



## Greek Heroes in Popular Culture Through Time

*Achilles discussion*

### **Penny Boreham:**

The Greek hero Achilles is the central character of Homer's epic poem, the *Iliad*. He is the greatest and fastest hero on the Greek side during the Trojan War, and he chooses to go to war rather than enjoy a long and peaceful life at home, despite the fact that it is prophesied that he will die in battle. Achilles has been popularly portrayed in the modern western tradition as an undefeatable warrior, a beautiful, young, fearless fighter, and also as Achilles, the lover. His relationship with his friend Patroclus, which Homer depicts as a deep and meaningful one, is a key element of the myths associated with the Trojan War. It is the death of Patroclus in battle that spurs a wary Achilles into action, and ultimately leads to Achilles' own death, as prophesied. From the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus was sometimes depicted as one of overt homosexual love, and from then until now retellings of the myth of Achilles have sometimes chosen to concentrate on this aspect of the story, and sometimes not. I'd like to find out more and I've been joined here by the Open University Classicists, Dr. Elton Barker and Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni. Thanks for joining me.

### **Both:**

Hello.

### **Penny Boreham:**

So it seems to me that with Achilles in particular what's not mentioned in popular culture retelling seems particularly revealing of our own changing cultural mores. Anastasia, do you find it fascinating to reflect on what we leave out when we reinvent our own Achilles?

### **Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

Absolutely. I thought it was very interesting that in the 2004 film, *Troy*, they were very careful to make the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus a sort of a familiar one, so he is a younger cousin, I think, so it's very much Achilles is teaching him how to be a man, how to be a warrior, so they were very careful to leave that out.

### **Penny Boreham:**

So do you think the Hollywood producers thought that the audiences weren't ready for this?

### **Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

I think that's probably the case. I mean it's very interesting because we also had *Alexander* at about the same time, and when there's supposed to be a homosexual element to the relationship between him and Hephaestion, but all we actually see is a hug between two men, and that's as far as even that film goes, which I thought was very interesting.

### **Penny Boreham:**

Are there other popular retellings that really have emphasised that relationship?

### **Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

I've actually just come across this new novel by Madeline Miller, called *The Song of Achilles*, which is actually playing up the love between Achilles and Patroclus, but it is very interesting that that's the selling point of the book, that it is supposed to be a homosexual love story.

### **Penny Boreham:**

So what do you think this says about the sort of cultural mores, the fact that this is still such an issue that some of them, some of these retellings emphasise it and some don't?

### **Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

I think it's still a very sensitive issue and coming, being Greek myself, I have the experience of the sort of the modern Greek context, and when we were at school we certainly were not taught, it was never even suggested that there might be any love interest between Patroclus and Achilles. The whole point is that it was presented as this wonderful male friendship between two warriors, and no subtext there at all, at least that was what we were taught, and it's certainly an element that is silenced in a modern Greek culture, I think.

**Penny Boreham:**

This is very surprising, isn't it considering, Elton, the context in Ancient Greece where this wasn't an issue?

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

That's right. Well what struck me about maybe modern representations, such as the *Troy* film, is that they had to change the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles and make them cousins because they were very uncomfortable with the idea that men could have a close relationship. Now, of course, that doesn't have to be sexual. From my perspective I would like to see the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, at least in the *Iliad*, much more like one between Hamlet and Horatio in *Hamlet*, rather than thinking of Achilles of some kind of Captain Jack out of *Torchwood*. Now that overt sexuality of Achilles isn't really emphasised in the *Iliad* at all but, of course, you can read it into it, and Anastasia's mentioned this new book, you know *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller and that makes, that brings this love interest between them right to the centre of the tale.

**Penny Boreham:**

So you're saying the subtleness of the whole relationship in all its dimensions?

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

Exactly, exactly, and we have to kind of sexualise that and we can't talk about a close relationship between men without being sexual now almost, or if we don't want to make, if we don't to imply homosexuality then we don't do that close relationship at all.

**Penny Boreham:**

So, Elton, when have there been portrayals of the myth showing the overt homosexual relationship, the erotic aspect?

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

Well there's certainly tales in Ancient Greek itself, other tales contemporary to the *Iliad* that we have, there's a good story of, for example, Achilles hiding, you know cross-dressing as a woman, trying to avoid the call-up, as it were, to the Trojan War, and there's also a play by Aeschylus, the Athenian tragedian, his one portrayal of Achilles on stage in a play called *The Myrmidons* emphasises his relationship, this homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.

**Penny Boreham:**

So there was more awareness then than there is now of being able to tell the whole story?

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

Of course, of course, I mean that really would be my point with the *Iliad* that Homer chooses not to kind of make a big deal of it, that's not really the concerns of his story, but it's not because he would be afraid of talking about homosexuality. There are lots of evidence both in epic tales and also in pots: lots and lots and lots of pots of men engaged in homosexual activity, including ...

**Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

Including Achilles ...

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

Achilles and Patroclus ...

**Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

Yes. I mean and that would have been the popular culture of its day, wouldn't it, because these images were widely distributed, so the homosexual relationship was there out in the open, if you like, in antiquity. It's perhaps later on that it got silenced.

**Penny Boreham:**

So Achilles is a very complex character, as originally written about. Are there other subtleties and things that you think that we've lost in the modern retellings, other things have been emptied out, if you like?

