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Contact
Principal Contact
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de
Support Contact
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

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MICHAEL JULIAN FISCHER
(Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

Madeline Miller and the Midcult

The Song of Achilles and *Circe* as Exemplary Cases of 21st Century Mythological Retellings

Abstract Madeline Miller's novels *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018) comprise fictional autobiographies of the figures of Patroclus and Circe, respectively, known from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Revolving around Homeric side characters and the themes of homosexuality as well as female agency in the traditionally heteronormative and patriarchal ancient world, they pose perfect examples of 21st century mythological retellings with their typical focus on characters and topics considered underrepresented. With recourse to the concept of 'midcult', i.e. literature that suggests high-cultural and social relevance while not living up to this claim, Miller's novels will serve as exemplary cases demonstrating the chances and limitations of modern mythological retellings. Miller's broad media presence will additionally allow for insights on her poetic self-conception and the role of public epitext in the process. Due to misrepresentations of the ancient tradition, untenable accusations against classical scholarship, and a rather narrow conception of homosexuality, *The Song of Achilles* will be revealed as midcult, whereas the variety of female topics and strong female characters, the skilful reworking of Odysseus and Circe's encounter, and the intertextual play with Odyssean narrative techniques render *Circe* a successful balancing act of a modern approach to the ancient tradition.

Keywords Madeline Miller, mythological retellings, midcult, reception of Homer

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THE 21ST CENTURY: A NEW WAVE OF MYTHOLOGICAL RETELLINGS

Despite the relatively continuous line of productive reception that can be drawn from Homer as the archetype of ancient and western literature in general up to the present day, it may still be striking that classical mythology appears to have only recently experienced a certain renaissance in popular fiction: the 21st century has been spawning a wide variety of mythological retellings that generally enjoy a huge popularity, and several announcements up until January 2025 show no sign of an end to this trend.[1]

Between 2005 and 2013, for instance, Scottish publisher Canongate Books subsequently released a total of eight instalments as parts of their Canongate Myth Series, an arrangement of internationally renowned authors' takes on ancient mythology.[2] Apart from a single nonfiction book, the compilation consists of retellings only, i.e. reworkings of ancient myths for contemporary readers. While a single instance of them, respectively, covers Norse as well as Irish myths, and two of the works retell biblical tales, it is a total of three of these novels – Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* (2005), Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) – that are thematically located within the field of Greek or Roman mythology. Although the books of this series were by far not to remain the only instances of this type of literature, the compilation still exemplifies some of its most characteristic traits: first of all, the increased interest in ancient narrative traditions does not seem to be limited to those of ancient Greece or Rome; it is, however, this latter cultural sphere from which the majority of modern retellings originates. Secondly, Winterson, Atwood and Smith are all female writers commonly known for their explorations of gender roles, queerness, or feminism. Generally, recent mythological retellings are predominantly authored by women and revolve around individuals, groups of people, or themes perceived as traditionally underrepresented or marginalised.[3] Altogether,

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1 See Bea Fitzgerald's *The End Crowns All,* Claire North's *The Last Song of Penelope,* Susan C. Wilson's *Helen's Judgement,* or Pat Barker's *The Voyage Home.*

2 Cf. Canongate.

3 In Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005), the years of Odysseus' absence and his eventual return to Ithaca are recapitulated through the eyes of his wife Penelope. Pat Barker's Trojan War trilogy starting with *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) follows Briseis and other female pro-

it seems that the 21st century trend of mythological retellings operates under the flag of a corrective claim.

Madeline Miller: An Exemplary Case

Two of the most prominent examples of such retellings are Madeline Miller's novels *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018) which both revolve around figures known from either Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey,* respectively: *The Song of Achilles* tells the story of prince Patroclus, who, exiled from his home country as a child, is taken in among other foster boys by king Peleus of Phthia. This is how he meets Achilles, the king's son and future hero, with whom he forms a strong bond of friendship that would eventually develop into a homosexual love and make them an inseparable couple. After spending time with the centaur Chiron as their common tutor, and on the island of Scyros as a hiding place from the Trojan War, Achilles decides to join the Greek army before Troy, where Patroclus follows him. The novel thus provides an account of the hero's life and the typically epic subject of the Trojan War through the perspective of his lover. *Circe,* then, centres around the eponymous goddess, who grows up in the halls of her father Helios, but never quite belongs to the other gods due to the rather human characteristics she possesses. As punishment for an act of witchcraft, she too is exiled to an otherwise deserted island of the name Aiaia, where she continues to develop her magic skills. The human and divine encounters she experiences throughout her life on Aiaia as well as during a visit to her sister's palace on Crete gradually shape her personality and make her the enchantress known for meeting Odysseus and transforming his companions to pigs in the *Odyssey.*

Either novel has proven remarkably successful in that it sold more than two million copies and appeared on the *The New York Times* Best Sellers List, where *Circe* took no less than first place directly after release. Both works have been translated into 35 and 33 languages,[4] respectively, and have by and large

tagonists through the turmoil of the war, as does Natalie Haynes' episodic novel *A Thousand Ships* (2019). Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta* (2021) centres around the lives of Helen and her half-sister Clytemnestra, to name only some of the most typical examples specifically recasting Trojan War mythology.

4 Cf. Goodreads, "The Song of Achilles > Editions"; "Circe > Editions".

been overwhelmingly favourably reviewed. Especially *The Song of Achilles* has been awarded several nominations and earned Miller the notable Women's Prize for Fiction in 2012. On *Goodreads,* the social cataloguing platform for books, they achieved ratings of 4.33 (*The Song of Achilles*) and 4.24 (*Circe*) out of 5 stars, respectively, with more than a million individual assessments each.[5] Her announcement of a third novel[6] suggests that more can be expected from Miller in the future, and a planned adaptation of *Circe* in the form of an HBO TV series indicates that the novel's potential has been recognised by cinematic content creators as well.[7]

Miller traces her fascination for Greco-Roman and particularly Homeric mythology back to her early childhood, from which she likes to tell the anecdote of her mother reading the *Iliad* to her as a bedtime story.[8] This enthusiasm seems to have persisted: she recalls learning Latin in high school as well as ancient Greek with the motivation to read Homer in the original and later continues her education at Brown University, from where she graduates with a BA and MA in classics. After years as a high school teacher, the financial success of her novels ultimately allows her to become a full-time writer.[9]

As the initial inspiration behind her creative engagement with the Homeric source texts, Miller mentions a number of irritating factors both direct and indirect:[10] during research for her originally planned master's thesis on "interpre-

5 Cf. Goodreads, "The Song of Achilles"; "Circe".

6 Cf. E14. The following discussion will be supported by instances of epitext, i.e. authorised texts in the broadest possible sense (interviews, essays, posts on social media etc.) which allow Miller to wield an influence on the public reception of her novels. Like in this case, the respective texts were cited using abbreviations.

7 Cf. Andreeva (2019).

8 Cf. E4 00:38.

9 Cf. Miller, "The Author"; Harris (2022).

10 As much as Miller remembers being "frustrated" (E2 13:00) and "angry" (E12 56:06) in the wake of her academic exploration of how the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus had been interpreted in post-Homeric depictions or scholarly literature, her first encounter with Circe, as she appears in the *Odyssey,* is described by her as "disappointing" (E1), "shocking" (E6 08:47), and – again – "frustrating" (E5 07:38); she recalls being "infuriated" (E1) as well as "mad" (E19 12:01) and "outraged" (E21 12:28), and in fact, she declares having been "fueled by rage" (E21 49:02) as the impelling force behind both of her novels.

tations of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers through the centuries"[11], it occurred to her that "a number of articles [...] kept sidestepping the love between him [Patroclus] and Achilles, which to me felt so obviously at the story's heart"[12]. The theme of homosexual love, which to her represented the centrepiece of the *Iliad,* was perceived by Miller as "forcibly closeted"[13], for which she saw "no good reason [...] except homophobia"[14]. She regularly refers to Aischylus and Plato as authorities testifying that an understanding of Patroclus and Achilles as lovers was common in antiquity,[15] and as a result, she claims to have been "propelled by a desire to set the record straight"[16] and "make the case for that [...] as a very powerful interpretation"[17]. "[T]he purpose of the story", in her own words, "was to take this larger than [...] life epic and tell it from a really intimate [...] perspective with a love story at the centre"[18].

The situation is similar with *Circe,* as another anecdote from Miller's school days illustrates: while reading the *Odyssey* in class, she reports to have been excited about Odysseus' encounter with the Homeric Circe, as she had heard about the latter's powerful witchcraft and outstanding intellect. Expecting a "battle of wits"[19] between two cunning characters, she remembers severe disappointment over the resolution of their conflict, as Odysseus "pulls out his sword and threatens her with it and she screams, falls to her knees, begs for mercy, and invites him into her bed [...] all in one breath"[20]. She additionally deemed it unsatisfactory that Homer never answers the question of why the enchantress

11 E7 05:34.

12 E11.

13 E6 33:39. Alternative phrasings used by Miller to denote an active suppression of this interpretation are "covered over, put in the closet" (E12 56:18), "silenced and ignored and not talked about and cut out of commentaries and not taught" (E5 25:25), as well as "pushed aside and ignored and silenced and written out" (E21 01:02:37).

