THE CHASTE CONSECRATION OF THE THIGHS: POST-HOMERIC REPRESENTATIONS OF ACHILLES AND PATROCLUS IN CLASSICAL GREEK LITERATURE

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Abstract

Although Homer's *Iliad* does not explicitly portray Achilles and Patroclus as lovers, they were characterized as such by many later authors in antiquity. A number of post-Homeric texts attempt either to redefine Achilles' and Patroclus' friendship as a sexual relationship, or to argue against such redefinition. Previous scholarship has tended to focus on the difficulty of adapting the Iliadic Achilles and Patroclus to the paradigm of Classical Greek pederastic homosexuality. This article demonstrates and analyzes how Classical and Hellenistic interpretations of Achilles' and Patroclus' relationship reflect the literary agendas of the works in which they are contained. We suggest that rather than "misreading" Homer, ancient authors creatively re-interpret the *Iliad* in order to present Achilles and Patroclus as the quintessential example of whichever type of bond between men they wish to praise, problematize, or otherwise evaluate.

Introduction

IN the *Iliad*, Homer's eight century BCE epic poem set during the Trojan War, Achilles is portrayed as the greatest Greek warrior and Patroclus is his dearest companion. The question of how best to define the relationship between these two characters was first raised in antiquity and continues to be a source of both interest and anxiety in receptions of the *Iliad* up to the present day. In Homeric epic, their bond is never explicitly described as having a sexual element. It is, however, characterized by an emotional closeness and a passionate intensity that is not seen in any other male friendship in the poem. ¹ When Achilles refuses to save the Greek army from the Trojans because he has been dishonored by the Greek commander Agamemnon, it is Patroclus who at last convinces him to show mercy, after he has denied the pleas of his other friends. Although he still refuses to fight himself, Achilles gives Patroclus his armor and lets him lead his soldiers into battle to drive back the Trojans from the Greek ships. Patroclus succeeds, but is then killed by the Trojan prince Hector. Achilles is overcome with inconsolable grief, and takes a terrible vengeance by killing Hector and repeatedly dishonoring his corpse, to the dismay of both mortals and immortals. Apollo, the god of balance, declares that Achilles' sorrow for Patroclus exceeds what is appropriate to feel for a friend, or even for a brother or a son (24.46-49). Achilles himself laments that Patroclus' death is more painful to him than the death of his own father or child would be (19.321-327). What Achilles and Patroclus feel for each other in the *Iliad* is something wholly extraordinary, a love that exceeds the boundaries of ordinary human relationships. It is likely for this reason that in the early fifth century BCE, a number of extant texts begin either to redefine Achilles' and Patroclus' friendship as a sexual relationship, or argue against such a redefinition.

The most pressing issue these works grapple with is the fact that the Homeric portrayal of Achilles and Patroclus does not fit into the paradigm of pederastic homosexuality that was the norm in certain parts of Greece, particularly among the Athenian upper classes from the sixth through the fourth centuries. Such relationships involved an older, dominant partner, called the *erastês*, and a younger, submissive partner, called the *erômenos* or *paidika*. The *erastês* was usually an adult, while the typical *erômenos* was an adolescent boy who had not yet grown a beard.

¹ Clarke 1978
The grammatical construction of these terms reveals the inherent inequality of the two roles: erastês is active, “he who loves,” while erômenos is passive, “he who is loved.” Sexual dominance is associated with social dominance. There was virtually no conception of reciprocal male sexual desire between equals (Dover 1978 16), and for a younger man to act as an erastês to an older man was seen as a form of perversion and sexual deviance (cf. Xen. 

Achilles and Patroclus in the Iliad do not conform to this accepted pattern of homosexuality in a number of respects. Most importantly, Patroclus is older (II. 11.785-89), but plays a subordinate role, acting as Achilles’ servant and obeying his orders (II. 9.199f). He is also, like all the other Achaeans, less skilled in battle than Achilles. In order to depict Achilles and Patroclus as a pederastic couple, classical authors were compelled to alter significant aspects of the original Homeric representation of these two characters, either ignoring Patroclus’ age to portray him as Achilles’ erômenos, or ignoring his social and martial inferiority to depict him as Achilles’ erastês.

These attempts to force Achilles’ and Patroclus’ relationship into the framework of pederasty may indicate that a profound cultural change occurred between the eighth and fifth centuries with regard to the way Greek, particularly Athenian, society characterized intense emotional relationships between men. In classical Athens, pederastic erôs was a conspicuous form of male love among the upper classes, and it was natural for many Athenians to view Achilles’ devotion to Patroclus in this context. The fact that the Iliad does not characterize Achilles and Patroclus as pederastic lovers, and that there are in fact no erastês/erômenos relationships at all in Homeric epic, is often taken as evidence that pederasty was much less normal, perhaps even non-existent, in Homer’s time (Levin 47). It is also possible that pederasty is absent from Homeric epic for other reasons, such as genre convention.

Previous scholarship on this topic has tended to focus on the difficulty of adapting the Iliadic Achilles and Patroclus to the model of classical pederasty, and on their inherent incompatibility with such a dynamic. Little attention, however, has been paid to the creativity of post-Homeric authors in presenting Achilles and Patroclus as the quintessential example of whichever type of bond between men they wish to praise, analyze, or otherwise evaluate. The shared trend in these texts is that each seeks to make a specific point about male relationships and cites Achilles and Patroclus as evidence, often emphasizing particular details in the Iliad which support their argument while disregarding others. The concern of these authors is not with interpreting Homer accurately, but with interpreting Homer usefully. No piece of classical rhetoric was complete without a Homeric precedent, and an important part of a Greek education was learning how to interpret Homer usefully.

2 Thomas Hubbard implies that pederasty existed in some areas of Greece but not in others: “Epic tradition is generally reticent about same-sex love because, whatever may have been going on in Crete or Sparta at this time, it lacked sufficient Panhellenic status to be acknowledged in poems that were meant to appeal to all Greeks. Homosexuality is thus left as a possible reading for those members of the audience inclined to it, but it nowhere forces itself upon us” (Hubbard 790).

