguously considered lovers (Clarke, 1978; Fantuzzi, 2012), and their cultural production therefore always implies that. This means that Miller's work reflects these later receptions, maybe more than the *Iliad* itself, and should be understood as such.

Miller's readers, however, have an interesting take on that. According to them, the 2011 novel is proof that LGBTQ+ people have always existed; therefore, it historically affirms LGBTQ+ existence in the past. This is explicitly recognised as one of the merits of *The Song of Achilles*. One reader says,

> The love between Achilles and Patroclus is one of the great classics of Greek literature. For gay men, it's a story we can look to as proof that there have always been men who loved other men, and they weren't always as reviled as we sometimes feel in modern society (Holland, 2013).[1]

Another reader goes as far as to declare that "[the novel] historically affirms and normalises the presence of gay people and gay love" (RD, 2022). We could say, however, that *The Song of Achilles* — as an adaptation of a story into another — *doesn't* historically affirm anything other than what we, as a society, would like to see in the past.

As David Halperin argued more than two decades ago, the present should not be considered the measure of all things. However, that does not stop readers from identifying with historical figures and reclaiming them (Halperin, 2002). This practice of retroactively reclaiming historical figures as queer has been very common in LGBTQ+ cultural discourses, and recognised by its scholars as well (cf. Kunzel, 2018; Schuyf, 2000). It is a discursive strategy, politically useful, to affirm different forms of queer existence and experience in different times and places, and therefore validating the existence of those here and now.

The list of reclaimed figures is ever-growing and has been used to both identify queer figures in the past and to "persuade readers that if Socrates, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Whitman were homosexual, then popular prejudices against homosexuality must be unjustified" (Greenberg, 1988, p. 4-5). Achilles and Patroclus, in particular, have been reclaimed by LGBTQ+ — and LGBTQ+ coded — discourse since very early on.

The problem with these icons, however, is that they are silent (Schuyf, 2000) and that the past, as we've seen, has a limited ability to speak for itself. We know by now that the study of ancient sexualities is a complicated thing. Most of the evidence we have on Ancient and Archaic Greece sexuality and their social meanings comes from literature, art, and poetry, and these sources have been subject to several massive campaigns of destruction and defacing in history (Greenberg, 1988). It is very possible, even, that Homer's text has been censored over the centuries, and that any reference to same-sex romantic or erotic relationships has been lost (Murray, 1934).

In Academia, there is no consensual definition of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship. For some authors, for example, the absence of an explicit sexual element in their relationship in the poem is enough to dismiss the idea of a relationship (Dover, 1978; Fantuzzi, 2012); for others, the relationship is an example of how pederasty functioned in Ancient Greece (cf. Morales; Mariscal, 2003). Both of these interpretations, however, can be criticised: for it is not sexual touch that defines queer relationships (King; Kozak, 2023) and its absence might very well be fabricated; and even in Ancient Greece, the relationship didn't fit the traditional definitions of pederasty (Clarke, 1978). While some consider the question "futile" (Hooker, 1989), most scholars seem to lean towards considering them friends, or at least the generally ambiguous "companion" (King; Kozak, 2023) — because this, at least, is what the poem can tell us.

Readers of *The Song of Achilles* who agree with Miller's interpretation are either convinced by her text or have already come to it with some previous knowledge or

expectations about Ancient Greek sexuality: "I never really thought about Achilles as possibly having what we would now refer to as a gay relationship but when you think about it, it rather makes sense" (M., 2021); "I always thought Achilles was over reacting when he has his mental breakdown in *The Iliad*, but now I completely understand. (...) Patroclus and Achilles were so close — I can't believe I missed all the subtext while reading the actual story" (Williams, 2015); and, most tellingly, "We all know that in Ancient Greek society homosexuality was part of the deal" (Customer, 2023). Even unsatisfied readers can agree with Miller: "From past historical evidence I realize Achilles was gay but in the book description there was no mention this would be a romantic tale" (Desi, 2021).

