

Achilles & Patroclus - Teachers' Guide

The resources about Achilles & Patroclus have been designed in order to help teachers have discussions on this rich and interesting topic with their students. We understand that the situation may vary from school to school as regards what opportunities there are to do so, namely in terms of the age in question and whether this fits within the existing curriculum or is something which could be included as part of an extra-curricular activity (for example, a lunchtime club).

The chapter itself may be used as background on some key themes relating to **Achilles & Patroclus: their intimacy; the relationship that sexuality & gender presentation had to gender & a hero's warrior status (if any); and the depictions of Achilles & Patroclus in modern times.** It is anticipated that teachers may use sections of the chapter depending on what is most appropriate and engaging for the level of their students. The teaching activities below have been designed to offer a variety of ideas from which to choose, depending on the specific aims of teachers and the year groups with which they are working.

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1. Starter Activity: Discussion of Key Question, Key Terms & Key People

Activity aim: get students to understand lesson focus and outline of core lesson content

Timing: 5 minutes

Alternative Key Questions to reorient your lesson around:

"What is the best way to understand Achilles & Patroclus? As a gay couple? As Greek comrades in war and in their masculinity? As both?"

Content advice:

Depending on your class and what you have covered with them previously, you may like to pick up on "the abduction of Helen" mentioned at the start of the resource material; and you may begin a conversation about rape versus seduction in the Homeric world.

Moreover, Troy controlled the Bosphorus Strait and, therefore, trade routes. Some argue that there were economic motives for the Trojan War.

If this is not material you have covered before, or you have more time or curriculum constraints, you may not like to have this conversation at this stage

2. Textual analysis of extract from Iliad 17

There are various ways you might like to introduce this textual analysis. Introduce the inquiry question in a discussion for students. This will enable them to consider the extract with focus. Before showing them the extract, you might like to ask them to speculate on what words or behaviors a comrade-in-arms might use upon hearing of a comrades' death; you might also ask students to anticipate what words or behaviours that would expect of a grieving romantic partner.

You might need to chunk the text with highlighting or notation for students to help identify what it is that is happening. Below is an example of how you might chunk the text:

- 1) "*Distraught, Achilles was ... not to fight Hector*"
 - Achilles is realizing that Patroclus must have died
- 2) "*As he was stewing... pain eclipsed Achilles*"
 - a soldier confirms to Achilles that Patroclus has died
- 3) "*He took... his heroic heart groaned.*"
 - Achilles' physical response to hearing confirmation of Patroclus' death

There is an additional line of translation that you may like to include depending on your class. This line does reference suicidal ideation. It is up to teacher discretion as to whether they include it or not:

... – his heroic heart groaned.

For he feared that Achilles would cut his own throat with a knife.

Textual analysis of extract from Iliad 17: activities

The chunking of the passage above offers a nice opportunity for group work. The section that is hardest to make inferences about Achilles' feelings is the second section, since it deals more with the soldier's words to Achilles than Achilles' actions or words himself. Nevertheless, there is a nice opportunity to give sections to students for them to think of their analyses in response to the inquiry question, and then to share their ideas with others.

Activity aim(s): get students to empathize with Achilles:

consider whether Achilles' grief is that of a comrade-in-arms, or that of a romantic partner

Timing: 10 minutes

Read the extract in full aloud as a class. Discuss - either first in small groups, or first altogether - what is happening in the passage and discuss the extent of Achilles' grief. Ask students in groups to prepare a dramatic rendition of the passage. Or ask students to arrange themselves in such a way as to wordlessly represent the extract in a freeze frame of the scene. Ask students to consider Achilles' physical response and the image of his grief that the extract implies.

You can split your class into three and assign them different parts of the extract

1) "*Distraught, Achilles was ... not to fight Hector*"

→ Achilles is realizing that Patroclus must have died

2) "*As he was stewing... pain eclipsed Achilles*"

→ a soldier confirms to Achilles that Patroclus has died

3) "*He took... his heroic heart groaned.*"

→ Achilles' physical response to hearing confirmation of Patroclus' death

As an extension or stretch activity, consider how:

Achilles commits mass slaughter on the Trojans until he is able to fight and kill Hector, and even threatens to 'behead twelve excellent sons of Troy in front of [Patroclus'] tomb, angered at [his] Death'. Iliad 23.22f

You can introduce to students the fact that human sacrifice was very rare in a Greek context; ask students to consider (again) the extent of Achilles' grief. Consider introducing the fact that mourning was typically carried out by women. Ask students if they think that Achilles' mourning is therefore more profound, or perhaps more problematic?