3 A potential analogue can be seen in Apollonius’ treatment of the Hylas story in the Argonautica. He does not portray Hylas’ and Hercules’ relationship as sexual, although his near contemporary Theocritus does so in Idyll 13. Apollonius is likely imitating the lack of pederasty in Homeric epic, but it is possible that Homer himself was influenced in a similar way by an archaizing poetic tradition that looked back towards the Mycenaean Era and did not necessarily accurately evoke the details of eight-century society.

4 Cf. Halperin 1990, Clarke 1978
quote or gloss Homer to one’s own advantage (Ford 231-256). The perception of Achilles as an admired figure, worthy of emulation, made his bond with Patroclus ideal for exploitation.

The idea of a “correct” interpretation of Achilles’ and Patroclus’ sexuality is, for the purposes of this paper, neither relevant nor useful. I intend instead to offer a comprehensive survey of classical Athenian texts which comment on the nature of Achilles’ and Patroclus’ relationship, while paying particular attention to how each interpretation reflects the literary agenda and cultural context of the work in which it appears. A comparison of these texts sheds light on the techniques authors used in adapting Homer to their own uses and the ways that classical conceptions of sexuality influenced receptions of Homeric epic.

Aeschylus

The first known literary work to characterize Achilles’ and Patroclus’ relationship as sexual is Aeschylus’ Myrmidons, which dates from the early fifth century BCE. This play is now lost, but the plot may be partially reconstructed from surviving fragments and references to it in other texts. It appears to coincide with the action of Books 9-18 of the Iliad, and deals with the consequences of Achilles’ decision to withdraw from battle due to his anger at having been dishonored by King Agamemnon. The portrayal of Achilles and Patroclus in the Myrmidons differs in important ways from their portrayal in Homeric epic. By making them a pederastic couple, Aeschylus transforms their complex bond in the Iliad from something exceptional and difficult to define into a conventional relationship that fits neatly into the social framework of classical Athens. The pederastic nature of Achilles’ and Patroclus’ love in the Myrmidons is made clear by a line in which Achilles reproaches the dead Patroclus: σέβας δὲ μηρῶν ἁγνὸν οὐ κατῄδεω / ὃ δοσχάριστε τῶν πυκνῶν φιλημάτων, “And you did not respect the chaste consecration of the thighs, oh ungrateful that you were for those countless kisses!” 6 (fr. 135). Another fragment reads, μηρῶν τε τῶν σῶν ἡσεβῆσθ’ ὁμιλίαν / κλαίων, “I honored the intimacy of your thighs by bewailing you” (fr. 136). The phrases sebas mêrôn hagnon and mêrôn tôn sôn homilian, the “chaste consecration” and “intimacy” of Patroclus’ thighs, are references to intercrural sex, the socially acceptable form of sexual conduct in a pederastic relationship. The practice is described in Dover’s Greek Homosexuality: “The erastes and eromenos stand facing one another; the erastes grasps the eromenos round the torso, bows his head on to or even below the shoulder of the eromenos, bends his knees and thrusts his penis between the eromenos’ thighs” (Dover 1978 98). Achilles’ erotic devotion to the thighs of Patroclus confirms his status as the erastês and Patroclus’ status as the erômenos 8 Halperin comments:

[This] was no more than what was consistent with the differential distribution of power in the relationship for, as we have seen, Achilles had both personal and narratological precedence over his

6 Translations by Sommerstein, 2008
7 An alternate reconstruction is μηρῶν τε τῶν σῶν εὐσέβης ὁμιλία (cf. Snell 15)
8 This is corroborated by Plato’s Symposium 180a, in which Phaedrus says that Aeschylus made Achilles the erastes of Patroclus.

For the complex construction of Achilles’ and Patroclus’ relationship in the Iliad, see Halperin 1990, Mills 2000.
comrade: to Aeschylus’ mind, it was obvious that Achilles must have been on top in other respects as well (classical Greek pederasty, after all, tended to assimilate social and sexual roles) (Halperin 86).

Although pederasty does not appear in the *Iliad*, it was ubiquitous among the Athenian elite in the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries, making it an obvious context in which to situate a close emotional relationship between two epic male characters. In a similar reflection of the fifth-century social reality, the *Myrmidons* focuses not on the quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles, but on a clash between Achilles and the body of the Achaean army that is not portrayed in Homeric epic. Interactions between heroes and common soldiers are given little attention in the *Iliad*, but this theme was of the highest relevance in the context of Athenian democracy. Aeschylus uses the story of Achilles to dramatize the contentious relationship between the egalitarian Athenian demos and the exceptional individuals it produced (Michelakis 24-30).

The play opens (Sommerstein 146-147) with the chorus of Myrmidons berating Achilles for abandoning his fellow Greeks: τάδε μὲν λεύσσεις, φαίδιμ᾽ Ἀχιλλεῦ, / δοριλυμάντους Δαναῶν μόχθους, / οὓς σὺ προπίνεις <θάσσων> εἴσω / κλίσιας, “Do you see this, glorious Achilles—/the toils of the spear-ravaged Danaans, / whom you are betraying [by sitting idle] within / your hut...?” (fr. 136). The use of the verb προπίνειν is significant: they are accusing Achilles of treason. We know from another fragment that the Achaean army also threatens to stone Achilles if he will not rejoin the battle (fr. 132c.1). This episode is not in the *Iliad*, and it reveals how Aeschylus has altered the story to give it relevance to a democratic context:

When the Greeks threaten Achilles with stoning, they are claiming for themselves a right: the right to punish him. In the *Iliad* the legation can attempt to persuade Achilles, can offer him gifts so that he desists from his anger, can convince him (245) that he himself will be in difficulties if the Greeks are defeated, and can ask him, even if he is angry with Agamemnon, to have pity on the other Greeks (301); but they claim no pretext for taking legal proceedings against him, indeed they do not even appeal to something like comradeship. The stoning is a death penalty in which every member of the community has the right to take part...[It] is above all the punishment for deserters (Snell 4-5).