14 E8 16:56.

15 Cf. E2 53:09.

16 E11.

17 E8 17:01.

18 E5 25:11.

19 E10 10:32.

20 E10 11:02.

transforms men into pigs in the first place,[21] and that Odysseus as "the most curious man in literature"[22] is never inclined to ask this very question.

Further studies in later years, according to her, eventually drew her attention to the fact that the figure of Circe has, in post-Homeric reception, largely been reduced to the role of one among various antagonists to be overcome by Odysseus to successfully complete his journey home. Miller has been perceiving this as a considerable contrast to her portrayal in the *Odyssey*, where she and Odysseus surmount their initial conflict and develop sympathies for each other, causing him to spend no less than a year on her island, after which his crew actively has to persuade him to embark for Ithaca. She emphasises that it is Circe who, before their departure, gives them quite helpful advice for their further travels and therefore proves to be one of the most supportive characters throughout the entire *Odyssey*.[23] The later vilification of Circe to her had been representing a prototypical instance of what women undergo in patriarchal societies if perceived as too powerful.[24] It is, therefore, not surprising that Miller claims – with *Circe* just like with her former novel – to have been driven by the intention to speak up for something that she had been perceiving as marginalised in classical epic literature: "[a]ll these stories are composed by men, largely starring men, and I really wanted a female perspective"[25]. As a result of the desire to produce an instance of such epic literature revolving around a strong female protagonist and thus "give […] a woman's life the same treatment that Achilles and Odysseus and Ajax have had for centuries"[26], it seems only suitable that she terms her second novel a "feminist project"[27].

21 Cf. E6 08:43.

22 E24 17:24.

23 Cf. E10 13:26.

24 Cf. E27.

25 E1.

26 E20 04:50.

27 E19 21:37.

Popular Realism and the Suspicion of the Midcult

As honourable as the cultural turn towards political correctness and increased awareness of diversity in its central demand certainly is, it also entails a number of problems: German philologist Moritz Baßler, who has been researching contemporary popular fiction, states that ideologies have, to a worrying degree, become part of literary criticism. He argues that the facilitating role of social media in connecting like-minded people has led to groups of mutually self-affirming readers no longer relying on any type of professional assessment.[28] A first consequence of this deprofessionalisation, according to him, is that an "individual work's specific literary constitution"[29], i.e. its genuinely aesthetic layer, plays less of a role for opinion making than a perceived authenticity. This extends so far that novels of certain writers are rejected outright, or their identity is adduced as a "quality criterion and answer to the question 'Who should be allowed and able to write and judge this?'"[30]. Works by authors of certain backgrounds are considered welcome, legitimate and authentic, while others are accused of reproducing exclusive privileges or of appropriation.[31] Baßler admonishes that the awarding of prizes is increasingly based on such standards,[32] and that even in academia, where aesthetics are a genuine part of the profession, more and more ideology-based assessments can be observed.[33]

It is this loss of awareness of formal and aesthetic categories that Baßler holds responsible for the development of 'popular realism' (*Populärer Realismus*) written in an "International Style"[34], i.e. a literature which is 'popular' in that it is intended to appeal to broad readerships, and 'realistic' in the sense that "anything relevant takes place on the diegetic level"[35]. That the character level, con-

28 Cf. Baßler (2021) 132–34.

29 Baßler (2021) 135: *"spezifisch literarische[] Verfasstheit des Einzelwerks".*

30 Baßler (2021) 146: *"Qualitätsargument und Antwort auf die Frage 'Wer darf und kann das schreiben und beurteilen?'"*

31 Cf. Baßler (2021) 145–46; Wesselmann (2021) 7–10.

32 Cf. Baßler (2021) 145–46.

33 Cf. Baßler (2022) 186; (2021) 137–39.

34 Baßler (2022) 49.

35 Baßler (2022) 45–46: *"Alles Relevante findet sich [...] auf der diegetischen Ebene [...]."*

versely, is hardly essential for an understanding of these types of narrative is the result of a simple prose intended to be easily readable for ensuring a certain reading flow. The independence of its diegesis from the language conveying it thus renders this type of literature not only incredibly easy to consume, but also to translate, and even to adapt to other media – factors greatly favouring financial success, also internationally.[36] The interplay of this linguistically realised low threshold and the unambiguously likeable identification figures typically featured in popular realist storytelling usually constitutes a "twofold principle of immersion"[37].

The fantasy genre, which largely depends on its invented worlds of little allegorical potential, and mostly unfolds on the diegetic level only, is considered by Baßler to be "quintessential International Style"[38]. If popular realist storytelling is applied to the non-fictional world, however, an ideological narrowing of reality takes place without our becoming aware of the narrated world's constructed nature[39]. Especially in contrast to literary modernism and its eagerness to experiment with languages and modes of narration, Baßler notes that popular realism "appears to fall short of the formal possibilities that have been available to literary fiction since the 20th century"[40]. Still, he does not overlook the fact that this is the result of a somewhat democratic process: the extensive production of popular realist works in a comprehensible language is, after all, the result of a respectively high demand. If large reader groups additionally wish to be confirmed in their ideological views, it does hardly surprise that these ideologies are reflected in popular literature too, especially since different topics or beliefs may become exclusion criteria.[41] Speaking in market logics, expectations on the reception side are to be fulfilled on the side of production.

This all leads to Baßler's assertion of a new 'midcult': this concept, as coined in the 1960s by Umberto Eco and Dwight MacDonald, originally denoted popular

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36 Cf. Baßler (2022) 46–49.

37 Baßler (2021) 141: *"doppeltes Immersionsverfahren".*

38 Baßler (2022) 110: *"International Style in Vollendung"*; cf. 105–10.

39 Cf. Baßler (2021) 141.

40 Baßler (2022) 9–10: *"Allzu deutlich scheint er [der Populäre Realismus] […] hinter den formalen Möglichkeiten zurückzubleiben, die literarischer Fiktion seit dem 20. Jahrhundert zur Verfügung stehen."*

41 Baßler (2022) 47–51, 194–95.

fiction written with the intention of being effortlessly consumable and at the same time giving recipients the impression of experiencing high culture.[42] The observation was that an otherwise hardly challenging text was decorated with "literary and cultural markers of significance"[43] suggesting meaningfulness. This way, the original midcult "satisfies its consumer by convincing him that he has just experienced culture"[44], while not doing justice to the high-cultural artifacts it references. The new midcult, on the other hand, is characterised by Baßler to be permeated by "ethically and socially relevant topics"[45] like "loss, trauma, abuse, misogyny, racism, capitalism, flight"[46]. In addition, these topics be preferably approached by authors in the position to authenticate them from their own experience, and in a way that corresponds to already given convictions:[47] whereas the "offence"[48] of the midcult originally consisted in a form inappropriate to its contents, it nowadays appears to arise from the expectation that literature "addresses and confirms what one believes to be right, true, and important anyway"[49]. In either case, they signal a discussion which eventually does not take place, and thus comprise a "structural lie"[50].

Bearing in mind the essential characteristics of 21st century mythological retellings as described above, it is not difficult to see that this form of literature harbours much potential for midcult in the original as well as the new sense: as manifestations of the "often-invoked ancient roots of our culture"[51], the settings or narratives in question suggest an engagement with high-cultural matters, while the above-mentioned corrective claim promises relevant statements on

42 Cf. Baßler & Drügh (2021) 166–67; Baßler (2022) 69–72.

43 Baßler (2022) 70: *"literarisch-kulturelle Bedeutsamkeitsmarker".*

44 Eco (1989) 192; cf. Baßler (2022) 70, 185.

45 Baßler (2021) 146: *"ethisch-sozial bedeutsame[] Themen".*

46 Baßler (2021) 145: *"loss, trauma, abuse, Misogynie, Rassismus, Kapitalismus, Flucht".*

47 Cf. Baßler (2022) 185–90, 194–95.

48 Baßler (2022) 71, 211: *"Tatbestand".*

49 Baßler (2022) 189–90: *"[D]ie strukturelle Lüge, die eine Bezeichnung als 'Neuer Midcult' rechtfertigt, bestünde dann darin, etwas für bedeutende Literatur zu halten, weil es wundersamerweise das thematisiert und bestätigt, was man ohnehin für richtig, wahr und wichtig hält".*

50 Baßler (2022) 71, 185, 189: *"strukturelle Lüge".*

51 Wesselmann (2021) 10: *"oft beschworenen antiken Wurzeln unserer Kultur".*

current societal issues. The facts that most of the typically female protagonists of 21st century mythological retellings are written by women, and that the only instance of a queer topic within the Canongate Myth Series comes from an author identifying accordingly indicates a close affinity between authorial identity and legitimacy of the narrative. As if to further emphasise this assumed correlation, the information on an author's classicist background is mentioned too, wherever applicable, for an impression of literary authority over ancient matters.[52] It goes without saying that a modern perspective on an ancient value system perceived as overcome additionally provides a solid foundation for establishing strong identification figures who, as victims of these discriminatory structures, will attract most readers' sympathies. Considering the simple prose in which such retellings are usually presented, they also regularly follow the binary mechanism of immersion observed above to be so characteristic of popular realist storytelling.