3. Were Achilles and Patroclus a gay couple, or were they just comrades?

Activity aim(s): get students to record, consider multiple & different points on whether Achilles and Patroclus were a gay couple or not

get students to consider points from different authors & also material evidence

get students to use structures & planning to develop sophisticated arguments

Timing: 10 minutes

Following a discussion of the extract from Iliad 17, you should record points that support Achilles &

Patroclus being a gay couple, and any that support them just being comrades. You can ask students to draw a simple table in their books, or you can provide one to them in advance in the interest of saving time. You may even include key points from the *Iliad* 17 extract - which you will have elicited from students in your prior discussion - pre-written into the table.

This table may be a good building block for a mini-essay or individual response that students may write towards the end of the lesson.

In addition to points from *Iliad* 17, you may like to project the detail of **Aeschylus**¹, **Plato**'s² and **Xenophon**'s interpretation of Achilles & Patroclus' relationship. You can conduct a whole class discussion on these points, or you can elicit through questioning whether students would like to record these points in the table as points of support, or not.

You may like - as a moment of variety - to introduce the Greek vase visual source separately. Tell students that the vase depicts Patroclus (right) treating Achilles' (left) wound. Ask students what they can infer about each man based on their depiction. Ask students what they can infer about their relationship based on their interaction between each other. It can be helpful to ask students to be specific in their language as to what precisely makes them say their points. To get the whole class engaged, you may like to ask every student to record one adjective that they may use to describe the mood of the image (tender, gentle, healing, etc.). This may be a good opportunity for whole-class discussion.

Students can record points about the vase in their table either in the column of Achilles & Patroclus just being comrades, or being a gay couple.

Extension: Consider also how Briseis is treated as a 'war-prize'.

Achilles is angry at first because he lost a woman, Briseis. Agamemnon, the commander of the Greeks, takes Briseis away from Achilles as repayment for his loss of Chryseis, another Trojan war prize; Achilles refuses to fight until she is returned. So does that mean that Achilles was actually in love with Briseis?

This question may be challenging for some students, since it introduces new characters & deviates from the theme of Achilles' and Patroclus' relationship. But you may find that it is useful to pose as an extension question to students who finish writing up their table early.

You can either keep the below as a follow-up slide for students, or you can not project it to students if you want them to feel that they can formulate good answers of their own in their own words

The *Iliad* seems much clearer on that point. Briseis was a prisoner of war and a slave – and Achilles responds to her loss as if he had lost a *possession*, not a romantic partner. One of the uncomfortable parts of reading the *Iliad* is the

¹ Aeschylus, fragments, 137

² Plato, Symposium 180a. NB: the wider context of the passage is explicitly sexual

way it presents women, and Briseis in particular is regularly dehumanised by the Greeks, including Achilles. Achilles' relationship with Patroclus is very different. They are close emotionally, which causes Achilles' rage at Patroclus' death

4. Achilles on Skyros

Activity aim(s): get students to understand that - for the Greeks - Achilles' role as a man & warrior is distinct from his sexuality AND from his gender expression/ clothing

Timing: 5 minutes

Introduce students to the Skyros episode of Achilles' mythology. Make it clear & plain to students that this is a different piece of learning for the lesson. You may like to show students a map to make this separation clear.

In order to develop students' train of thought there are several inquiry questions that you might like to use before introducing this episode:

- In the modern day, what ideas are there about how men and warriors act?
- From what we have read so far today, did the Greeks have similar ideas or different ones?

This can be a good opportunity to recap the key point that Achilles' sexuality did not seem to impact how much of a man & warrior he was seen as. Making links to the modern day can help students talk more confidently about the ancient societal context of sexuality. Make this a point of your discussion.

Introduce the details of the Achilles on Skyros episode. Ask students: (1) is this story about Achilles' sexuality; (2) how much of a man and warrior Achilles is; (3) gender expression. Get students to vote by a show of hands. Allow them to cast multiple votes. Use this as a basis for small-group or whole classroom discussions.

After laying out the details of the story, and giving an opportunity for discussion, you might like to direct students to the full written analysis of this episode. You can advise students about the importance of engaging with firsthand evidence in answers, but also about explicitly referencing historical context and showing awareness of context.

You can also encourage students to explore the limitations of our understanding in highlighting the different ways that Greeks thought about these topics. You might like to provide students with a sentence starter, such as: "Greeks' understanding of what made someone a man or a great warrior was very separate from whatever sexuality or gendered clothing they wore. An example of this is _____ This illustrates that Achilles' role as a warrior was separate to other aspects of him, and strengthens the idea that

Achilles could have had an intimate relationship to Patroclus, separate to their relationship as brothers-in-arms.”