Unlike the Homeric Achilles, the Achilles of the *Myrmidons* is answerable to the people, and the people attempt to enforce their power upon him. In another fragment, Achilles voices his rage against Agamemnon and the army. He declares that the reason for his inaction is anger because of bad leadership (literally poimenos kakou, “because of a bad shepherd,” fr. 132c.8), and that fear of the Achaean will not induce him to rejoin the battle. He points out that if the soldiers stone him, they will not get what they want, which is for him to save them from the Trojans. He says they will not dare to harm him:

[If] all on my own, as our allies claim, I caused so much [harm] by my absence from battle, then I [alone] am everything to the Achaean army (fr. 132c.9-11).

This is said with characteristic Achillean arrogance, but it is not exaggeration. The soldiers are left in an untenable position, as Achilles is both the cause of their present peril and the only thing that can save them from it. Here Aeschylus’ narrative choice reflects the unease that the individual glory of certain political leaders aroused in the democratic citizen body. Fifth-
century Athens produced a number of brilliant men whom the demos both loved and hated, whose talents proved indispensable to the polis but whose personal power made them objects of suspicion to a tyrant-fearing citizenry. The characterization of Achilles in the Myrmidons seems to emphasize the painful paradox at the heart of Athenian democratic politics: that the exceptional citizens who threatened the egalitarian ethos were nevertheless necessary to the city.

Significantly, it is Achilles’ relationship with Patroclus that leads to a resolution of the stalemate with the army. In the Myrmidons, as in the Iliad, Patroclus causes Achilles to rejoin the war by going to the defense of the Achaean ships and being killed by Hector. However, the sexual element of Achilles’ and Patroclus’ relationship in the play adds a thematic layer to these actions which is not present in the original. Against the backdrop of Achilles’ conflict with the people, Aeschylus explores the role of pederastic love in society, touching on both its positive and negative aspects.

Both Michelakis and Snell speculate that the Myrmidons may to some degree have problematized Achilles’ love for Patroclus. The evidence for this lies in Achilles’ use of the word *sebas* to describe their sexual relationship, which both scholars argue the audience would have found excessive and inappropriate (Snell 14, Michelakis 44). Snell asserts, “It must have shocked even the Athenians when Achilles looks on the friendship as something sacred and speaks of the ‘chaste consecration of the thighs’ and the ‘devout union of the thighs’” (Snell 15). Michelakis suggests that Achilles’ use of *sebas* to describe his devotion to his beloved is symptomatic of his lack of proper respect. Rather than the exhibiting the correct reverential response to Agamemnon and the Achaean army, the sources of power which society expects him to obey, Achilles perversely shows inordinate reverence for Patroclus’ thighs while scorning the authority of the army and its leader. In the Myrmidons, Achilles’ immoderate love for Patroclus becomes something that divides him from the rest of his fellow Greeks. This characterization of pederasty suggests that erotic devotion to individuals may function to undermine social obligations to one’s community. Michelakis writes, “The Myrmidons questions the premise that private and public interests can be mutually supportive” (Michelakis 44).

On the other hand, it is pederastic love which ultimately overcomes the division between Achilles and the army. Achilles rejoins the war, and in doing so rejoins his community, because of his love for Patroclus and his desire to avenge his death. Michelakis suggests that in this situation, pederasty functions as a mediating factor in a social conflict, and homosexual desire is portrayed as a link which binds individuals to a common cause: “homoeroticism serves as a means of achieving social solidarity—even without consensus” (Michelakis 44-45). One may compare this idea to that of the army of erastai and their eromenoi in Plato’s Symposium.

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9 The fifth-century practice of ostracism, in which the Athenian demos voted to exile powerful citizens by writing their names on pieces of pottery, highlights the Athenian fear that any politician who was too prominent and successful might harbor ambitions of becoming a tyrant (cf. Michelakis 25-26). A scholiast on Aristophanes’ Knights 885 writes: “Virtually all the most accomplished men were ostracized: Aristides, Cimon, Themistocles, Thucydides, Alcibiades.”

10 In the Iliad, Achilles is frequently censured for his excessive emotional reactions: by Ajax 9.632-638, by Patroclus 16.21-45, by Apollo 24.46-49. 11 Just as it does in the Iliad, as exemplified by Achilles’ wish at 16.97-100 for the annihilation of the rest of the Achaean army other than himself and Patroclus.
who, Phaedrus suggests, would be able to conquer the world because of their courage inspired by erôs (Plat. Sym 178e-179a).12

This complex representation may reflect the double valence of pederasty in classical Athenian society. In some sources, it is associated with undemocratic sentiment and the values of the aristocracy, as in the speech of Just Argument in Aristophanes’ Clouds (960-1020). On the other hand, pederasty was often characterized as essentially democratic, enshrined in the democracy’s founding myth and exemplified by the self-sacrificing love of Harmodius and Aristogeiton who died to free the demos from tyranny (Pl. Sym 182c, Aeschin. Tim. 132). The portrayal of pederasty in the Myrmidons perhaps toys with the first idea, but seems ultimately to agree more with the second.

The characterization of Achilles and Patroclus as a pederastic couple in the Myrmidons is part of a larger effort on Aeschylus’ part to adapt the story of Achilles to an early fifth-century frame of reference. Not only would a classical audience have seen a pederastic relationship as a natural context in which to express homoerotic affection, but the complex position of pederastic erôs in Athenian society would have made it an ideal subject for dramatic exploitation. It is unknown if Aeschylus was the first author to portray Achilles and Patroclus as lovers, but the fact that a number of later authors cite the Myrmidons when discussing Achilles and Patroclus and/or homosexual desire suggests that this play became to some extent paradigmatic.13 When considering later literary representations of Achilles and Patroclus, it is often relevant to inquire whether or not the work in question is influenced by or reacting against Aeschylus.