Miller and the Midcult: Poetic Self-Conception

As the ten-year and seven-year development periods of her novels as well as her self-designation as a "magpie [...] go[ing] through all the ancient sources"[53] suggest, Miller likes to present herself as a typical *poeta doctus* composing her own work in close consideration of her literary predecessors. When confronted with the possibility of approaching other mythologies than the Greeks' or Romans' in future works, she even objects to doing so for the reason of not "ha[ving] that same grounding"[54]. Although the above-mentioned literary objectives – retelling traditionally heroic-epic-masculine matters from an intimate and amorous perspective on the one hand, and from a genuinely female perspective on the other hand – clearly correspond to typical midcult characteristics, the authority Miller lends herself this way implies the expectation of an appropriate treatment of the chosen contents.

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52 Apart from Miller, examples would be Natalie Haynes, Claire Heywood, Costanza Casati, Emily Hauser, or Susan C. Wilson.

53 E20 17:08.

54 E10 42:53.

As to the social-ethical dimension of midcult, Miller seldom misses an opportunity to present herself in a philanthropic light: she terms Emily Wilson's 2017 translation of the *Odyssey,* the first translation by a woman, "a glass ceiling that is shockingly overdue for shattering"[55], raises awareness for "an initiative called Black Publishing Power"[56], and expresses regret over classicism's "hurtful history being co-opted by things like white supremacy"[57]. Repeated references to current political issues in the US, such as the legal situation regarding abortion[58], or the characterisation of Agamemnon as the "most Trumpist figure [in the Greek canon]"[59] additionally demonstrate a certain strive for topicality in doing so. As it would be typical of midcult, such utterances make it quite transparent which values Miller stands for, and what to expect in her novels. Readers sharing these values therefore seem more likely to pick up her novels in the first place. Beyond that, however, she also claims to have achieved a certain missionary effect on others:

> I've had so many people come up to me and say, "I never thought I would read a gay love story, but I really enjoyed *The Song of Achilles* and it's really changed the way I think." That to me is the highest honour, it means so much to me and […] I've had lots of […] men come and say "*Circe* really expanded the way I thought about what women struggle with." […] [O]ne of my favourite interactions […] was a woman who said: "My son is going off to college, I bought a copy of *Circe* for him and every one of his male friends, and I am giving it to them and I'm saying, 'read this and then go off to college and think about consent and think about what it means to be a woman in the world […]'. I mean that is like 'wow'[…]. [H]umans are such emotional creatures. You know, we can look at a fact sheet and […] it doesn't […] hit us, but stories, they […] get in there and they transform. That has happened to me so many times in my own life, and so I hope that […] I can be part of stories transforming people and increasing their empathy and allowing them to make the world a better place.[60]

55 E18.

56 E5 00:18.

57 E5 22:28.

58 Cf. E6 37:05.

59 E12 01:04:17.

60 E6 42:15.

Although this self-attested ethical impact somewhat reminiscent of Aristotelian *catharsis* is hard to falsify and Miller may have experienced such encounters, statements like this certainly cast doubts: one may indeed wonder whether the described effect would also be observed among readers truly objecting to the values represented by Miller, and whether it thus actually transcends the self-affirmation efforts of readers already committed to them. That a sceptical attitude is only appropriate becomes additionally evident when Miller projects her philanthropism into the Homeric source texts: her irrevocable convictions that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* "were intended not just for an elite audience, but for everyone"[61], or that "it is impossible to […] think that Homer is pro-war because he is so clear about the physical violence and what happens to men's bodies in war and how brutal and disgusting and gory it is"[62] obviously subverts these poem's original nature of being sung at the courts of a privileged nobility, and their genuinely heroic perspective on fighting as an honourable and reputationally promising act.[63] One may gain the impression that the message to be sent was prioritised over the actual historical context of Homer's epics, and it is especially their assumed inclusive nature as well as, derived from this, the implication of her work too being designed "for everyone"[64] that undeniably reveals the popular realist characteristic of appealing to the largest possible audience. Miller's emphasis that prior mythological knowledge will provide familiar readers with "goodies"[65] but is by no means necessary for an understanding of her novels represents an intentional act of addressing several audiences at once[66], and thus additionally supports this notion. In the light of linguistic simplicity and the minor importance of the aesthetic level in popular realist literature, it is particularly interesting that Miller seems to anticipate this exact point of criticism and, as if to refute it, comments on the aesthetics of her novels' linguistic level itself:

61 E16.

62 E6 19:13.

63 Cf. M. Reichel, HGL I (2011) 9, 15.

64 E10 50:02.

65 E10 50:08.

66 Cf. Baßler (2022) 70.

> I do read aloud. I think reading aloud is important, particularly because I'm so influenced by Homer, which was originally oral poetry and so I really want the sentences to have [...] an oral quality to them, an oral presence, I guess.[67]

Referring to the Homeric epics' oral origins, she acknowledges that the sound of epic literature must have been important and derives from this her ambition to also provide her own novels with certain acoustic qualities, and her habit of regularly verifying them by revising and reading aloud.[68] Her concept of this 'oral presence', however, remains rather vague: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*'s oral past is reflected linguistically in the extensive use of the hexameter, formulaic verses and repetitions, epithets, as well as an overall artificial language far from "any Greek dialect used at any time in any place in Greece"[69]. Since an imitation of this genuinely Homeric style, however skilfully rendered into English, would certainly not pose a low-threshold reading, it is surely not what Miller had in mind.

Her remarks become only seemingly clearer when she elsewhere refers to Callimachus as another model for her writing: resembling the latter's principles of lyric poetry as a desirably elaborate and small-format alternative to epic standards[70], Miller ascribes to such poetry that it "is doing exactly what novels are doing, they're just doing it really compressed and really compacted and so it reminds me that I want every word in my novels to be load-bearing"[71]. For this reason, she states to "start many writing days reading a little bit of poetry and [...] trying to remember that I want each word to feel active"[72]. While comprehensible in theory, an approach like this appears difficult to grasp in its concrete application: as typical examples of Hellenistic poetry, the callimachean ideals resulted in works of "the highest standards in terms of content, language

67 E12 1:08:36.

68 Cf. E12 1:09:51

69 M. Reichel, HGL I (2011) 19: *"Die homerischen Epen sind in einer poetischen Sprachform verfaßt* [sic!]*, [...] die sich von jeder zu irgendeiner Zeit an irgendeinem Ort Griechenlands verwendeten Umgangssprache erheblich unterscheidet."*

70 Cf. Detken (2003) 1291–92 and D. Meyer, HGL II (2014) 144, 152–154.

71 E5 28:31.

72 E12 1:07:31.

and metre"[73], which may lead one to expect from Miller a prose of challenging linguistic complexity and elaborateness. What she, however, is actually aiming at becomes evident from the continuation of the above quote:

> So I do read aloud, and you can hear pretty quickly when you're reading aloud if there's […] a real clinger in there. What are the things you stop over, what are the things you stumble over?[74]

Miller reads aloud to ensure effortless readability, and as much as this is substantiated by references to the origins of epic literature or elusively generalised understandings of ancient poetry and its formal requirements, what is described here is what Baßler would term 'International Style' – a language whose most distinctive characteristic consists in its inconspicuousness, allowing for the most immediate experience of diegesis. Bearing in mind Baßler's understanding of the fantasy genre as the most genuine form of International Style, Miller's assumptions that "if Homer […] was composing today […] the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* would go right on the fantasy shelf"[75], or that "for me, Greek mythology and fantasy seem like the same thing"[76] appear all the more revealing. An identification like this does certainly not do justice to Homer's style or his world, which reflects historical geographical conditions and cultic sites rather than a fictitious setting,[77] let alone to the various allegorical readings of Homer in ancient times.[78]

The variety of languages in which Miller's novels have been published proves the ease with which texts of International Style can be translated, especially in contrast to similarly recent but truly lyrical reworkings of Homeric matters like *Memorial* (2011) by Alice Oswald, for which *Goodreads* lists translations into only six languages and not more than 1,650 ratings.[79] While such market-oriented

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73 D. Meyer, HGL II (2014) 66: *"Das poetische Kunstwerk [des Kallimachos] sollte inhaltlich, sprachlich und metrisch allerhöchsten Ansprüchen genügen […]."*

74 E12 1:08:53.

75 E25 48:17.

76 E22 24:57.

77 Cf. M. Reichel, HGL I (2011) 37–40.

78 Cf. M. Reichel, HGL I (2011) 52–54.

79 Cf. Goodreads, "Memorial".

means represent a perfectly valid artistic choice in themselves, it is thoroughly misleading to present them as rooted in ancient poetry to affirm one's own place within a time-honoured tradition. While Miller's questionable self-authentication certainly poses a first indicator of a 'structural lie' in the sense of a potential midcult, a final verdict should not be passed without a look at Miller's novels as the actual products resulting from the described literary self-conception in the following.

