

Original Paper

Underrated Hero

—Further Exploration of the Status and Role of Patroclus

Ying Zhang^{1*} & Fenying MA¹

¹ The College of Humanities, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, China

* Ying Zhang, The College of Humanities, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, China

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Abstract

Among the heroes in the Homeric Epic, although Patroclus appeared late, he played a crucial role. This article will explore his relationship with Achilles, fighting as a substitute for friends, death, and the struggle for corpses, and further explain the hero, who has long been regarded as a substitute and attendant for Achilles, and his position and role in the Homeric Epic. The article breaks through the superficial understanding of his killing and death in the academic community, exploring how Homer portrays the noble side of his humanity in the Iliad, reflecting the humanistic spirit and rebellious spirit of ancient Greeks against fate.

Keywords

Patroclus, Homeric Epic, Achilles, humanism

1. Introduction

Patroclus is one of the important characters in the *Homeric Epic*. He is the son of Menoetius, a companion, partner and close friend of Achilles, and also a hero hidden beneath Achilles' brilliance. Such a character profoundly influences Achilles' humanity and compensates for the shortcomings criticized by many. In previous studies, most scholars regarded him as Achilles' substitute and attendant, conducting supplementary research on Achilles. James Hoke believes that we cannot prove whether Patroclus was a real person in Homer's era, but the significance of Patroclus' existence is significant. His significance lies in providing Achilles with a confidant and giving him a reason to be angry enough to make the story proceed. William Allen analyzed Patroclus' death and fate starting from weapons, and Marie Christina Leclercel focused on Patroclus' death, sorted out the killers of Patroclus, and showed the strangeness of his death. John A. Scott believes that Patroclus did not participate in the battle and did not have his own armor, but only existed as Achilles' attendant. The tragedy of the Wrath is that it

should have forced this man to his death, and in borrowed arm.

In fact, if we carefully review the plots related to Patroclus, we will find that Patroclus has long been underestimated as a hero. His relationship with Achilles, going on a campaign together as a friend, the struggle for his death and the corpse, all are of great significance. He symbolizes the beauty of humanity, the greatness of the common people, and the resistance of the Greeks against fate. Patroclus embodies the humanistic spirit that was highly praised in ancient Greece.

2. Identity—Lover and Lover

In Plato's *The Symposium*, there is such a relationship mentioned: "a lover and a beloved". It thinks that the happiest thing for a young lover is to have someone who loves him deeply, the greatest happiness for an older lover is to have a young lover who adores him.

At that time, people believed that young men possessed youth and beauty, while older men held power and status. The combination of the two was complementary and harmonious, and it benefited the city-state. "Akousilaos agrees with Hesiod as well. So there is an agreement in many sources that Eros is among the oldest. And as he is the oldest, we have him as the cause of the greatest goods, for I can hardly point to a greater good for someone to have from youth onward than a good lover, and for a lover, a beloved" (*Symposium*, p. 9). Then it took Achilles and Patroclus as examples and believed that the gods gave Achilles preferential treatment, allowing him to become the king of the ghosts after his death and accompany his friends, because he was determined to rescue his lover Patroclus. Although in the *Homeric Epic*, Achilles only saved Patroclus' body, from the *Symposium* of Plato, we can see that he recognizes the love relationship between Achilles and Patroclus and places Achilles in the position of the lover and Patroclus in the position of the beloved.

Parmenides also raised objections to the views of Aeschylus. He was dissatisfied with Achilles being called the lover of Patroclus and Patroclus being called the lover of Achilles. He said: "Aeschylus talks nonsense in claiming that Achilles was in love with Patroclus (rather than the other way around), for Achilles was more beautiful than not only Patroclus but all the other heroes as well; and besides, he was unbearded, and thirdly, far younger than Patroclus, as Homer says" (*Symposium*, p. 9).

Although the *Homeric Epic* did not clarify their relationship, through numerous metaphors and plots as well as the reflection in Plato's *Symposium*, Patroclus and Achilles in the hearts of ancient Greeks were clearly regarded as a classic image of lovers. Shi Xingfa and Li Zheng proved through the exploration of the ancient Greek burial system that the two were lovers. Ruan Wei said: "In an era with frequent wars, the relationship of lovers and companionship may even become a kind of life-and-death bond, more intimate and sacred than marriage" (Ruan, p. 252). It is precisely this relationship that made Patroclus better understand Achilles' anger and change his choice through his own actions.

Under this condition, the departure and death of Patroclus have a more profound meaning. He is not only Achilles' substitute, but also has more significant meaning from the perspective of Achilles and the Greek coalition.

3. Bond—Achilles and the Greek Alliance

The identity of “the beloved” indicates that Patroclus is a protected person, and his protector is Achilles. In the *Homeric Epic*, Patroclus always slept in the same tent with Achilles, which shows his uniqueness—a person with a close and intimate relationship with Achilles. He is also the bond between Achilles and the Greek Alliance, being the “decider” in his mundane relationship.