Plato

Phaedrus’ speech in Plato’s Symposium offers a different interpretation of Achilles’ and Patroclus’ relationship from the one in the Myrmidons. That they were a pederastic couple is taken for granted, but Phaedrus challenges Aeschylus’ portrayal of Achilles as Patroclus’ erastês, claiming that it contradicts the information presented by Homer; he cites textual evidence in the Iliad which “proves” that Achilles must have instead been Patroclus’ erômenos:14

Aeschylus is talking nonsense when he says that it was Achilles who was in love with Patroclus, because Achilles was more beautiful not only than Patroclus, but than all the heroes, and his beard was not yet grown, moreover he was much younger, as Homer says14 (180a).

Phaedrus is likely referring to Il. 2.673-75, where Achilles is called κάλλιστος ἄνὴρ ὑπὸ Ἰλίου ἥλθε / τῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν, “the most beautiful of the Danaans who came under Ilium,” and to Il. 11.785-89, where Nestor suggests that Patroclus

12 An army composed entirely of pederastic lovers did in fact exist during the classical period: the Sacred Band of Thebes, which was founded circa 378. According to Dover, it was “the hard core of the Boiotian army, a formidable army at all times, throughout the middle period of the fourth century, and at Khaironeia in 338, where Philip II of Macedon crushed Greek opposition, it died to a man” (Dover 1978 192). Whether or not the notion of “social solidarity” can properly be used to describe the effect of such an organization is debatable, as a man who fights out of love for his beloved is motivated by loyalty to an individual, not to a society. The fact remains, however, that pederastic erôs could and did benefit the common interest of the polis by motivating men to fight bravely.

13 Cf. Plato, Symposium, 180a ;Plutarch, Moralia 61a and 751c; Athenaeus 13.602e; Lucian, Erotes, 54

14 Translation by Tom Griffith, 1989
should act as an advisor to Achilles because he is older and wiser.

The *Iliad* does state that Achilles is younger and more beautiful than Patroclus, which to a classical audience would have meant that it would be inappropriate for him to be Patroclus' *erastês*. Phaedrus has picked out specific details from the *Iliad* which bolster his claim, but his characterization of Achilles as Patroclus' physically immature *erômenos* is no more supported by the original text than is Aeschylus' adolescent Patroclus. The passage in Book 11 does not say that Achilles is younger by far (*neôteros polu*), as Phaedrus claims, but only that Patroclus is older (*presbuteros*) by some unspecified amount. Phaedrus ignores Patroclus' subservient role as Achilles' *therapôn* (“servant/charioteer”) and the multiple passages which refer to Achilles as larger and stronger than the other heroes. Furthermore, the portrayal of Achilles as a beardless youth that Phaedrus cites is not Homeric, but rather a convention of vase painting that was especially popular in the second half of the fifth century (Dover 1980 95).

Phaedrus’ insistence that Achilles was Patroclus' *erômenos* has less to do with a desire for accuracy than it does with furthering the central argument of his speech in praise of *erôs*. He argues that *erôs*, more than anything else, produces excellence in human beings. For evidence he offers the fact that “lovers alone” (*monoi hoi erôntes*) are willing to die for their beloveds. In this category, he includes not only men, but women as well, since the first example he cites is Alcestis, who alone was willing to die in place of her husband Admetus because she surpassed his father and mother in her *philia*15 for him *dia ton erôta*, “because of her *erôs*” (179b-c). In the model Phaedrus presents, it is *erôs* which “generates that extreme *philia* which leads to self-sacrifice” (Dover 1980 93). It is clear that in this case Phaedrus envisions Alcestis as an *erastês* and Admetus as the object of her love. For a woman to be characterized in this way in classical Greek literature is highly unusual, and at the very least, aberrant (women, like boys, were meant to be objects, not subjects of *erôs*). According to Phaedrus’ argument, *erôs* is so powerful that it can motivate even women to perform extraordinary acts.

Orpheus is presented as a counterexample—he was not brave enough to die for his beloved and so the gods rejected his supplication.16 Phaedrus then says that it was Achilles who provided the greatest example of self-sacrifice motivated by love by dying for Patroclus. Although Achilles' divine mother Thetis had told him that his own death would follow soon after killing the Trojan prince Hector, he still chose to avenge Patroclus by doing so, and in that sense sacrificed his life for him (179e). Phaedrus believes that it was this act which led the gods to honor Achilles and send him to the *μακάρων νῆσοι*, the “Islands of the Blessed,” because for an *erômenos* to die for his *erastês* is an extraordinary thing.17 For an

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15 Friendship/familial love, used to denote a strong bond of loyalty, unlike erotic passion, which is perceived as more fickle and does not involve an inherent sense of mutual obligation. However, *philia* and *erôs* are not mutually exclusive, and may coexist in the same relationship, as Phaedrus suggests.

16 Dover suggests that the version of the Orpheus myth to which Phaedrus refers may differ from the well known version which appears in Vergil’s *Georgics* and other sources (Dover 1980 93-94).

17 The reference to the *μακάρων νῆσοι* further demonstrates Phaedrus’ willingness to freely adapt Homer to his own needs, as neither the Islands of the Blessed nor the tradition of Achilles being granted a blissful afterlife are Homeric. The Islands of the Blessed first appear as the home of dead heroes in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (171). This idea is similar to the Elysian Plain that Homer describes in his other great epic, the Odyssey (Od. 4.561-569) as the destination of Menelaus after death, but not of Achilles. Rather, Homer depicts Achilles in the Odyssey as a shade in the underworld (Od.
erastês to die for his erômenos is natural, Phaedrus suggests, because an erastês is theioteron, “more divine” than the one he loves. He is enthos, possessed by the god Eros. His love is expected and not at all surprising (180a-b).

It may appear logically inconsistent for Phaedrus to present the self-sacrifice of an erômenos as his greatest proof of the power of erôs, since he has said that only erôntes, those who experience erôs, will sacrifice themselves. The word erômenos is the same as the passive participle of the verb eraô; by definition it signifies the object of erôs, never the subject (Dover 1978 16). The Greeks did not conceive of erôs as a mutual emotion. If a woman or a boy reciprocated a man’s love, this sentiment was given the designation anterôs, “love in return,” which was viewed as a response to or replica of the original erôs of the adult male lover.

