

University of Guelph-Humber

The Song of Achilles and Patroclus:

The Influence of Classical Mythology on Modern Music

Emily Shmyr

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Shane Hubbard

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Introduction

Companions, lovers, and life-long friends. The myth of Achilles and Patroclus' has taken on many of these names, some of which have gone on to influence elements of modern society such as music. Using the song *Achilles Come Down* by *Gang of Youths* and its connection to the myth of Achilles and Patroclus, this paper will outline, how Classical mythology has influenced modern music. From boyhood to adulthood and even in death, the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus in myth has prompted several opinions to unfold all starting with its original depiction in *Homer's Iliad*.

The Myth of Achilles and Patroclus

The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus came to light in Book I of the *Iliad* where the two were established as “dear comrade[s]” (Hom. *Il.* 1. 345). The *Iliad* depicts the two in adulthood as they fight alongside the Achaeans during the Trojan War, however, their relationship was established long before the war took place. Achilles was the demigod son of the sea-nymph, Thetis and the mortal, Peleus. Not only was he prophesied to be “greater than his father” but he was also the only one who could resolve the conflict at Troy, which would also lead him to a glorious death (Morford, Lenardon and Sham 481). Unlike Achilles, Patroclus' upbringing was mainly centred around his companion. He was taken in by Peleus in his youth after he killed a rival in a dice game, allowing him to become the companion of Achilles. From then, their bond began and followed onwards into the Trojan War (Morford, Lenardon and Sham 483).

Patroclus was “routinely characterized as dearer to Achilles than the rest of his friends” (Warwick 119). Although *Homer's* original description of the two presented a friendship, those

of the 5th century and beyond, suggest they were lovers (Miller 165). Considering the undertones presented in the *Iliad* such as Achilles' reference to Patroclus as being “dear to this heart”, it, therefore, suggested that the two were in a homosexual relationship (Hom. *Il.* 11. 605-610). Despite the differences in opinion, it was apparent that the two strongly affected each other.

Achilles was known at Troy as “the mightiest of champions on either side and a hero of enormous passions” (Morford, Lenardon and Sham 483). However, due to his long-lasting quarrel with Agamemnon that created the deaths of countless Greeks, his stubborn actions led him to also be viewed as selfish and cruel (Morford, Lenardon and Sham 488). Yet, Achilles’ “arrogance and egotism” was not projected onto Patroclus, whom he often regarded with “unprecedented tenderness and compassion” (Clarke 392). It made it apparent that Patroclus had a much greater role in Achilles’ life and the outcome of the Trojan War. To Achilles, Patroclus was often considered his “good counsel” who was not afraid to carry out his actions when asked (Finlay 270). However, individually, Patroclus played his own role in history. When sent to the medical tent, he learned of the horrors the Greeks were facing due to Achilles’ lack of participation, invoking his appeal for his companion to return to the war. Achilles’ denial, sparks his own joining into the conflict and eventually his death by Hector (Finlay 269; Morford, Lenardon and Sham 493).

Patroclus’ death creates a turning point in the conflict where “a black cloud of grief enwrapped Achilles”, influencing his re-entry of vengeance and the sealing of his own fate (Hom. *Il.* 18. 25). Thus, Achilles returns to the front where he not only succeeds in his revenge on Hector but also eventually dies by Paris and Apollo. Despite the tragedy that struck the two, both the bones of Achilles and Patroclus were mixed together in a golden urn, thence insinuating that even in death, their relationship lived beyond (Morford, Lenardon and Sham 503).

A Modern Iteration: Achilles Come Down by Gang of Youths

Although the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus first came to light in the ancient poems of *Homer*, it is apparent that their myth has also been brought forward within modern society specifically through song. Looking at the song, *Achilles Come Down* by *Gang of Youths*, connections between the myth and the artists' lyrics can be made. As evident by the title itself, *Achilles Come Down* connects to the myth by telling the story of their relationship during the Trojan War. The song mainly depicts Patroclus trying to convince Achilles to return to the war and see the chaos he has caused. Although Patroclus is not explicated as the narrator, through the lyrics, this indication becomes apparent. As the song progresses it furthers into the tragedy of the war and the actions of both companions. In its final notes, *Gang of Youths* showcases the tragic ending of Achilles and Patroclus, highlighting both the myth and its influence on the song.

Connections

Through the subtle lyrics of *Achilles Come Down*, the myth of Achilles and Patroclus is shared from start to end. Using the metaphor of a roof to describe Achilles' pride, the song focuses on the narrator attempting to get Achilles down from his refusal to rejoin the conflict. Patroclus' narration becomes evident in the second verse with the lyrics "remember the pack of our youth" tracing back to the bond created as boys between the two fighters (*Gang of Youths* 1:10). Similarly, the lyrics also mention that "there is no me without you", indicating not only their bond but also Patroclus' willingness to follow Achilles as a beloved companion (*Gang of Youths* 1:15; Finlay 267). However, as the song continues, the true frustration of Achilles' actions comes to light. As evident through the lyrics "so end it all now. It's a pointless resistance for you", it shares Patroclus' pleas for Achilles to rejoin the war and stop the killings of countless Greeks as found in *Homer's Iliad* (*Gangs of Youth* 2:40-45; CLARKE 391). Yet as

the *Iliad* shares, Achilles refuses, resulting in Patroclus' entry into war and his eventual death. The action creates a ripple effect, causing Achilles such grief that others feared he would commit suicide as no other "would not be worse to suffer than the death of Patroclus" (Clarke 392). Reflected in the song, Gangs of Youth depict Achilles' feelings of "no purpose nor point for existing" following the death of his friend while also highlighting Achilles' quest for revenge (3:18-21). The song speaks of how Achilles threw himself into the war "with pace and a fury defiant", indicating that through his quest for vengeance, his own fate was sealed (Gangs of Youth 6:07). It ends with its chorus creating a sombre element that truly reflects the tragedy of Achilles and Patroclus. Through the lyrics "see how the most dangerous thing is to love", a bittersweet ending of sacrifices is made on the part of the companions (Gangs of Youth 6:26). As the final notes fade out, the listener feels the heart-wrenching conclusion of the song, the myth, and the insinuation that the two have met once again after death.

Conclusion

From the *Iliad* and beyond, the nature of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship has been debated. Yet whether they were lovers, companions, or friends, it was evident that even in death the two cared deeply for each other. Similar to the nature of this myth, music often has its own debates on where inspiration comes from. However, in both myth and music, the inspiration is all reflective of the past. Using the example of the song, *Achilles Come Down* by *Gangs of Youth* and its connection to Achilles and Patroclus, it is evident that Classical mythology has influenced modern music. Through the musicality and lyricism of modern artists, the myths of the past have been reflected and allowed for yet another generation to interpret and analyze what these stories mean to them.

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