The response to *The Song of Achilles* and Miller's interpretation of Homer, despite being overwhelmingly positive, was not by any means unanimous. This "gay twist" of the relationship was not well-received by many readers, who either did not want to read an LGBTQ+ novel and were expecting something else or who did not agree with Miller's interpretation of Homer's work. This can be an example of how reading is not a straightforward act, and readers' expectations do affect how a text is read and received.

For those who are actively looking for LGBTQ+ historical figures, seeing Achilles and Patroclus as such is very easy. History, therefore, is still useful and being used as a point of identification, which can be looked at as "proof" or "evidence" of queer existence in the past. And, curiously, a modern — and perhaps *too* modern (cf. Delbar, 2023; Jokivuori, 2023) — historical fiction novel is being read, by some readers, as historical evidence.

The Song of Achilles explicitly portrays Achilles and Patroclus as a couple while subtly referring to the aforementioned canon of Western LGBTQ+ literature: while daydreaming about his growing attraction to his friend, Patroclus tells the reader that he "cannot name the thing I hope for" (Miller, 2011b, p. 59), which is distinctively similar to Wilde's 1985 famous use of the phrase "the love that dare not speak its name" (Norton, 1997). This not only reaffirms its role as an heir to this canon, but also shares its views on discourses of power that control what is thought of and what is talked about the past. This, as we will see, ends up having consequences in the way readers receive and interpret the novel. A discourse of distrust in History and its mistakes is shared amongst hundreds of readers — if not more.

Overcoming History

The problem with the historical authenticity of historical fiction is twofold: readers can view a novel not only the evidence of history, but also as historiography. This seems to be the case with *The Song of Achilles*, where the credentials of the author and the book's design have made a considerable impact on how the story is received — and what history it is believed to tell.

Author Madeline Miller comes from an academic background, with a bachelor's and master's degree in Classics from Brown University (Alter, 2012), and experience teaching Greek, Latin, and Shakespeare to High Schoolers (Brown, 2012). The book took her ten years to write, and according to her, it started as an idea for her thesis (Miller, 2021). The publishers of her novel make use of this information, salienting her academicism in her author bio, as a means of authorising her to rewrite Homer's work (Sinha, 2017; King; Kozak, 2023). Reading is a creative act, and readers' receptions can only be influenced to a certain point. Editorial decisions do, nonetheless, have an impact on how a text is received and interpreted (Chartier, 1989).

Despite being known as such, *The Song of Achilles* is *not* marketed specifically as LGBTQ+ literature; instead, the book makes heavy use of Greek Antiquity symbology in its design to associate itself with a historical narrative, further legitimising its interpretation (Sinha, 2017). Miller was not the first one to offer this interpretation of their relationship, and she doesn't claim to be: "I stole it from Plato!", she says when asked where she got the idea from (Miller, 2023). The effort to make *The Song of Achilles* seem like a valid interpretation of Homer and Ancient Greece has certainly influenced the way people read the novel: Miller, as an authorised interpreter with a few degrees and Plato on her side, could only be telling the historical truth.

Miller claims a very particular narrative about how the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus has been interpreted over time, and this has influenced much of how the novel was received by critics and the general public. In Miller's own words, she wrote it to "set the record straight" (Miller, 2011a). The idea for the novel came, according to her, as a response to the supposed hesitation from scholars to recognise the romantic nature of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship:

> I was already working on my thesis, on a topic that had long frustrated me: the way that some scholarship dismissed the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, labelling them "good friends". I'd read Plato's *Symposium*, where Achilles and Patroclus are not just presented as lovers, but the ideal romantic relationship. I knew that interpreting their relationship as romantic was a very old idea, and I was angry at the way homophobia was erasing this reading (Miller, 2021, l. 8-14).

> I had been intensely frustrated by a number of articles I had read that kept side-stepping the love between him [Patroclus] and Achilles, which to me felt so obviously at the story's heart. (...) So partially I was propelled by a desire to set the record straight (Miller, 2011a, l. 30-37).

With this, she promulgates a narrative where every scholar is not only denying but *in denial* about the relationship, and it becomes her responsibility to honour Homer's real intention with the poem: "for me, the love story between these two men was the heart of the story (...) and the turning point of *The Iliad*. I wanted to really honour that" (Miller, 2021).