It would likely have startled the Greeks to hear Alcestis, a woman, characterized by Phaedrus as being motivated by erôs, but it would have been even more startling for them to hear an erômenos described in this way. Women were expected to experience anterôs, but in classical texts, the use of the term anterôs for the feelings of an erômenos is relatively uncommon, with Plato’s Phaedrus providing a rare example (255d). A more usual way of describing an erômenos is that he is philerastês, “fond of his erastês” (cf. Plat. Sym. 192b). Dover writes, “In a homosexual relationship…the erômenos is not expected to reciprocate the eros of the erastes” (Dover 1978 52). In any case, the verb Phaedrus uses to describe Achilles’ love for Patroclus is not anteraô, but agapaô, a word which has the general meaning “love” or “show affection for,” but which could also be used in Classical Greek to denote a love which had a sexual element to it (LSJ I; cf. Dover 1980 2). This does little to clarify the role of erôs in Achilles’ decision to die for Patroclus.

One must either assume that Plato intended to make Phaedrus invalidate his own argument, or that Phaedrus has purposely assigned Achilles to the set of erôntes, despite his seemingly contradictory role as erômenos, in order to make a point about the greatness of erôs. Support for the latter hypothesis can be found in the text. Plato has written:

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ἀλλὰ γὰρ τῷ ὄντι μάλιστα μὲν ταύτην τὴν ἄρετην οἱ θεοὶ τιμῶσιν τὴν περὶ τὸν ἔρωτα,
μᾶλλον μέντοι θαυμάζουσιν καὶ ἄγανται καὶ ἐὰν ποιοῦσιν ὅταν ὁ ἐρώμενος τὸν ἔραστὴν ἀγαπᾷ,
ἡ ἄρετη τὰ παιδικά.
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The gods especially honor the virtue which arises from erôs, however they are more amazed and pleased and grant rewards when the erômenos loves the erastês than when the erastês loves his paidika. (180a-b)

This sentence seems to imply that an erômenos dying for an erastês is an example of τὴν ἄρετην τὴν περὶ τὸν ἔρωτα, “virtue which arises from erôs,” just as an erastês dying for an erômenos would be. The agapê of Achilles for Patroclus could therefore be said to arise from erôs, just as the philia of Alcestis did. The wording of this passage is perhaps too ambiguous to draw any definite conclusions, but it seems to be attributing erôs to an erômenos.

The key to these lines likely lies in Phaedrus’ use of Alcestis as an exemplar. If he is prepared to argue that erôs is powerful enough to motivate even women to sacrifice themselves for the ones they love, it would logically follow that the still more unlikely example of an erômenos being

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11.488f and 24.1-200). In the lost epic Aethiopis, however, Achilles is granted an afterlife on Leuke, the White Island (Proclus, Chrestomathia, suppleta ex. Apollod. epit. 5.1-6; cf. West 111). This appears to be the story that Phaedrus is referring to. The White Island was associated with the Islands of the Blessed from an early date, and the two names may have been used synonymously (Ivantchik 133).
motivated by erôs to sacrifice himself for his erastês would in fact be the most perfect proof of Phaedrus’ argument. That an erômenos is generally considered to be incapable of feeling erôs merely strengthens his case: erôs has the power to engender self-sacrifice even in those who should by their very natures be immune to it.

By assigning Achilles the role of an erômenos who dies for his erastês, Phaedrus has characterized the love between Achilles and Patroclus as something surprising and out of the ordinary. Unlike the more traditional erastês/erômenos relationship depicted in Aeschylus’ Myrmidons, the relationship described in Plato’s Symposium transgresses societal expectations. Indeed, there is a strong suggestion that Phaedrus dislikes Aeschylus’ interpretation because of its conventionality. He prefers a story about an erômenos sacrificing himself for his erastês because it is something beyond the natural order of things, and is therefore a greater cause for amazement.

Xenophon

Achilles and Patroclus are also used as an exemplary paradigm in a different context in Xenophon’s Symposium, which many scholars believe was written, either in whole or in part, as a response to Plato’s Symposium (Thesleff 157-170). Chapter VIII of Xenophon’s Symposium is largely comprised of a long speech by Socrates on the superiority of non-sexual friendship to pederastic relationships based on sexual desire. The benefits of spiritual love and the inferior nature of physical love are themes frequently expounded by Plato’s Socrates (e.g. Sym 199c-212b; Phaedrus 244a-257b), but Xenophon’s Socrates is more didactic and censorious in his disapproval of pederastic sexual relationships, especially in comparison to the Socrates in Plato’s Symposium. Rather than suggesting that his listeners should sublimate their sexual desire to the higher erôs of philosophy, Xenophon’s Socrates unequivocally condemns sex with an erômenos as degrading for the man and unpleasant for the boy:

ουδὲ γὰρ ὁ παῖς τῷ ἀνδρὶ ὀσπερ γυνὴ κοινονεῖ τῶν ἐν τοῖς ἀφροδισίοις εὑροσινῶν, ἄλλα νήφουν μεθύοντα ὡς τῆς ἀφροδίτης θεάττα. εἴς ὃν οὐδὲν θαμμαστῶν εἰ καὶ τὸ ὑπερορᾶν ἐγγίγνεται αὐτῷ τοῦ ἑραστοῦ.