Patroclus – Miller's Misfit or Homeric Hero?

Looking up Achilles in any of the common encyclopaedias of classical studies will suffice to see that, in the larger scheme of her narrative framework in *The Song of Achilles,* Miller indeed remains faithful to the mythological canon surrounding the Greek hero. In fact, the allusions and references to ancient works are so dense and numerous that they could justify a scholarly commentary[80], and certainly confirm Miller's good knowledge of her sources. Problems begin, however, with her treatment of Patroclus: considering her stated aim of shifting the traditionally heroic focus of Trojan War mythology towards a rather intimate perspective, she presents him as the most suitable protagonist: among the multitude of Greek heroes characterised as destroyers of cities or victorious fighters,[81] Patroclus is, according to Miller, mainly referred to as "gentle"[82] and "kind to everyone"[83]. She also mentions his Homeric backstory of "a tragic childhood – he accidentally killed another boy and was exiled from his kingdom, which is how he came to meet Achilles"[84].

In the way they appear in her novel, these pieces of information harmonise well with each other: Patroclus's unheroic nature had long been causing his

80 This is not to say that explanatory notes were needed at any point. Rather to the contrary, Miller is always aiming at effortless comprehensibility, one of the characteristics of popular realism.

81 Cf. E8 41:16.

82 E2 43:28.

83 Ibid.

84 E26.

father to perceive him as an unmanly disappointment,[85] and in view of the homicide committed by his son, he does not hesitates to exile him.[86] At the same time, the traumatic childhood experience of being responsible for the fatal consequences of physical violence anticipates the novel's major theme of Patroclus's lifelong aversion to fighting and killing, as well as combat exercises.[87] It is this aversion which accounts for his extensive inability to fight[88] and his wish to rather learn about medicine and surgery from his and Achilles' common mentor Chiron[89] – an inclination which eventually proves him an appreciated physician within the Greek camp.[90] Altogether, he almost poses a private counterpart to his lover, who is not only exceptionally skilled in battle and fond of traditionally epic matters like glory and honour, but even appears as *"Aristos Achaion"*[91].

The textual evidence given by Miller indeed references specific passages in the *Iliad*: after Patroclus's death in battle, the effort to retrieve his body is accompanied by the call to think of his gentleness and how kind he had been to everyone while alive.[92] When mourning over him, Achilles's slave girl Briseis too calls him "always gentle"[93], and addresses him as the one who treated her best.[94] The unintentional homicide eventually leading to his exile, then, is also reported in a speech delivered by Patroclus himself.[95] But as accurate as this information is, and as precisely as it is retrieved from the Homeric text, it is also incomplete: Homer's Patroclus is also μεγάθυμος, μεγαλήτωρ, a ἥρως[96], and in

85 Cf. Miller (2012) 1–3.

86 Cf. Miller (2012) 16–18.

87 Cf. Miller (2012) 30–31, 89–91.

88 Cf. Miller (2012) 324.

89 Cf. Miller (2012) 75–76, 83.

90 Cf. Miller (2012) 247–251.

91 Miller (2012) 176, 178, 184, 192, 197, 216, 236, 257, 292, 297.

92 Cf. Hom. Il. 17,670–72 ἐνηείης Πατροκλῆος […] μνησάσθω· πᾶσιν […] ἐπίστατο μείλιχος εἶναι ζωὸς ἐών.

93 μείλιχον αἰεί, Hom. Il. 19,300.

94 Cf. Hom. Il. 19,287 Πάτροκλέ μοι […] πλεῖστον κεχαρισμένε.

95 Cf. Hom. Il. 23,85–89.

96 Homer qtd. in Wüst (1949) 2281.

fact even ὥριστος Ἀχαιῶν[97] himself. By denying these qualities to her version of Patroclus, she amplifies the contrast between him and Achilles to such an extent that they appear as opposite ends of a heroic scale.

How far Miller, in doing so, departs from Homer becomes especially evident considering that Patroclus and Achilles have in fact been understood as "alter-egos, or better,'second-selves'of each other"[98]: the Homeric idea of Chiron's tutorship, for instance, seems to be that the centaur was never responsible for the education of Patroclus, but for Achilles alone, and that the two comrades must have met at a later date. The medical competencies, which Miller's Patroclus has acquired from Chiron in person and which she uses to set him apart from his lover, are in the *Iliad* part of an expertise which Achilles has passed on to him.[99] As the bearer of both Achilles' medical knowledge and his armour, he functions as a representative of the hero whenever the plot does not allow him to be physically present himself. Along with parallel situations, like both figures' similar bed routine, Patroclus is likely to be understood as Achilles's mirror image rather than his antithesis.[100]

This becomes also apparent in combat: even though a backstory, according to which his heroism in battle had led to his status as Achilles's closest comrade, is only introduced in the *Cypria* and thus un-Homeric,[101] Patroclus is a more than decent soldier in the *Iliad* too. When entering his final fight, he encourages his fellow Myrmidons to "be men"[102] and to vigorously join battle.[103] Subsequently, he kills no less than 54 people, among them Sarpedon, a demigod and son of Zeus, and is stopped only by divine intervention before Hector can deliver the fatal blow.[104] This stands in direct contrast to Miller's Patroclus, who is neither willing nor capable of fighting, and in fact, her reworking of this scene in particular may appear as one of the weak spots of *The Song of Achilles*: Patroclus'

97 Hom. Il. 17,689.

98 Fantuzzi (2012) 197.

99 Hom. Il. 11, 830–832.

100 Cf. Fantuzzi (2012) 197–198, 202–215.

101 Cf. Wüst (1949) 2277.

102 ἀνέρες ἔστε, Hom. Il. 16,270.

103 Cf. Hom. Il. 16,269–274.

104 Cf. Hom. Il. 16,287–789; Wüst (1949) 2278.

sudden skilful handling of a spear is ascribed to "the armor, molding me [Patroclus]" and "the years of watching him [Achilles]"[105], the accuracy of his strikes to his anatomical knowledge.[106] Though certainly helpful in a fight, such supportive factors may evoke scepticism when claimed as substitutes for years of real combat experience, and the impression arises that Miller had difficulties substantiating her protagonist's unexpected combative abilities.

The most striking characteristic, however, distinguishing Miller's Patroclus from his Homeric namesake, is his status as an outsider: there is no model in the *Iliad* for the contempt Patroclus experiences at the hands of Achilles' mother,[107] and given his qualities as a proper Homeric hero, there would be no reason to consider him an unworthy companion. Similarly, a dysfunctional relationship to his father, as it is characterised by Miller, is never indicated by Homer; in fact, Menotitios even accompanies his son into exile in Phthia and is not only present when he leaves for Troy, but sends him to battle himself after giving him benevolent advice.[108] The fact that Achilles, when tearfully approached by Patroclus, instantly associates his friends' agitation with possible news of his father's death, additionally suggests a mutually rather appreciative attitude.[109]

It goes without saying that the picture of Patroclus painted by Miller entirely corresponds to the demands of popular realist storytelling: he not only represents an embodiment of her philanthropic world view, but also a strong identificatory character to readers sharing this view and the corrective claim of 21st century mythological retellings: his gentle nature and dislike of violence oppose traditional – and potentially perceived toxic – notions of masculinity. That his social environment, in the form of his father and his divine mother-in-law Thetis, despises him for his unheroic nature let him appear treated unfairly and make it nearly obligatory to empathise with him. This, along with the novel's first-person narrator, through which the thoughts and feelings of Miller's protagonist are constantly accessible, ensures a degree of immersion very typical of popular realist storytelling: the world described and the perspective through which it is viewed merge together – an effect further emphasised by the novel's

105 Miller (2012) 328.

106 Cf. Miller (2012) 330.

107 Cf. Miller (2012) 170, 264, 347.

108 Cf. Hom. Il. 11,765–789; 23,85.

109 Cf. Hom. Il. 16,13–14.

generally rather plain prose and easy readability. Miller's over-stylisation of Patroclus's characteristic gentleness by depriving him of his heroic qualities is particularly noteworthy in the light of her own remarks on Circe as a figure unfairly flattened in its reception history, and certainly seems like unexploited potential for interesting ambiguity. That it, beyond that, harbours problematic implications for the portrayal of homosexuality will be illustrated in the following discussion of Patroclus and Achilles' relationship.

Patroclus and Achilles – 'Ideal Lovers?'