If you have time with your students to do essay writing, this can be a way to model good essay writing to them. You can ask them to cast their eye over points they have already recorded about Achilles & think how they may formulate these into a longer answer.

5. How have Achilles and Patroclus been represented in modern retellings?

Activity aim(s): get students to consider the inquiry questions

- In these modern versions of Achilles’ story, how ‘masculine’ is Achilles’ representation?
- Are these modern retellings true to Homer’s? Do they change key aspects of the stories or characters? Why?
- How do you understand Achilles and Patroclus?

This task can be in small groups, with each group feeding back on a specific material. This is a good opportunity for differentiation since you can allocate material to groups depending on their ability & give them specific instructions.

Alternatively, you might like to run this as a carousel activity. Either digitally - or physically around the classroom - share material with students to circulate. They can formulate their own analyses of material, or they can contribute on flipchart paper in different areas of the classroom to combined analysis for each modern retelling. This is a good opportunity for differentiation since students can build on each others’ analysis depending on their ability level.

MATERIAL #1



DETAIL

The Wrath of Achilles (1847), by François-Léon Benouville, shows Achilles at rest; just as in the *Iliad*, he has left the battle because of his anger. Like a Greek statue, Achilles is depicted naked. This allows us to see his rippling muscles and manly physique. He looks almost uncomfortable, as if he is shifting in his seat – he cannot quite allow himself to rest. Even though he has withdrawn from battle, the painting makes it clear that Achilles is still a mighty warrior

MATERIAL #2

DETAIL

Troy movie clip

<https://youtu.be/WMIMmcM1Se0?si=meOCwWzOuMB63dfk>

This film is a 15/R in America

DETAIL

In the ancient world, where same-sex experiences were common, it was not assumed that being in a romantic relationship with another man would make a person any less masculine. Achilles, whose masculinity is in no doubt throughout the *Iliad*, is an excellent example of this. But in the modern world, homophobic assumptions about gay people often focus on their femininity. Many gay men do embrace their femininity, but being gay does not mean you *have* to act in a particular way. Even so, the makers of *Troy* may have felt it would complicate Achilles' representation to show him as both masculine and LGBT+

MATERIAL #3

DETAIL

Extract from Song of Achilles by Madeleine Miller

In the book, Achilles is again shown to be a great warrior. By focusing on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, and by making the pair act and sound like teenagers rather than adults, Miller emphasises their queerness but also de-emphasises their masculinity. In fact, the portrayal of Patroclus is particularly feminine – in the novel, he decides to become a healer rather than a fighter.

MATERIAL #4

DETAIL

Video game 'Hades' detail

There is no firsthand material to show students for this. So you may like to introduce this material yourself & role model the kind of analysis & response you want students to have for the firsthand material #1, #2, #3.

6. Essay/ Creative Writing Response/ Debate

Activity aim(s): improve & assess students on their understanding & argumentation

Timing: 10-20 minutes

Depending on how formal you would like your plenary activity to be, you may like to end with this task in whatever time you have left in your curriculum. Students should have accumulated (in their pro forma tables & notetaking) several points for Achilles & Patroclus being a gay couple; several points of context or limitations to our understanding that they may use to develop their argument; and several points from across a range of sources. You may like to use the inquiry question: "What is the best way to understand Achilles & Patroclus? As a gay couple? As Greek comrades in war and in their masculinity? As both?". Or you may like to use an enquiry question of your choosing. You can structure this as an individual task that students write a mini-essay on (using the pro forma table & notes that they have made throughout the lesson). You can structure this as a debate & split the class into small groups in preparation of a formal debate the following lesson. You can do a composite task - where some students write an essay, and others choose to do a piece of creative writing inspired by what they have learnt. You may like to introduce a prompt that begins this creative writing task.

If you are short on time, you might like to ask students to synthesize their perspective on the inquiry question into one statement; have them write it on a post-it note; and then post it on the board at the front of your classroom.

7. Orestes and Pylades

Achilles and Patroclus were sometimes connected with other pairs of male heroes, including Theseus and Pirithous, Herakles and Philoctetes, and Orestes and Pylades. The poet Goethe, recently “outed” as gay, celebrated them in his Temple of Friendship in 19th century Germany.

David Halperin further connected Achilles and Patroclus to Near Eastern couples, such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and David and Jonathan. The nature of all of those couples, and whether they were erotic or not, has been discussed at length.