A boy doesn’t share the pleasures of sex with a man as a woman does: he’s sober, facing a sexual drunk. It’s no wonder if as a result he even develops disdain for his erastês (8.21-22).18

Socrates’ speech in chapter VIII of Xenophon’s Symposium attacks several ideas presented in Phaedrus’ speech in Plato’s Symposium, specifically the assertion that Achilles died for Patroclus because they were lovers,19 as well as the idea that erôs is effective as a motivation for martial courage. First Xenophon’s Socrates makes it clear that there was no sexual element to Achilles’ and Patroclus’ friendship:

Now, Niceratos: Homer has made Achilles take that spectacular revenge for Patroclus

18 Translation by A.J. Bowen, 1998
19 It is worth noting that although Plato’s Socrates comments on Phaedrus’ interpretation of Achilles and Patroclus, he does not explicitly contradict Phaedrus’ assertion that they were lovers. All he says is that Achilles died to avenge Patroclus out of a desire for undying fame rather than out of devotion to Patroclus as an individual (208d).
because it was his companion? (hetairos) that died, not his paidika; and Orestes and Pylades, and Theseus and Pirithous, and many others of the best of the demigods, are celebrated in song for having achieved their great and glorious deeds together not because they slept together but because of their mutual esteem. (8.31)

These lines are likely meant to remind Socrates’ audience of the lack of pederastic terminology in the Iliad. Fourth century readers were certainly capable of discerning this lack and commenting upon it, as Aeschines proves in Against Timarchus (see below).

Xenophon’s Socrates also disparages the idea that an army composed of erastai and their paidika would be an effective fighting force. This seems to be meant as a rebuttal to the famous passage from Plato’s Symposium in which Phaedrus says that an army of lovers could conquer the world (178e-179a). Xenophon’s Socrates thinks that this would in fact be the worst kind of army, due to the poor moral character of men who have sex with boys:

τούτους γὰρ ἂν ἐφη οἴεσθαι μάλιστα αἰδεῖσθαι ἀλλήλους ἀπολείπειν, θαυμαστὰ λέγων, εἴ γε οἱ ψόγου τε ἄφροντες καὶ ἀναισχυντεὶς πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἑθιζόμενοι, οὗτοι μάλιστα αἰσχύνονται αἰσχρόν τι ποιεῖν.

He said he thought these people would be the most ashamed of deserting each other, a remarkable thing to say if the people who would be most ashamed of doing something ugly were those in the habit of disregarding censure and trampling on the other’s feelings (8.33).20

Xenophon’s Socrates uses Achilles and Patroclus as an example of an ideal relationship between men, one based solely on philia rather than erôs. Their prowess comes not from a sexual bond (οὐ διὰ τὸ συγκαθεύδειν), but from mutual respect and admiration (τὸ ἄγαθοι ἀλλήλους). He has chosen to characterize them this way in order to provide proof for the overall argument of his speech: that pederastic sex is without benefits, especially in a martial context.21

20 If this passage is indeed meant as a reference to Plato, Xenophon has misattributed the quote, assigning it to Pausanias, another speaker in Plato’s Symposium, rather than to Phaedrus: Παυσανίας γε ὁ Ἀγάθωνος τοῦ ποιητοῦ ἐραστῆς ἀπολογούμενος

ύπερ τῶν ἀκρασίας συγκυλινδουμένων ἀρχής ως καὶ στράτευμα ἀλκιμώτατον ἂν γένοιτο ἐκ παιδικῶν τε καὶ ἐραστῶν. “Pausanias, erastês of the poet Agathon, speaking in defense of those who wallow in intemperance, observed that out of erastai and their paidika, a most valiant army could be made” (8.32). It is probable that Xenophon simply made a mistake, as Pausanias’ speech comes directly after Phaedrus’. The less likely alternative is that Xenophon is referencing not Plato’s Symposium, but a speech by the historical Pausanias (Hubbard 219n85).

21 Clifford Hindley has argued convincingly that Xenophon himself did not share the extreme views on pederasty that he attributes to Socrates. There are a number of instances in Xenophon’s writings where pederasty in a martial context is positively portrayed, such as the story of Episthenes, a pайдерастês who was willing to die to save the life of a beautiful boy (Anab. 7.4.7); the devotion of the Greek soldier Plisthenes to the captive son of an Armenian village headman (Anab. 4.6.1-3); the love affair between Archidamus, son of King Agesilaus of Sparta, and Cleonymus, son of Sphodrias (Hell. 5.4.25-33; 6.4.13f.); and the account of the Spartan general Anaxibius, whose erômenos refused to abandon him as he fought to the death (Hell. 4.8.38-9). These examples show that Xenophon does believe that erôs can sometimes inspire loyalty, devotion, and heroism in soldiers (Hindley 80). Furthermore, in the Memorabilia when Socrates warns Critobulus of the dangers of kissing Alcibiades’ son, Xenophon remarks that this is the sort of risk he himself would be willing to take (Mem. 1.3.10). From this we may assume that Xenophon is neither immune to the charms of beautiful boys nor unaccustomed to acting upon his desires. According to Hindley, Xenophon does not appear to have been opposed to pederastic
Aeschines

The latest extant classical text which attempts to define the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is Against Timarchus, a speech delivered by Aeschines in 346 or 345 BCE. At that time, Demosthenes and Timarchus, a minor politician, were bringing a suit of misconduct against Aeschines for his role in the Athenian embassy to Macedon in 346. Aeschines retaliated by launching a prosecution against Timarchus, the less formidable of his two opponents, on the grounds that he had prostituted himself in his youth and was therefore forbidden by Athenian law to address the assembly. The accusation was successful and Timarchus was convicted, more because of Aeschines' rhetorical skill than because of any solid evidence (Carey 18). This prosecution speech is significant because it is a goldmine of information about classical Athenian laws and attitudes regarding male homosexuality. Unlike Plato's works, which were written for an elite and highly-educated minority, Against Timarchus was composed with the average Athenian juror in mind, and therefore likely reflects viewpoints which would have been acceptable to the majority of Athenian citizens (cf. Dover 1978 19-109).

Achilles and Patroclus are mentioned in the section of the speech where Aeschines anticipates and refutes the arguments of the defense. He conjures up a hypothetical opponent:

τῶν στρατηγῶν τις, ὡς ἀκούω, ὑπτιάζω καὶ κατασκοποῦμεν ἑαυτόν, ὡς ἐν παλαίστραις καὶ διατριβαῖς γεγονώς (132).22

One of the generals will take the stand for the defense, I'm told, carrying himself arrogantly and preening himself, with the air of a man who has frequented the sexual relationships that were conducted with self-control and moderation (Hindley 97).