For many of her readers, then, by portraying Achilles and Patroclus as a couple, Miller is doing an important job of *revelation* — more specifically, the revelation of something that scholars have tried very hard to hide or ignore. This can be inferred by the *hundreds* of reviews that tell us exactly that: "for so many centuries these types of relationship were dusted under the rug as 'friendships' by historians, and I respect the author for bringing it out in the daylight" (Antanavi, 2022); "what historians refuse to highlight is the love story between achilles and patroclus" (Lara, 2022); "a story that is rarely told. History is often too hesitant to share gay love stories of famous figures" (Pete, 2021); "Madeline Miller tells the story of the *Iliad* in a modern, nuanced way that has largely been erased by historians and literary critics for years" (Taplin, 2022); and, the well-phrased comment of "Madeline Miller speaks for those who were silenced by the lips of historians" (Noel, 2020).

According to these comments, there seems to be a secret plot, followed by every historian, to hide the truth of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus from the general public. They are considered as either in denial, avoiding the subject, or even actively trying to deny the relationship and convince the public of some other truth, like in the comments "Historians be damned, they were lovers" (Stock, 2020), "That was gay and historians won't prove me otherwise" (D., 2021), and "Friends, huh? Yeah right, HISTORIANS CANNOT FOOL ME! I know what they really were… soulmates!" (Maya, 2021), which implies, very clearly, that they are *trying to fool* them — or, at least, that's what they believe.

It is interesting to us, however, how *historians* seem to be considered the main culprits of this centuries-old misconception, as if they had sole control over the meanings of the poem over time. In her criticism of what she claims to be the main interpretation of the relationship, Miller only refers to "scholars". The blame on historians, specifically, seems to come from the readers.

These "historians" are also considered very specific types: they are "homophobic" (Charlie, 2020; Ryan, 2022), "stuffy" (Rozanne, 2017), "old and crochety" (Scott, 2021) and even "crusty, who insist on seeing the past as strictly heterosexual until the 1970s" (Kelly W., 2016), who "have the audacity to call them 'just friends'" (karin, 2021). With Miller's work, these characters are considered by readers to be 'saved' from the control of historians and their prejudice, or their inability to identify LGBTQ+ people in the past: "historians say they were roommates" (Anabelle, 2022), and "historians will say they were bffs [best friends forever]" (Mia, 2023). This particular remark is repeated hundreds of times in slightly different formats, as a *meme*, and the meaning is clear: when seeing what is supposedly the evidence of a very clearly romantic and sexual relationship, historians will come up with the most deranged interpretations for it — that they are roommates, best friends or good comrades —, overlooking what the actual truth would be. To queer artists and readers throughout the ages, the erotic and romantic bond between these characters has been considered very obvious (King; Kozak, 2023), and that is why it becomes incredibly frustrating, for queer readers, to not have it recognised.

Even rigorous and deliberate conclusions from historians are met with scepticism by these readers:

> Historians seem to have a homophobic tendency — even in the most glaring of circumstances being gay is always caveated with doubt and uncertainty around the evidence. It is a good reminder that history, even mythological in nature, is not objective. It is necessarily dictated by the prejudices and biases of the historian (Ryan, 2022).

The problem with evidence, as we've seen, is one of the most debated methodological problems of LGBTQ+ History — whether identifying or interpreting it. This criticism seems to come from a misunderstanding — or even disagreement — from the public about how history is written. Historians, then, are not only considered bigots, but also incapable of doing their own jobs.

The meaning of the *Iliad* is considered not only the responsibility of historians, but the poem is also considered, by extension, something that should be taught in History classes, and it is not being done correctly: "I've always thought Pat[roclus] and Achilles were lovers and seeing historians or even history teachers state that they were merely friends is just unbearable" (Mnv, 2022). Teachers can be blamed for an incorrect interpretation of Homer, just like historians. Miller offers, then, not only something considered more truthful, but also more entertaining. One reader says that "If this had been around in high school I would have been far more interested in learning about history like this than the boring texts they force down our gullets" (Written…, 2023); and another,

while praising the novel, declare that "All history lessons should be as enjoyable as this" (Kirby, 2023).