> "I think there have been many people who have taken them as close companions," says Miller, "but looking at the way Achilles mourns, how incredibly deeply and sensually – holding the dead body all night, wanting their ashes put together – that seems to say something beyond [friendship] to me".[110]

It is Achilles's emotional condition in reaction to Patroclus's death which prompts Miller to read them as lovers, as well as Patroclus's wish for their ashes to be united in burial. Her estimation that 'many people have taken them as close companions', i.e. comrades-in-arms without any sexual or amorous implications, clearly presents this reading as subordinate to a supposedly prevalent homosexual understanding of their relationship.[111] Along with her statements that scholarly literature has been denying or even suppressing an allegedly obvious love between the two Homeric characters, she not only levels serious charges against the entire field of classical studies, but once again paints an unreasonably oversimplified picture:

It is undeniably true that the interpretation of Patroclus and Achilles as engaged in an implied homosexual relationship was already in antiquity discussed and weighed up against the traditional understanding dismissed by Miller. Also, said interpretation certainly has more than once been the object of literary adoption, and any such reworking undoubtedly possesses an inherent literary value in its own right. Without denying any of this, it is still a valid and established scholarly observation to note that the portrayal of the relation-

110 E9, supplement in orig.

111 Cf. also E12 55:08.

ship between Patroclus and Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* – examined individually – offers little reason in terms of reliable textual evidence to assume even remote suggestions of homosexual love or sexuality, as inferred by later interpreters: firstly, there are no terms whose connotations would openly indicate any kind of erotic overtone; secondly, both Achilles and Patroclus share their beds with female slaves;[112] thirdly, the motif of close, non-sexual male friendship is an established element of archaic epics known to feature quite similar plot points of loss and vengeance.[113]

This is also the conclusion reached by K. J. Dover, who has written perhaps the most comprehensive monograph[114] on depictions of homosexuality in Ancient Greece. He not only states that "Homer [...] nowhere speaks of an erotic relationship between Achilles and Patroklos"[115] and that "[w]e would reasonably attribute the poet's silence to the absence of any erotic element from the relationship as he envisaged it"[116], but continues with two essential arguments given by ancient interpreters arguing in favour of reading Patroclus' and Achilles' relationship as homosexual: "the extravagance of Achilles' emotion when Patroklos is killed"[117] as well as "the injunction of Patroklos that when Achilles too dies their ashes should be interred together"[118]. These are the exact textual clues referenced in Miller's quote above, and although they certainly suggest exceptional affection, this need not have an erotic dimension to it. In fact, Dover makes it unmistakably clear that, in classical Greece, homosexual interpretations of

112 As Fantuzzi (2012) rightly notes, "the fact that both now sleep with women does not mean that they cannot sleep, or have never slept, with each other at other times. But it is telling that the *Iliad* gives no hint whatsoever of this latter possibility" (198). Also, if their relationship was poetically intended to be read as homosexual, it would have been quite misleading to insert a detail like this, just like it would have been distracting from the central theme of Miller's novel if Patroclus freely enjoyed sexual intercourse with women.

113 Cf. Fantuzzi (2012) 190–193; Dover (1978) 53, 197; Choitz (2011) 108.

114 In E3 01:22, Miller presents Dover's monograph as part of her private bookshelf, among her "important research materials".

115 Dover (1978) 197.

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

Patroclus and Achilles originated from the idea of pederasty,[119] a form of relationship, in which "[a] 12 to 18 year old 'youth' (παῖς/paîs) would be the 'beloved' (ἐρώμενος/erṓmenos) of a man older than 30, the 'lover' (ἐραστής/erastḗs), who would also educate him"[120]. Fragments of Aischylos' *Myrmidons,* the earliest known instance of a notion of Patroclus and Achilles as lovers,[121] refer not only to "frequent kisses"[122], but also to intercrural intercourse[123], a sexual practice which was commonly associated with this type of erotic connection.[124] The clear rules of pederasty regarding the participants' age and status, however, do not quite correspond to Homer's portrayal: as evident from the disagreement between the dialogue partners in Plato's *Symposium,* the difficulties experienced by Greeks of the classical period describing a pederastic relationship between Patroclus and Achilles as the socially accepted form of homosexuality by ascribing to them the labels of *erastes* and *eromenos* in retrospect were not least due to the fact that the Homeric original does not yield such a forced transfer.[125] Dover even adduces some arguments of the *Symposium* as examples of "how easily (in ancient and modern times alike) the evidence of texts can be bent"[126]. Miller's awareness of this becomes apparent when she addresses the issue of pederasty herself:

> [W]hen Patroclus speaks to him [Achilles], […] he speaks to him absolutely as an equal, as an emotional equal and […] that was really what I wanted to honour, […] and then the *erastes – eromenos* […] takes us into this territory of inequality, but I didn't want to go in that direction.[127]

119 Cf. Dover (1978) 53, 197.

120 Hartmann (2006).

121 Cf. Wüst (1949) 2281.

122 πυκνῶν φιλημάτων, Aeschyl. Myrmidones fr. 135.

123 Cf. Aeschylus, Myrmidones fr. 135 σέβας […] μηρῶν; fr. **136 μηρῶν […] ὁμιλία.

124 Cf. Dover (1978) 70.

125 Cf. Dover (1978) 53, 197 and Hom. Il. 11,786–789.

126 Dover (2009) 95.

127 E22 19:32.

The essential characteristic which appears to have guided Miller in her portrayal of Patroclus and Achilles' relationship is that of mutual equality, with a particular emphasis on emotional equality, and since Patroclus alone manages to get through to Achilles in his anger[128], there is indeed a certain template for this in the *Iliad.* Between the ancient poles of interpreting Patroclus and Achilles in either a traditional Homeric (close friends and fellow soldiers at emotional eye-level) or a post-Homeric pederastic sense (erotically engaged conforming to later and asymmetrical social norms), Miller seems to take a third path, establishing their relation as erotic *and* (emotionally) equal. This indeed innovative approach may have shed a light of originality on her literary endeavour if made transparent; her chosen method, however, of instead confronting classical studies with undifferentiated accusations of homophobia and delicate claims, such as 'to set the record straight', indicates midcult rather than sincere engagement with the respective literary tradition. The following reader review illustrates how seriously such misrepresentation can damage public discourse:

> Madeline Miller did what the movie producers of the film Troy (2004) were too cowardly to do; she stayed true to the homosexuality of Homer's *Iliad* rather than writing a censored version of the story which stank of homophobia. Achilles and Patroclus were passionately in love, which resulted in their respective destructions. They were not cousins or man at arms, but soul mates. The watering down of this in the film Troy was an insult to the LGBT community. Nothing more. Nothing less [...]. I'm so glad the author didn't deviate from the suggestions of homosexuality that were present in Homer's writing.[129]

The quoted response belongs to a four-star rating, and the overall good assessment of *The Song of Achilles* suggests that most readers have been approving of Miller's way of addressing homosexuality. A deliberate look at less favourable reviews, however, reveals a substantial problem:

> Both in classical antiquity and in modernity, the fact that they [Patroclus and Achilles] were equals makes them stand out. Miller could've taken this unique relationship and made something revolutionary and groundbreaking of it, but she chose not to. Instead, Patroclus is effeminate, innocent, campy, and squeamish about the

128 Cf. Hom. Il. 15,401–404; 16,7–19; 16,64–65.

129 Sean Barrs (2020).

> blood and guts of war. He's a "healer" who stays in the tents while Achilles is off slaughtering men on the battlefield. He's soft-hearted and empathetic, crying while Achilles is emotionless […]. The result of this, of course, is that Miller's portrayal of a gay relationship is basically just a heteronormative straight one. Patroclus could be replaced by a woman and it would change absolutely nothing about the story Miller has written. In essence, Miller has told the audience that queer relationships are fundamentally the same as heterosexual ones, and that makes them okay!… but with no apparent knowledge of or care as to how this might contribute to the perpetuation of homophobia in the real world. It's not an accurate portrayal of the characters she claims to love so much, and it's unintentionally homophobic at best.[130]

Given Patroclus's overdrawn gentleness in contrast to Achilles's heroism, the natural conclusion indeed seems to be that Miller considered it necessary to differentiate her main characters on a binary conception of traditionally masculine and feminine traits for their amorous relation to appear convincing. *Goodreads* comments like "Seriously, can Patroclus be any more of a Bella?"[131] – a direct reference to the *Twilight* series – demonstrate the parallels to young-adult fiction and its typical character dynamics of a strong and protective partner romantically engaged with a weaker one: indeed, Patroclus' survival strategy in the world of Miller's novel mainly consists in his affiliation with Achilles, and his repeated utterances that he "*will kill myself rather than miss it* [lying next to Achilles]"[132] or "would follow [Achilles], even into death"[133] paint a problematically idealised, and certainly not equal, picture of love.

Not only do Miller's wish that her novel "might help to combat the homophobia that I see too often"[134] and her self-attested success in this respect[135] seem misplaced in this light; one could also discuss whether a depiction of homosexual love between two truly Homeric heroes might not have more genuinely challenged the reproduction of stereotypes and posed the rather 'revolutionary

130 saïd (2023).