22 Translation adapted from Chris Carey, 2000

Aeschines predicts that this general will denounce him for attacking the institution of pederasty and instigating δειν ἆπαιδευσίας ἀρχήν, “the beginning of a terrible lack of cultivation,” because pederastic erōs has been proven to confer great benefits. Among his imagined examples are Harmodius and Aristogeiton, whose love freed Athens from tyranny, and the φιλία δ’ ἔρωτα, “friendship arising from erōs,” of Achilles and Patroclus (133). The hypothetical general will then accuse Aeschines of hypocrisy for condemning pederasty when he himself has been πλείστων ἔραστης, “the erastês of many,” and furthermore he will produce and read aloud a number of love poems which Aeschines has written to beautiful boys (135).

In response to these anticipated claims, Aeschines says that he does not criticize dikaios erōs, homosexual desire which is appropriate and legitimate, nor does he deny that he has experienced such desire (136). He draws a sharp contrast, however, between dikaios erōs and Timarchus' alleged behavior:

According to my definition, desire for those who are noble and decent is an emotion of the generous and discerning spirit, but debauchery based on hiring someone for money I consider characteristic of a wanton and uncultivated man. And to be loved without corruption I count as noble, while to have been induced

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Aeschines associates himself and all other good Athenians with the \textit{erôs} that is \textit{dikaios}, “just,” and \textit{kalos}, “beautiful/good,” the kind of \textit{erôs} which is praised by the general, and sets Timarchus up as the enemy of that \textit{erôs}, turning the general’s argument on its head.

At the same time, he sides with the common citizen in opposition to the elitism which he attributes to the defense. The general is linked to aristocratic snobbery by his association with παλαίστραις καὶ διατριβαῖς, “wrestling schools and philosophers’ haunts,” and Aeschines portrays him and Timarchus’ other supporters as talking down to the jury in a condescending manner. Using a disingenuous first person plural to associate himself with his audience, he asserts that the defense are not the only ones who know how to interpret Homer:


eπειδὴ δὲ Ἀχιλλέως καὶ Πατρόκλου μέμνησθε καὶ Ὀμήρου καὶ ἑτέρων ποιητῶν, ὡς τὸν μὲν δικαστῶν ἄνηκόν παιδείας ὄντων, ὑμεῖς δὲ εὐσχήμονες τίνες καὶ περιφρονοῦντες ἱστορία τὸν δήμον, ἵν᾽ εἰδήτε ὅτι καὶ ἡμεῖς τῷ δῆμῳ ἀνηκόων παιδείας ὄντες ὑμεῖς δὲ εὐσχήμονες τίνες καὶ περιφρονοῦντες ἱστορία τὸν δήμον, ἵν᾽ εἰδήτε ὅτι καὶ ἡμεῖς ἦματι κείνῳ \(\text{μὲν \textit{ἔρωτα καὶ τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν αὐτῶν τῆς φιλίας \textit{ἀποκρύπτεται, ἤγομον μὲν τῆς μὲν εὐνοίας ὑπερβολὰς καταφανεῖς εἶναι τοῖς πεπαιδευμένοις τῶν ἄκροστῶν.}}\)

He hides their love and the name of their friendship, thinking that the remarkable strength of their affection is obvious to the educated among his audience (142).

He then goes on to cite several passages from the \textit{Iliad} which he feels are indicative of Achilles’ \textit{erôs} for Patroclus, including the lines in Book 18 where Achilles declares that he will take vengeance on Hector despite the fact that his own death will soon follow (18.333-335), and the scene in Book 23 where the ghost of Patroclus appears to Achilles in a dream and tells him to bury their bones in the same vessel, just as they were raised together as boys (23.77-91). However, it is lines 18.324-329 which prove for Aeschines that Achilles and Patroclus were lovers. In the \textit{Iliad} the lines read thus:

\[\text{o pótoi ἢ ὅ' ἄλλον ἔπος ἐκβαλον ἡματι κεῖνῳ \(\text{θαρσύων ἤρωα Μενοίτου ἐν μεγάρισι φήλὴν δὲ οἱ εἰς Ὀπόεντα περικλυτὸν \(\text{υἱὸν ἄπαξειν} \)) \(\text{Ἰλιον ἐκπέρσαντα, λαχόντα τε ληθὺς αἴσαν.} \)) \(\text{ἄλλ}' οὐ Ζεὺς ἀνόρεσει νοήματα πάντα τελευτᾶ· ἀμφοτεροί ροποται ὑμοῖν γαῖαν ἐρέσαι} \]

Vain indeed was the word I uttered on that day when I sought to encourage the warrior Menoetius in our halls, and said that when I had sacked Ilion I would bring back (\(\text{ἀπάξειν} \)) to him to Opus his glorious

This allows Aeschines to engage in a neat bit of textual criticism without being accused of elitism himself. There follows a long passage in which he sets out to prove that Achilles and Patroclus were lovers in the \textit{Iliad}, and that they for this reason can be seen as an example of \textit{dikaios erôs}. He acknowledges that Homer does not explicitly mention a sexual relationship between the two heroes, but argues that it can easily be inferred by intelligent readers:

\[\text{τῶν μὲν ἔρωτα καὶ τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν αὐτῶν τῆς φιλίας ἰστορία καταφανεῖς εἶναι τοῖς πεπαιδευμένοις τῶν ἄκροστῶν.} \]

But since you mention Achilles and Patroclus and Homer and other poets, as though the jurors are men without education, and represent yourselves as impressive figures whose erudition allows you to look down on the people, to show you that we have already acquired a little knowledge and learning, we too shall say something on the subject (141).

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Vain indeed was the word I uttered on that day when I sought to encourage the warrior Menoetius in our halls, and said that when I had sacked Ilion I would bring back (\(\text{ἀπάξειν} \)) to him to Opus his glorious
son with the share of the spoils that would fall to his lot. But Zeus fulfills not for men all their purposes; for it is fated for both of us to redden the same earth.