The Orestes story goes like this: Orestes was the son of King Agamemnon, who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to enable the Trojan War to go forward; in revenge, his wife Clytemnestra killed him. Orestes has been in exile in Phocis, and he returns home to avenge his father’s death along with his comrade Pylades, with whom he grew up in Phocis. The Furies drive him mad and send him into exile until Apollo exonerates him in a formal jury trial.

That synopsis comes from Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, but there is no one Orestes, as there is no single Achilles. In his *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, Euripides highlights the care that Pylades devotes to Orestes in his fit of madness:

The stranger [Orestes] fell, throwing off the assaults of madness, dripping foam down his jowl. . . . But the other stranger [Pylades] wiped off the foam and gave his body protection, and shielded him with his well-woven cloak, watching out for the wounds that were coming his way, and succouring his comrade with kindly assistance (307-314).

When Pylades expresses a wish to die alongside Orestes, Orestes replies: “Don’t say such things! I must bear my own troubles—but I won’t bear double pains when they can be single. . . . Of all my friends I have found you the dearest” (708).

As in the case of Achilles and Patroclus, the close companionship between the two men may not be explicitly sexual in classical antiquity, but it is certainly deeply felt. Later ancient authors in Rome often drew out these implications, as have 19th-century writers like Goethe and Gluck, and modern fanzines!

MATERIAL #1



Orestes and Pylades, ca. 10 CE., The Prado Museum

Teaching potentially difficult material

While it is hoped that many discussions inspired by these materials will be positive and affirming for students, some elements may raise uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. For example, discussion and deconstruction of stereotypical masculinity or femininity may feel helpful for some students struggling with their own gender identity, but for others it may be deeply unsettling. Some of the narratives being explored also contain mention of violence, including sexual violence.

None of this is a reason to avoid this material or conversations pertaining to it, quite the opposite in fact. These conversations can be valuable, instructive and catalysts for important change. They should always, however, be undertaken carefully and thoughtfully. As an educator, remember that your students cannot leave their lives and traumas at the door (and neither can you). Such work requires you to be alert, engaged and sometimes vulnerable. Check in with yourself: can you do this today? If you do not feel in a good place to do so, then honour that. If you 'don't have time to unpack this' then do not bring these things into the room until you do. Give such topics the space they need.

There is no 'correct' way to teach sensitive material - it is context dependent, but the following principles may provide a sensible framework:

Safe environment. This is the most important factor for teaching difficult material successfully. This may include a clear class code of conduct which emphasises the need to respect the views of

others, as well as a clear way for students to indicate to the teacher that they are uncomfortable or in need of support.

Never aim to shock. Upsetting or sensitive material should never be presented with the aim of shocking or surprising students. This is important for all learners but especially for those who have suffered past trauma. Keep the 'temperature' in the room down and try to present things calmly. This does not mean glossing over or eliding violence, but instead thinking about how to present it in a way that does not increase the emotional load placed on students. This also applies to content warnings which should be given in a calm, neutral manner rather than as a dramatic announcement. Warnings might be incorporated into aims of a lesson and should convey the nature of the material to be studied but not assume any specific emotional reaction. For example, "in this session we will examine the story of Antiope, who was abducted by the hero Theseus, and discuss what ideas about violence against women are reflected by this and other myths we have studied", rather than, "in this session we will examine the disturbing story of Antiope, who was abducted by the hero Theseus, and discuss what ideas about violence against women are reflected by this and other myths we have studied. I recognise some of you may find this topic upsetting and want you to be prepared."

Individualised approach. Different students will be able to engage with traumatic or sensitive material to different degrees and will prefer to do so in different ways. Avoid activities which put students on the 'spot', for example rather than targeting specific students with questions, instead ask questions to the whole room and allow students to volunteer answers. When students do offer their thoughts, allow sufficient time for them to be expressed and fully discussed. Activities such as free writing can be very useful, as can allowing a range of ways in which students can express their thoughts (for example accepting oral responses or drawings rather than only written work).

Create distance. Do not force students to imagine the mindset of a victim of violence or oppressed person. For example, avoid questions such as "What do you think Penthesilea might be feeling when she comes face to face with Achilles?" and perhaps instead ask "What does the depiction of Achilles and Penthesilea on this vase tell us about what the Greeks thought about these two characters?". The former asks students to imagine being in Penthesilea's situation, whereas the latter looks for a factual, yet still important, answer. Emotional insights might be offered by students, but they should not be directly sought or forced. Allowing students to maintain emotional distance should they need to make for safer exploration of these topics.