Readers also make use of these platforms to criticise different adaptations of the poem; more specifically, the Hollywood movie *Troy* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, 2004), a million-dollar blockbuster starring Brad Pitt as Achilles and Garrett Hedlund as Patroclus — his *cousin*. This doesn't bode well for *The Song of Achilles* readers, who criticise the movie *and historians* at the same time: "It's so funny how they were obviously lovers and historians are just like, 'they were FRIENDS' and hollywood goes 'they were COUSINS'" (Y., 2022); and "But no one ever mentions the saddest love story is the one of Patroclus and Achilles. Why? Because hardly no historian will recognize them. Even Hollywood (Right "cousins" give me a break)" (Karoul, 2022). The movie *Troy* and *The Song of Achilles* were created and sold with different audiences in mind, and the sheer difference of these adaptations is a great example of how the ambiguities of a text can lead to very different works of reception (Delbar, 2023).

What is interesting to us, however, is how these readers seem ready to believe that what *The Song of Achilles* proposes is not an interpretation, but the truth about the past — a truth that neither historians nor movie writers have been able or even willing to offer. To define it as "the truth", moreover, dismisses the reading of this interpretation *as* an interpretation — which, as we've seen, are almost infinitely varied. In short, readers of *The Song of Achilles* seem to agree that historians are either incompetent at their jobs or too biased to do it correctly. And in whatever History books we write or History classes we teach, we cannot help but be unbearably boring too.

On historical representativity

As an adaptation of the *Iliad*, *The Song of Achilles* rewrites the poem to serve different purposes and to captivate different audiences. For LGBTQ+ readers, identified by their use of "we" in their own comments regarding the community, the novel satisfies a need for literary and historical representation. Mainstream literature and popular fiction have only recently started featuring queer main characters, and books have become spaces for queer readers "to locate themselves, as spaces for these young people to see their lives reflected back to them, but also to see alternative possibilities for richer, happier, fuller lives" (Banks, 2009, p. 33).

Despite *The Song of Achilles* being far from the first artistic reinterpretation of the *Iliad* that portrays Achilles and Patroclus as lovers, it is perhaps the most famous

adaptation of our generation, managing to captivate a public that no other has been able to reach. For an audience that only very recently has started seeing themselves represented in well-circulated and popular novels, it is clear that the emotional importance of the story has impacted how readers receive and respond to the text. This can be seen in readers' reviews: "Madeline Miller I will not rest until I can tell you myself how thankful I am for this book. As a historian, a romantic, and a gay man" (Jasper, 2021); "A love that I never thought I'd see (or read): As a gay male in their 20's that has not read a lot of LGBT books this one felt like it was for me" (Maurer, 2022).

The reviews we have found in this investigation reveal not only a deep dissatisfaction with traditional historical narratives but also an underlying desire for something else. Throughout them, there seems to be a common demand for more — or any — LGBTQ+ representation, which reinforces what other authors have identified: new publics of the contemporary political discourse are increasingly making their needs for representation known (Wallace, 2016; Santos; Almeida, 2022; Sousa, 2022). This doesn't always live up to some readers' expectations — the book is "a disappointment for queer readers looking for good representation", says one of them (Krasnansky, 2015) — but even Miller acknowledges this demand and has directed her efforts towards responding to it, making queer readers feel seen and hoping it could help counter homophobia in general (Miller, 2021; 2023). What the community demands, however, is not just more representation in popular media — but in History, too.

To read Achilles and Patroclus as a couple can be a deliberate strategy for queer people to see themselves in Classical texts. LGBTQ+ readers might have an inclination for this interpretation, and considering the history of the community, this seems to be well justified. Frequently, the audience actively chooses to interpret characters as queer to see themselves represented in different forms of media, such as books, movies, and TV series (Breitenfeld, 2023), and this can be seen as a strategy of survival for queer people in the face of invisibility, oppression, and alienation (Sedgwick, 1994).

In the absence of historical references they can see themselves in, modern queer readers often have to make use of the fictional to find satisfying representations in historical narratives. In some ways, representation in these fictional texts can partially compensate for the neglect of LGBTQ+ history and its subjects throughout history. As Alina Jokivuori writes,

> even if imagined, the experience of reading about a queer character who lived much before our modern day might allow the queer reader to feel a sense of belonging, of having a lineage. (...) It is perhaps even possible

> that the 'homophobic history of injury' can be healed, at least to some degree, by romanticising what the past was (Jokivuori, 2023, p. 28).