131 Paz (2018).

132 Miller (2012) 183.

133 Miller (2012) 168.

134 E17.

135 Cf. E6 42:15.

and groundbreaking' reworking desired by the reviewer above. There may, perhaps, be no better starting point for asking more profound questions about implications of masculinity, homosexuality, or the compatibility of these concepts. Although arising occasionally[136], such questions pale in comparison to conventional patterns of romantic storytelling or erotic interludes:[137]

> Our mouths opened under each other, and the warmth of his sweetened throat poured into mine. I could not think, could not do anything but drink him in [...] He seemed to swell beneath my touch, to ripen. [...] He went still as I took him in my hand, soft as the delicate velvet of petals. [...] Our bodies cupped each other like hands. [...] There was a gathering inside me, a beat of blood against the movement of his hand. [...] The feeling gathered and gathered till a hoarse cry leapt from my throat, and the sharp flowering drove me, arching, against him [...]. My hand reached, found the place of his pleasure [...]. There was a rhythm he liked, I could feel it, the catch of his breath, the yearning [...]. His mouth opened in an inarticulate cry, and we were pressed so close that I felt the spurt of warmth against me.[138]

According to Miller's anecdotes, she has been confronted with the accusation of "writing Homeric fan fiction"[139], and passages like this clearly demonstrate that this label is not entirely unreasonable. It may depend on personal taste whether such patterns represent an appropriate treatment of classical matters – the novel was statedly intended as a love story, after all. Miller's attempts to legitimise this approach by reference to Virgil's *Aeneid* as the "the original fan fiction"[140], however, once more testifies to confusingly simplified representations of the ancient tradition.

136 Cf. Miller (2012) 103–104, 176.

137 Cf. Miller (2012) 99–102, 104–05, 118, 134–136, 167–69, 182–83.

138 Miller (2012) 100–101.

139 E15.

140 E23 25:00.

Circe – from Side Character to Protagonist

Looking at Miller's second novel, it once again seems that its narrative framework is, in the bigger picture, thoroughly modelled on Circe's appearances in ancient mythology: apart from Homer's *Odyssey,* Miller recalls having resorted to Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* to Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* and to the surviving summary of the *Telegony.*[141] Again, encyclopaedic information proves these works to contain the most essential tales surrounding the enchantress, and the way they appear in Miller's novel corresponds, despite minor deviations, to their classical templates.

When introducing the figure of Circe and the information about her in ancient mythology, Miller most often initially declares that she is "most famous for turning Odysseus's men to pigs"[142] in Homer's *Odyssey,* where she is referred to as the "dread goddess who speaks like a human"[143]. She adds that Homer mentions Aiaia as the name of the island she lives on, as well as her descent from Helios, her father and the Greek god of the sun, who is said to have taken her to Aiaia on his chariot.[144] Miller points out that Circe's attractive outward appearance is regularly emphasised,[145] and that Homer presents her as weaving on the loom, as beautifully singing and surrounded by wild animals as pets. Although the detail of Circe's arrival on Aiaia is not mentioned by Homer, but in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women,*[146] this is a minor flaw in an overall quite accurate overview: the Homeric Circe lives on an island of this name and is introduced as a daughter of Helios[147] as well as a δεινὴ θεὸς αὐδήεσσα[148]. Her description as "beautifully braided"[149] indeed refers to a certain degree of beauty, as does the mentioning of

141 Cf. E12 17:39.

142 E10 02:15.

143 E24 27:21.

144 Cf. E24 46:39.

145 Cf. E13 08:30.

146 Cf. Hes. cat. fr. 46.

147 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,138.

148 Hom. Od. 10,136, "terrible goddess speaking with human voice".

149 ἐϋπλόκαμος and καλλιπλοκάμοιο, respectively, Hom. Od. 10,136; 10,220; 10,310; 11,8; 12,150.

her elegant clothing[150]. She is portrayed as accompanied by domesticated wild animals[151], as "singing with a beautiful voice"[152], and as "working on a big immortal loom"[153].

As Miller's treatment of Patroclus has shown, a character cannot only be shaped by the details retrieved from Homer, but also by those deliberately withheld. When looking for such evidence regarding *Circe,* however, one will quickly realise that the information provided is indeed complete. Even when Miller establishes Circe's human traits as the origin of an outsider status among the gods, or presents Aiaia as a place of exile, neither of which is attested in the ancient sources, she certainly reinterprets and supplements in creative ways, but never misappropriates essential information.

That said, Miller's statements regarding her inspiration for *Circe* certainly represent valid observations: although Homer's Circe is an ambiguous figure whose "fascination lies in the multi-faceted nature of her character: daemonic and threatening on the one hand; on the other, offering aid and protection"[154], she remained rather one-dimensional in post-Homeric reception.[155] But even in the *Odyssey,* there is – apart from the hardly informative remarks about the enchantress "pondering evils in her mind"[156] and drugging her visitors' food "so that they would entirely forget their homeland"[157] – no motivational indication whatsoever as to why Circe would wish to keep Odysseus and his crew on her island, or why she would transform them to achieve this, let alone to pigs.[158] That

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150 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,543–545.

151 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,212–219.

152 ἀειδούσης ὀπὶ καλῇ, Hom. Od. 10,221; cf. 10,254.

153 ἱστὸν ἐποιχομένης μέγαν ἄμβροτον, Hom. Od. 10,222; cf. 10,254.

154 Heubeck (1989) 51; cf. Segal (1968).

155 In Virgil's *Aeneid,* the sorceress is not more than a "furious goddess" (cf. 7,19 *dea saeva*), but her brief appearance by mere mentioning does simply not leave room for an elaborate characterisation. Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses,* generally treats her as a figure in a more or less permanent state of unhappy love; his reworking of particularly the episode at hand, however, does not give any specific reason for her doings either (cf. 14,242–307). See also Segal (1968).

156 κακὰ φρονέουσ' ἐνὶ θυμῷ, Hom. Od. 10,317. See also Circe's equally obscure "malign plans" (ὀλοφώϊα δήνεα) in 10,289.

157 ἵνα πάγχυ λαθοίατο πατρίδος αἴης, Hom. Od. 10,236.

158 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,230–243.

Homer's Odysseus indeed overcomes Circe by simply intimidating her using his sword,[159] and that she straightforwardly offers him to accompany her to bed subsequently,[160] also confirms Miller's estimation regarding the sudden sexually violent turn of the Homeric narrative: the power Circe wields in the *Odyssey* was certainly perceived as a reversal of normative patriarchal standards, and there is no doubt that, in archaic times, this battle of the sexes could only be won, as an act of restoring order, by the traditional male hero resorting to traditionally heroic means. Considering, however, that Odysseus usually "comes particularly to the fore among the Greek leaders with intellectual solutions to problems and their implementation via words"[161], Miller's expectation of a 'battle of wits' as well as her disappointment over the – from today's perspective – rather primitive resolution of their conflict is not entirely unfounded. In the light of this apparent contradiction, the questions left unanswered by Homer, and Circe's subsequent flattened representation, it seems that Miller this time made a perfectly valid choice of advocating for a previously underdeveloped and unfairly treated female character.

Circe – a 'Feminist Project'?

When attempting to determine how Miller's stated aim of a female epic is implemented, the first thing to note is that she "ignored […] depictions that struck her as silly or sexist"[162]. The most striking example may be Miller's treatment of the *Telegony*, the cyclic poem about Telegonus, Circe's son with Odysseus: its ending saw Telegonus return from Ithaca to Aiaia, along with Penelope and Telemachus; there, not only a double wedding takes place, between Circe and Telemachus on the one hand, and Penelope and Telegonus on the other hand, but Circe even bestows immortality on all of them – a "second-rate Greek epic's equivalent of 'they all lived happily ever after'"[163].

159 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,321–324.

160 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,333–335.

161 Visser and Bäbler (2006).

162 E1.

163 Davies (1989) 90.

Along with the strange detail of "a spear barbed with the spine of a stingray"[164] as the weapon causing Odysseus' death and the rather minor importance of this work to the canon, there would have been enough reason to reject it as a template. The excitement, however, "knowing that Penelope was waiting for me in the last quarter of the novel"[165] seems to have been a decisive factor to take up on it anyway, as it harboured the opportunity to bring another interesting female figure to Aiaia and give her the ending that she, according to Miller, deserved: after the "constant talk in the *Odyssey* about what man Penelope is attached to"[166], Miller eventually allows her to remain independent, to learn about Circe's witchcraft, and even to become the new witch of Aiaia.[167] The potential for ridicule that comes with the aforementioned weapon is confidently countered by Miller when she has Circe retrieve it from the tail of Trygon, a divine creature she invents for this purpose.[168] Given the lack of serious alternatives in existing mythology,[169] this supplement appears to almost repair a mythological weak spot, and in contrast to her first novel, Miller usually documents her modifications accurately.[170]

With Circe's sister Pasiphae terrorising her husband Minos, Medea keeping Jason under her spell, Athena as the antagonist of the novel's last third, and Scylla reappearing as the infamous man-eating monster, Miller seizes every opportunity to establish further strong female characters in an interestingly broad moral range. The prominent role of genuinely female topics like childbirth, single motherhood, as well as sexism and sexual violence[171] certainly contributes to

164 Davies (1989) 90.

165 E23 35:51.

166 E21 44:51.

167 Cf. Miller (2019) 329.

168 Cf. Miller (2019) 242–48.

169 Cf. West (2013) 310 who notes that, according to Aeschylus, "a heron flying overhead would one day defecate onto Odysseus, and its droppings would contain the (obviously much reduced and degraded) barb of a fish that would poison his aged, balding scalp".