This passage is paraphrased by Aeschines in the following way:

λέγει γάρ που Ἀχιλλεὺς ὁ Ὀδυσσεύς ὁ δόξωμενος τῶν τοῦ Πατρόκλου θάνατον, ὡς ἐν τι τούτῳ τῶν λυπητῶν ἀναμιμνησκόμενος, ὅτι τὴν ὑπόσχεσιν τὴν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα τὸν Πατρόκλου Μενοίτιον ἀκον ξειτοίο πέραγεος ἐπιγείεσθαι γὰρ εἰς Ὑποῖντα σὸν ἀπάξειν, εἰ συμπέμψειν αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν Τροῖαν καὶ παρακαταθεῖτο αὐτῷ. ὃ καταφανῆς ἔστιν, ὡς δ᾽ ἑρωτα τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν αὐτοῦ παρέλαβεν.

At one point, when Achilles is lamenting Patroclus' death, he mentions, as one of his most painful memories, that he has betrayed his promise to Patroclus' father Menoetius, that he had declared he would bring (ἀπάξειν) the son safe back to Opus, if the father would send him to Troy and entrust (παρακαταθεῖτο) him to Achilles' care. And this makes it quite clear that it was for love that he had taken responsibility for his care (143).

Dover remarks that this last inference is not at all obvious (Dover 1978 53), but Andrew Ford points out that Aeschines' reading of this passage depends on an additional meaning of the verb ἀπάξειν which was present in Classical Greek but not in Homeric Greek. In Homer it means simply “to bring back home” (LSJ s.v. II), but by Aeschines' time it has also come to mean “return, render what one owes” (LSJ s.v. III). Aeschines invokes this second meaning by adding the verb παρακαταθεῖτο to his paraphrase of Menoetius “entrusting” Patroclus to Achilles. Both of these verbs can be used as technical commercial terms, παρακαταπίθημαι for laying down a deposit and ἀπάγω for returning a deposit. The suggestion is not that money changed hands, but that Achilles has undertaken the ἐπιμέλειαν, or “supervision”, of Patroclus in an agreement with Menoetius that has the weight of a formal contract. Ford sums up the subtext of Aeschines' argument as follows: “Of course, no sane father would contract with another man to supervise his son unless it were a noble contract, and so this erôs must have been of the noble sort that Aeschines practices and Homer, subtly, commends” (Ford 253). Here Aeschines makes it clear that he conceives of Achilles as the erastês and Patroclus the erômenos, as Aeschylus does in the Myrmidons.

Aeschines' use of Achilles and Patroclus in Against Timarchus is complex and subtle. His strategy is to appropriate for his own case the argument of the defense that homosexual erôs is noble and beneficial. His repeated use of words derived from paideia, or “education”, is significant. The general attributes ἀπαιδευσία, literally “a lack of paideia”, to Aeschines, and treats the jurors as if they are ἀνηκόων παιδείας ὄντων, “men ignorant of paideia”. This allows Aeschines to seem to side with the jurors against these patronizing aristocratic sentiments and to prove that the common man is also educated enough to read what Homer has written about Achilles and Patroclus. When he says that the erôs of Achilles and Patroclus is obvious το ἔς πεπαιδευμένοις, “to the educated,” he means to himself and to his audience, thereby avoiding the hostile reaction that such a statement might otherwise invoke from Athenian citizens of the lower class. Furthermore, the dangerous ἀπαιδευσία, “lack of cultivation,” that threatens the noble tradition of pederastic erôs is properly to be associated not with Aeschines, but with men who exchange money for sex (137)—in other words, with Timarchus and other people like him.

The idea that pederasty (if correctly conducted) was beneficial, both to the individuals who participated in it and to the Athenian polis as a
whole, appears in the speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias in Plato's *Symposium*, and the fact that it was invoked by both sides of a court case shows that it was accepted by a significant number of Athenian citizens. The associations of pederasty with the founding of Athenian democracy and the glory of Homeric heroes carried enough weight to make it detrimental to an orator's case if he were perceived as attacking the institution. Aeschines constructs an argument that manages to appeal to both elite *symposia*-goers and the lower classes: everyone can agree on the benefits of *dikaios erôs*, “just love,” which is represented by Achilles and Patroclus, and they can similarly agree that the reprehensible behavior of Timarchus belongs in a different category.

**Conclusion**

The popularity of pederastic relationships in classical Athens and other parts of Greece contributed to the inclination of some post-Homeric authors to portray Achilles and Patroclus as lovers. Achilles and Patroclus are cited repeatedly as the ultimate example of male devotion because their relationship is one of the most prominent bonds between male characters in Greek literature, regardless of whether one interprets their attachment as sexual or non-sexual. For authors wishing to include a heroic precedent in their treatment of classical pederasty, Achilles and Patroclus were an obvious choice. Authors desiring to assert the primacy of chaste friendship would similarly want to lay claim to these two significant Homeric characters, as Xenophon demonstrates by attributing this intention to Socrates. Examination of the texts in question has shown that each author makes his decision with a literary agenda in mind, altering Homer to fit his own needs. These writers are certainly influenced in their perceptions of the *Iliad* by the sexual practices of their own times, but the deliberate and careful way in which many of them use Homeric evidence suggests that they were aware of the discrepancies between their source material and the interpretations they produced.

There is room for further research into how post-Homeric treatments of Achilles’ and Patroclus’ sexuality compare to receptions of other epic heroes. A close examination of other pairs of warriors who were perceived as pederastic lovers would contextualize the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus, and could shed further light on the interactions between classical sexualities and patterns of archaic “heroic friendship.” It would also be interesting to examine receptions of Achilles and Patroclus in Latin as well as Greek texts, as this would integrate the study of Roman conceptions of Achilles with Roman attitudes towards pederasty, while highlighting the tensions between differing Greek and Roman ideals of masculinity. Achilles’ place in the ancient sexual imagination is a complex and fascinating topic that is bound to generate further discussion.

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