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

Exactly, but precisely, because we tend to sexualise this tale we lose, I think, one of the main impacts of the *Iliad*. The *Iliad* is, you know the whole back-story behind the *Iliad*, you know the Troy story is about the Greeks versus the Trojans, and it's all about getting Helen back, but that's not how the *Iliad* begins. The *Iliad* begins not with conflict between us and them, Greeks versus Trojans, the *Iliad* begins with conflict between ourselves, among the Greeks, and it doesn't start with a battlefield scene as you would have imagined, you know a great epic would be, about us versus them, and a big battle before Troy, that's not where it starts. It starts with an assembly scene. It starts with an assembly that Achilles calls and so what I would suggest these modern retellings tend to miss is the politics of the *Iliad*. Achilles challenging the King Agamemnon, establishing the assembly as a place where you can speak, and speak freely, no matter if what you have to say is going to upset the king. And it's about social justice. He talks about how he's done all this fighting and he deserves credit for that, and has been recognised by the community, and it's wrong that Agamemnon is there getting all this booty and stuff without doing anything. And, of course, these issues of being able to speak freely in an assembly, the issues of social justice, these are issues, of course, that are highly resonant for today's culture, both in the west but also, as you see, with the Arab spring.

**Penny Boreham:**

And so are you saying it's quite interesting that they're not brought up for that reason? Perhaps they should be if they're resonant?

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

Yes, and we tend to flatten out the sto... We want a story to be simple. There's one way of telling the story that's going on in the Middle East or the riots, for example in London over the summer, we get fixated on a particular story, and we have a fixation on a particular story of the *Iliad* and we lose, I think, a lot of what else is happening actually in the text.

**Penny Boreham:**

Anastasia, certainly it seems every period champions a hero for its own reasons, its Achilles is the Achilles of that moment, but would you say that some of the darker aspects, or the more subtle aspects, have given way in popular culture to lighter ones? Is this something that you've noticed?

**Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

Absolutely, I agree with Elton. I think that this is a highly complex epic and, as classicists that is what we enjoy, it's picking the different strands apart, and it is interesting that in popular culture we tend, there is a tendency to cut those out. I'm always fascinated by Achilles's anger that he chooses to take himself out of battle, even though he knows that that will mean the death of many of his comrades and friends. Of course he doesn't count on Patroclus being killed, because he assumes that he, Patroclus, will also take himself out of battle. So that is, to me, sort of fascinating and from the modern Greek perspective we always, at least at school were taught to take the side of the Greeks, of course, as the glorious ancestors, and sort of downplay any of the darker aspects of the heroes to make them sort of more straightforwardly heroic. So I think our very idea of what a hero is has changed so much over the centuries that we sometimes apply the wrong kind of label to these ancient characters.

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

What we see here is that these heroes are actually very complex, and they're not simplistic figures at all, and Achilles, paradigmatically is a complex character, and ruminates on his own

mortality because, as you say, he knows he's going to die if he stays there at Troy, he has this very close relationship with Patroclus and you have this ironic situation where he starts off calling this assembly at the beginning of the epic to try to save the Greeks, and he supports them and their efforts, and by the end of that assembly he's cursed them all, and says 'go to hell, you know I want you all to die!', because they don't stand up with him against Agamemnon.

**Penny Boreham:**

You mentioned this changing attitude towards the hero, so what is it important for us to realise that has happened in that changing definition of the hero? Can you just define a bit more for me how has the notion of the hero changed?

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

Do you wanna have a go at that?

**Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

OK! Well I think the idea is that a lot of societies use the classical past because of its tremendous cultural value. They use it to reflect their own values and norms, and ideas. So almost by definition it means that each society will reinvent these heroes and make them in their own image, and make them reflect what they believe to be the important elements of the epic. I think because these are such complex characters, this is what is so amazing about them. This can actually be done. These are not black and white figures. They're immensely complex so that means that each artist can choose which strands they want to pick on like, for example Miller in her novel has chosen to focus particularly on the love affair between Achilles and Patroclus, and leave aside other questions, so I think it's very much a matter of choice, which is I think, to some extent at least, determined by our own values and our own ideas about the Homeric epics.

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

And I think there are broader issues at stake here too. We live in this sound byte culture, we're constantly told that we need to think of things, and we have to simplify that, and constantly try to get to just a simple idea of what the *Iliad* is about, what Achilles is about, and actually if you look at artistic representations, and I'm thinking about modern film here too, you know the number one film is *Tinker Tailor, Soldier Spy*, and this is not an easy film. These are not easy characters, they are actually very complicated, and that I think is the, really maybe our challenge as academics is to communicate the complexity of a narrative such as the *Iliad* and still make it exciting, sexy, something that people really want to read because I don't think actually we want simplistic tales. We like the challenges.

**Penny Boreham:**

You've said so much about Achilles but finally if we're just trying to sum up, why Achilles the hero still holds such sway for us and is constantly portrayed and reinvented in print, audio and film over and over again, what for you is the overriding reason, in a sentence?

**Dr. Elton Barker:**

He's challenging.

**Penny Boreham:**

Anastasia?

**Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:**

He's complex.

**Penny Boreham:**

And that seems a perfect place to close. For my part I've certainly learned a huge amount. Many thanks to our contributors, Anastasia Bakogianni and Elton Barker for shining the spotlight on a truly remarkable and complex hero.