170 Cf. e.g. E13 37:50 for the adjustment of the novel's ending or E21 37:36 for the invention of Trygon.

171 Cf. chapters 10 and 18–19, which contain extensive scenes of pregnancy, birth, and single parenting, as well as chapter 14, in which the sexual violence towards Circe reaches its point of escalation.

Miller's aim, and it almost seems like a revenge on traditionally male storytelling that the author reports to have deliberately confined Odysseus's appearance to two chapters only.[172] This latter notion is additionally supported by her reflections on narrative technique in the *Odyssey*:

> [M]ost of the *Odyssey* is told by the poet, but that section is Odysseus [...] getting hospitality from some people and telling them about his adventures to try and impress them, and [...] I started to realise, 'Hmm, actually, why are we believing anything Odysseus has to say?' He is the great liar of ancient literature, and so once you start realising 'Oh, this is Odysseus trying to impress people,' the Circe episode starts to look a little bit different, right? 'There was this, oh, terrifying witch and she totally got the jump on my men, but then I tamed her, and she threw herself at me, and she was super-hot,' uhm, which is pretty much what he says over and over and over again, and what you realise is: every time he's talking about how mysterious and beautiful Circe is, what he's really saying is, 'Look how great I am,' and so the whole episode serves as a way to, uhm, burnish Odysseus's own legend. So I came at the project from this perspective of 'Okay, Odysseus has had three thousand years of self-aggrandising, let's put him out of the way and imagine how this might look to someone else.'[173]

In principle, Miller's observation is right, as Circe's appearance in the *Odyssey* is embedded into Odysseus's own account of his previous wanderings when hosted by the Phaeaecians. The picture Miller paints here is, of course, exaggerated: in scholarly terms, there is little reason to believe that the hero is poetically intended to assume the role of an unreliable narrator.[174] Also, although the hero undeniably uses terms denoting an appealing outward appearance when referring to Circe, these designations are relatively rare and never as trivial as 'super-hot'. Working under the creative license, however, there could hardly be any textual foundation more suited for questioning the established Homeric narrative than a report given by a hero known for repeatedly taking on con-

172 Cf. E10 31:30.

173 E5 12:16.

174 Cf. Grethlein (2017) 108–109.

trived identities and invented backstories.[175] With regards to Circe's hair, Miller even specifies this interpretation:

> [I] talked about how Odysseus is always saying how hot Circe is in the *Odyssey,* and one of the things he […] keeps saying about her is he describes her as having this […] super fancy hairdo, it's often translated as […] 'Circe of the beautiful braids' […], as if […] his portrait of her is that 'here she is […] in her prom hair waiting for someone to show up on her island, doing nothing, just lounging around with her lions' […]. That's a totally […] objectified, absurd fantasy of what women are doing when men are not there, and so part of what I wanted to do was […] take that detail of Circe's braids and transform it. So in my version, Circe does braid her hair, but she braids her hair because she spends all her time trumping through the woods, hanging out with lions, you know, digging up plants, working in her garden, and she would braid her hair. That's how she keeps it out of her face, so, you know, I tried to […] take even little moments […] and change it so that Circe has the agency.[176]

Miller clearly imputes a male gaze to the Homeric narrative, assuming that anything Circe is doing is done with the intention to be appealing to possible male visitors. Her braids, however, are never indicated to be the result of extensive preparations, as Miller's comparison with 'prom hair' suggests, and they may simply testify to Circe's given beauty as a divine being, after all. Also, the terms at hand – ἐϋπλόκαμος/καλλιπλόκαμος – are by far not reserved for Circe, let alone used by Odysseus only. Rather to the contrary, they are attributed to many other divine and mortal female side characters throughout the *Iliad* as well as the *Odyssey,* regardless of whether they are employed by the omniscient narrator or put in the mouths of characters.[177] Their frequency suggests that they are, as epithets, part of epic standard vocabulary whose original purpose consisted in facilitating the spontaneous completion of verses. As simple verse constituents, such epithets are often enough reduced in meaning or even incomprehensible. Especially in the case of female side characters, one may gain the impression

175 One need only think of Odysseus' way of confronting Polyphemus under the name of "Nobody" (Οὖτις) in Hom. Od. 9,364–367, or of reaching out to his people on Ithaca in the disguise of a beggar from book 14 onwards.

176 E5 38:42.

177 Cf. TLG s.v. ἐϋπλόκαμος; καλλιπλόκαμος.

that, if a poet did not know what else to append to them, he was inclined to resort to the domain of beauty. This is surely problematic in its own right, but the significance Miller attributes to said labels is probably overestimated.

In view of this misogynist assumption, it is quite revealing how the information on Circe's outward appearance found its way into Miller's novel: her plaits are introduced as a measure ensuring that "it [Circe's hair] would not catch on every twig"[178] while gardening or exploring the woods, her garment – made on the loom that was gifted to her by Daedalus – is a sign of appreciation of this former acquaintance,[179] and her singing is "[o]nly for myself [Circe]"[180]. It seems to have been important to Miller to clarify that the mentioned particulars have personal relevance to her version of Circe, and that she does not make herself dependent on male perception. But the impression of emancipation is not only evoked by the reinterpretation of Homeric particulars, but also by metacommentaries on epic literature in general:

> Later, years later, I would hear a song made of our meeting. The boy who sang it was unskilled, missing notes more often than he hit, yet the sweet music of the verses shone through his mangling. I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep.[181]

Quite reminiscent of the truly Odyssean feature of the hero being confronted with his own deeds in literarily processed form, Circe eventually learns how she has entered the canon of epic poetry. Whether the 'unskilled boy' is to be understood as Homer himself or not, Miller's protagonist claims to have observed how traditional epic literature deliberately distorts an imagined truth of Circe's actual experience in such a way that it fulfils the genuinely misogynist characteristics of a particularly male literary genre. It is at this point that *Circe*'s first-person narrator becomes more than a typically popular realist mechanism of ensuring immersion: by means of direct intertextual reference, she poses a ques-

178 Miller (2019) 71.

179 Cf. Miller (2019) 131–32.

180 Miller (2019) 81; cf. 160.

181 Miller (2019) 181; see also 131, 209.

tion of trust and subverts Homer's authority much more fundamentally than only by giving a deviating account.

Circe and Odysseus – the 'Battle of Wits'

The most direct engagement with Homer in *Circe,* however, consists in the enchantress's prominent encounter with Odysseus, the original of which can be found in book 10 of Homer's *Odyssey*:[182] Odysseus and his crew arrive on Aiaia, desperately disoriented and demoralised by previous casualties. After resting for two days and gaining orientation, Odysseus sends a vanguard, lead by Eurylochus, to the source of the smoke he saw arising from Circe's palace. When this group arrives there, they are greeted by tame wolves and lions, and they notice Circe singing as well as working on her loom. They call for her; she readily invites them in and provides them with poisoned food and drink before suddenly hitting them with her staff, transforming them into pigs and locking them up in her sty. Eurylochus, who had sensed the trap and observed everything from the outside, returns and reports to Odysseus, who makes his way to liberate them. Hermes steps into his path, warns him of Circe's evil intentions, and supplies him with a herb called moly, which would protect him against her magic. He instructs him to attack her as soon as she reaches for her staff, and to have her swear an oath to not do him any further harm when luring him into her bed.

Hermes withdraws, and Odysseus continues to also be welcomed and hosted by Circe. When offered the drugged wine, he drinks it, which prompts Circe to use her staff on him; the moly, however, prevents its transformative effect, and Odysseus can strike as advised. Circe instantly assumes a suppliant pose and invites him into her bed to gain trust in each other. Odysseus accepts on condition of the above-mentioned oath. It is only after being intimate, enjoying a bath at the hands of Circe's servants, as well as dinner preparations that Odysseus mentions his companions again: he declares it inappropriate to dine before the retrieval of his crew. Moved by his grief, the enchantress eventually retransforms them. Looking at Miller' reworking of this passage, it is striking how closely it resembles the structure of the Homeric original:

182 Cf. Hom. Od. 10,133–399.

> A ship, the nymphs said. […] The afternoon passed, and the sailors did not appear. My nymphs reported they were camped on the beach with fires burning. Another day went by, and at last on the third day came the knock. That painted ship of theirs was the finest thing about them. Their faces had lines like grandfathers. Their eyes were bloodshot and dead. They flinched from my animals. 'Let me guess,' I said. 'You are lost? You are hungry and tired and sad?' They ate well. They drank more. Their bodies were lumpish here and there with fat, though the muscles beneath were hard as trees. Their scars were long, ridged and slashing […]. I did not wait any more for them to stand up and come at me. I raised my staff, I spoke the word. They went crying to their pen like all the rest.[183]

Not only is the sailors' miserable appearance consistent with the picture painted by Homer, but they also flinch from Circe's cats, and the enchantress's sudden strike seems similarly unmotivated. The quoted passage is, however, preceded by an explanatory backstory revealing a traumatic event: when the first crew of sailors had appeared on her island, Circe had welcomed them with hospitality. Astonished to find a woman living alone on an otherwise deserted island, they had interrogated her on possible male protectors. Having ensured that there was no one to interfere, their captain had walked up to her and, past violently stunning and silencing her, had raped her in front of his crew. As a safety measure, she had earlier mixed moly into the wine to be used as a sedative, if necessary, but was not able to voice the eliciting spell due to the oppression of her windpipe. When released, she takes revenge by resorting to the transformative effect of moly instead: the new appearance of her oppressors as pigs is motivated by noises reaching her from her sty at this very moment. Subsequent visitors and sexual assaults render it plausible that she would expect the same of Odysseus' newly arrived companions.[184] Like in the *Odyssey,* the hero himself appears after having heard Eurylochus' report:

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183 Miller (2019) 173.