Reclaiming these historical figures, like Achilles and Patroclus, is not only of political importance for the movement but also quite emotionally valuable for its subjects. These figures, having been heterosexualized by previous historical interpretations, could now represent role models and different possibilities of queer existence that are not limited to systematic oppression and constant suffering.

The Song of Achilles can be an example of how narratives about the historical past are being reinterpreted, reclaimed, and transformed by modern readers to create subversive meanings**.** It is possible, even, that the past is being reinterpreted to give queer people the possibility of happiness that wasn't common — or even possible — for earlier generations. With History being disbelieved as an accurate portrayal of the past, these people start thinking *what if* we could have been happy in the past? And that is where invention might come in handy. We cannot transform history, but the power of transformation that historical narratives have is undeniable.

Afterword

In this investigation, we intended to show how the past can be reinterpreted for different aims with historical fiction, and how readers of the genre mobilise their references and expectations to criticise or to accept an interpretation. In our case, a centuries-old fictional relationship is being reinterpreted and used to give historical and literary representation to marginalised communities in the present, and to question traditional and legitimised narratives of the myth.

Ancient Greece is still a disputed past, and different narratives can be useful for political and identificatory means. For LGBTQ+ people today, Greek Antiquity continues to be an important point of reference and is still an important theme of the LGBTQ+ historical imagination. Achilles and Patroclus are still being reclaimed as a great example of the different ways queer relationships could have existed and thrived in the past, going against the frequent discourses that these people have either never existed or never known anything other than suffering. They are, in this way, being read as a symbol of queer love and persistence, both in the past and in the present. The dispute over the meaning of these historical icons and characters might be endless (Blondell, 2008), but this interpretation can tell us a lot about the ways we read the past and, more importantly, what we wish we could find in it. Reading Antiquity as queer is one of the ways we translate the past to

make it comprehensible for our modern audiences; for it is maybe hard for us to read Achilles and Patroclus' intense relationship as anything other than romantic love between two men.

Readers can find in fiction the answers to questions History doesn't seem to offer, and for our readers, these questions include "*Were there LGBTQ+ people in the past?"* and *"Why don't we know about it?"* Because of this, we have seen a common and intense criticism of the Historical discipline and its professionals in the reception of *The Song of Achilles*. LGBTQ+ people in particular are known for having a general suspicion of History, as a discipline, and in its ability to tell the truth about the past (Murphy, 2021), but Miller's work — and maybe the digital world in its entirety — has managed to deepen this suspicion to an incomparable degree. Scholars' interpretations of the *Iliad*, whichever they might be, are not only being rejected but also ridiculed by this public. As we've seen, this suspicion might be expressed in mocking, belittling, and outright disbelief, and has been the trigger that instigated Miller's own creative work. The relationship that Academia has spent decades discussing and trying to understand has become, for these readers, the epitome of all of our failures.

It is possible to recognise, however, that this kind of criticism comes from a desire and a demand for representativity in historical narratives, whether in History or in Literature. The case of *The Song of Achilles* has opened up space for us to discuss how new reading publics are making their demands heard and actively transforming the literary industry — and, therefore, the LGBTQ+ historical fiction genre itself. Diversity sells, is one conclusion we might find (Rocha, 2023); but it is also an actual emotional *need* for marginalised communities. For these communities, history is not only a way to affirm themselves as part of a society and therefore deserving of the same rights, but also as a way of acknowledging the pain that decades of misrepresentation have caused — a form of healing, maybe the only one we get to have.

For historians, an investigation such as this can show just how much criticism can come from unexpected sources, and can help us understand what people really want from the past, and what they expect to read in History books. Most of us agree that we are living in a bigger context of the dislegitimation of History as an authorised narrative about the past, and several scholars have already tried their hand at, if not predictions, then at least instructions on how not to lose this battle completely. But what this means for the future of the profession, only time will be able to tell.

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