184 Cf. Miller (2019) 160–165; 169–172. The scenes perfectly illustrate Miller's thorough consultation of Homer: like in the *Odyssey,* it is the smoke arising from her palace and her singing which attract the attention of her visitors (cf. Hom. Od. 10,149–150; 196–197; 221; 226–228; 254–255; Miller 160). Their ambiguous perception oft he enchantress as a goddess or a mortal woman has a clear model in the Homeric expression "ἤ θεὸς ἠὲ γυνή" ("either goddess or woman", Od. 10,228; 255), and even the number of the "twenty men" matches that of Odysseus' original vanguard (Miller 167; cf. Hom. Od. 10,208). When Odysseus later enters Circe's house and "s[its] down in the silver chair I [Circe] indicated" (Miller 174), this

> The nymphs [Circe's servants] were helping me set right the toppled benches and scrub away the wine stains when one of them glanced at the window. 'Mistress, another on the path.' I had thought the crew too small to man a full ship. Some of them must have waited on the beach, and now one had been sent to scout after his fellows. The nymphs set out new wine and slipped away.[185]

What follows in Miller's novel, however, is the 'battle of wits' she claims to have been wishing for: as the faithful treatment of the Homeric narrative up to this point suggests, the underlying presumption of Odysseus and Circe' encounter is that both are aware of what had happened shortly before as well as each other's intentions. The dialogue between them is driven by an effort to, as for Circe's part, prolong the conversation until her guest would have consumed the drugged wine, whereas Odysseus' aim consists of signaling reason and reassurance while carefully figuring out how to help his companions. Nearly every of his moves or utterances fulfils a purpose: knowing what had happened shortly before in the room, the first thing he does is head for a chair which, left upended, may be the last indication of a previous conflict and straightens it up to test her reaction;[186] his next move of addressing Circe's weaving loom may even be a prime example of rhetorical skill:

> He gestured with his cup. 'I have never seen a loom like that,' he said. 'Is it an Eastern design?' A thousand of his kind had passed through this room. They had catalogued every inch of gold and silver, but not one had ever noticed the loom. I hesitated for the briefest moment. 'Egyptian'. 'Ah. They make the best things, don't they' Clever to use a second beam instead of loom weights. So much more efficient to draw the weft down. I would love to have a sketch.' His voice was resonant, warm, with a pull to it that reminded me of ocean tides. 'My wife would be thrilled. Those weights used to drive her mad. She kept saying someone ought to

represents nearly an exact translation of Hom. Od. 10, 314 εἶσε δέ μ' εἰσαγαγοῦσα ἐπὶ θρόνου ἀργυροήλου ("having led me inside, she made me sit on a silver-decorated chair"). The same is true for the phrases "I heard […] that many find their trust in love" and "We did find some trust between us" (Miller 179 and 181, respectively), which closely resemble the Homeric wording ὄφρα […] φιλότητι πεποίθομεν ἀλλήλοισιν ("until, through love, we have found trust to one another", Od. 10,334–335).

185 Miller (2019) 173.

186 Miller (2019) 174.

> invent something better. Alas, I have not found the time to apply myself to it. One of my many husbandly failings.'[187]

In terms of content, he uses a concrete object as a conversational starting point, organically repurposes it as a transition to mentioning his wife, and implicitly emphasises his appreciation for her as well as his awareness of responsible behaviour towards women. In ignoring the rich furnishings of the room, he presents himself as distinctly different from the ordinary plunderers Circe had been meeting beforehand, and his generally conciliating tone signals harmless intentions. It seems that Miller's Odysseus very deliberately plays with the traditional persuasive means of *logos, ethos* and *pathos,* and generally, reading this scene evokes the impression of witnessing a performance. In contrast to Homer's Odysseus, who naively takes in the drugged wine and waits for Circe's spell to fail, this becomes particularly evident in his handling of the drinking vessel:

> He took the goblet and sat in the silver chair I indicated. [...] He gestured with his cup. [...] His goblet was lifted loosely in his hand, as if any moment he would drink. [...] I sipped my wine [...]. He gestured with his cup now here, now there, sloshing his wine a little, but never spilling it. And never once touching it to his lips.[188]

Even when Circe grows impatient and directly addresses Odysseus' reluctance to drink, he manages to evade and steer the conversation towards his own enquiries about the whereabouts of his men.[189] It is at this point that the illusion of hospitality turns into an openly addressed conflict. Where the Homeric Odysseus, however, would have straightforwardly attacked the enchantress, his namesake in *Circe* expresses his wish to "settle this with reason"[190] and only places his hand on the sword hilt as a precautionary measure; where Homer's Circe would have been deeply intimidated by the hero's blade, Miller's protagonist simply remarks that "[w]eapons do not frighten me, nor the sight of my

187 Miller (2019) 174.

188 Miller (2019) 174–76.

189 Miller (2019) 177.

190 Miller (2019) 177.

own blood"[191]. When the enchantress eventually resolves this stalemate situation by openly making sexual advances, Circe acts, in contrast to her Homeric equivalent, of her own free will, and her erotic manoeuvre is not a last resort, but rather the result of a gradually rising and mutual sexual tension:

> [T]here was something in him that nearly felt familiar [...]. His sword hilt was hacked from ten years of battles, his scarred body braced and ready. His legs were short but stiff with muscles. My skin prickled. He was handsome, I realized [...]. My name in his mouth. It sparked a feeling in me, sharp and eager [...]. He was smiling, inviting me to laugh, as if we were two mischievous children [...]. He reminded me a little of Daedalus [an earlier love affair], his evenness and wit. But beneath his ease I could feel a roil that Daedalus never had. I wanted to see it revealed [...]. His skin smelled of labour and the sea. He knew ten years of stories. I felt keen and hungry as a bear in spring.[192]

It should have become obvious that Miller's retelling of this passage in particular poses a skilful reworking of the original Homeric passage, as it not only follows its narrative structure, but improves on it in several ways: by introducing the painful experience of rape and a situational link to the animals kept by Circe, she motivates both her deeds and pigs as the chosen result of transformation. Beyond that, her version of Odysseus corresponds to the hero's general reputation as an eloquent diplomat rather than Homer's portrayal of him as a soldier pragmatically resorting to violence.

CONCLUSION

With Homeric side characters as protagonists as well as their respective agenda of advocating for homosexuality and female agency in traditionally heteronormative and patriarchal epic literature, Miller's novels represent perfect examples of 21st century mythological retellings and their corrective claim. It is this claim, along with the classical matters they adopt, which makes such works vulnerable to accusations of a possible midcult, i.e. literature which pretends to, in

191 Miller (2019) 177.

192 Miller (2019) 175–79.

its original sense, represent high culture or art, or in its new sense, to address socially relevant topics, while not doing justice to either of these issues in their concrete literary realisation. It is particularly the new form of midcult, in which the discussion of these topics appears to be less relevant than an author's capacity to personally authenticate them, and to confirm readers in convictions they already share.

This pertains to Miller, who uses her status as a classical philologist to lend herself authority over ancient matters and present herself as a typical *poeta doctus* with good knowledge of her sources on the one hand, and as a philanthropist sharing the values of the new midcult on the other hand. Problems arise when she either projects these values into ancient texts and interprets them in questionable ways, or misrepresents ancient poetics to present herself in a better light. Especially the claim of her novels' 'oral presence' in the tradition of preliterate epic performances appears untenable, just like her role as a rediscoverer of an allegedly suppressed homosexual reading of Patroclus and Achilles' relationship. The missionary effect she ascribes to her novels cannot be falsified, but certainly raises scepticism.

Although both novel's narrative framework is closely modelled on the respective mythological templates, a closer look reveals that different verdicts must be passed: since *The Song of Achilles'* agenda of an intimate perspective on the life of Achilles results in an over-stylisation of Patroclus' characteristic gentleness and a potentially problematic binary conception of homosexuality – which it was supposed to advocate for – it proves difficult to arrive at a final assessment other than to confirm the 'structural lie' of midcult in both the original and the new sense. It is all the more surprising that this does not hold true for *Circe*: with a variety of genuinely female topics and strong female characters, the novel certainly constitutes a 'feminist project', as intended by Miller. Meta-commentaries reflecting on the nature of (male) epic literature and the skilful reworking of especially Circe's encounter with Odysseus additionally indicate and encourage active intertextual dialogue rather than forced and predetermined interpretation.

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Michael Julian Fischer
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
Address of university/institution
mfischo4@students.uni-mainz.de

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