At first, Achilles requested the gods to punish the Greek Alliance for helping the Trojans. His intention was to reaffirm his central position in the army. When the fierce battle between the Greek Alliance and the Trojans caught his attention, he joyfully sent Patroclus to inquire who was injured and taken off the field. At this time, Achilles, from a personal standpoint, hoped that the Greek Alliance would convey the message of seeking help through the more approachable Patroclus to him. When Patroclus stood by Nestor's door, Nestor invited him to take a seat, but he refused to do so, citing his fear that the “revered and stern master” Achilles would blame him. Some scholars believe that this reason shows Achilles' mood swings, often blaming others without cause. Chen Zhongmei believes that this might be an exaggerated expression because even if Patroclus did not return on time, he did not receive Achilles' wrath, or that this was Patroclus' excuse to prevaricate Nestor's invitation. (Chen, p. 633). In fact, although the *Homeric Epic* revolve around Achilles' anger as the main thread, his anger has an inherent reason, and the reason why Patroclus said this is very likely to be to re-establish the prestige of the disgraced Achilles before the Greek Alliance. At this time, he was merely a closely integrated community with Achilles, and his heart was not worried about the tragic situation of the Greek Alliance. Nestor was very smart. He hoped to get help from Achilles, but focused his persuasion on Patroclus who came to visit. Nestor persuaded him with the words of his father's reminder, and showed fear towards the Trojans, wanting to give Patroclus a reason to become a warrior. Nestor proposed that Patroclus borrow Achilles' armor to fight, and let the Trojans treat Patroclus as Achilles.

Nestor realized that if Patroclus could repel the Trojans, then the Greek Alliance would have a breathing space. If Patroclus was in danger, due to his close relationship with Achilles, Achilles would surely lead his troops to rescue him. Therefore, when Patroclus was moved and decided to follow Nestor's advice, the bond between Achilles and the Greek Alliance was formed, and this bond was Patroclus himself.

4. Death—Awakening of Human Nature

Chen Siyi holds that: “The divinity and the beastliness of a hero are two sides of the same coin” (Chen, p. 139). And he believes that Achilles, as a first-class hero, is no exception. Achilles was the son of the

sea goddess Thetis and the human Pelias. He had two kinds of blood flowing through his veins, half human and half divine. His body should possess both “humanity” and “divinity”. Analyzing from “The Iliad”, the divinity of Achilles originated from his mother, while his humanity was concentrated in Patroclus.

Throughout the entire Trojan War, Achilles’ father remained in his hometown and did not appear on the battlefield. Goddess Thetis helped Achilles many times. Her excessive protection of Achilles fostered the arrogance of the divinity in his bloodline. Patroclus, also known as Patroklos, is a Greek name written as “Πάτροκλος” in Greek, meaning “the glory of the father”. In the *Iliad*, Homer made Achilles’ father absent, but Patroclus—the glory of the father—was present. We may understand that Patroclus replaced Pelias as the source of Achilles’ humanity.

The greatest difference between gods and humans lies in that the life of gods is eternal, while human life is short. If humans want to obtain eternity in a short life, they can only rely on glory. When facing the choice between “eternal life but unknown” and “glory but premature death”, Achilles was also choosing between divinity and humanity. Thetis immersed Achilles’ entire body in the River Styx and sought armor for him, made weapons for him, and advised him not to kill Hector, so as to obtain a life as close to that of gods as possible. When Achilles gained the power similar to that of gods and had a body invulnerable to weapons, his divinity gradually grew. Under the influence of Thetis, Achilles did not form an interest community with the Achaeans. His divine bloodline always occupied the dominant position. He, like the gods, disregarded the lives of the Greek coalition forces. “The *Iliad* already highlighted the suffering brought by Achilles to his companions at the beginning, and the core of this suffering was the conflict between the individual and the community” (Chen, p. 88). At this time, Achilles did not consider himself a member of the Greek coalition. He stood in opposition to the community from the perspective of the individual.

Greek generals repeatedly tried to persuade Achilles, but ultimately failed to convince him. Chen Siyi believes: “However, Achilles’ divine perspective completely followed the logic of nature, ignoring the mundane situation of human beings. This was particularly manifested in his disregard for two fundamental political facts: the distinction between the Achaeans and the Trojans as enemies, and the hierarchical order within the Achaeans” (Chen, p. 205). Facing the heavy casualties among his former companions, Achilles appeared exceptionally cold. The reason for his coldness was that his divine perspective transcended his human perspective. The superiority of gods over humans triumphed over the distinction of enemy and friend in human wars. However, his human perspective was awakened after the death of Patroclus. After Nestor reminded Patroclus, he became aware of the influence of Thetis. He proposed, “If some secret your mother has leaned from Zeus is holding you back, at least send me out, let me lead a troop of myrmidons and light the way for our army” (*Iliad*, p. 472). When Achilles was deeply immersed in his arrogance, Patroclus was extremely distressed by the casualties of the Greek coalition. He treated the wounded soldiers’ wounds, saw the Greek generals wounded, and

the Trojans approaching the shore, and he wept like a little girl and begged Achilles to go to battle. At this time, Patroclus hoped to awaken his mundane consciousness and also his longing for glory. Patroclus succeeded, but at the cost of his own life. The death of Patroclus shattered the situation where “divinity” was superior to “humanity”. After losing Patroclus, Achilles finally realized that the Trojans were the true enemies. His connection with the mundane world was thus awakened and magnified, and he became a true “community” with the Achaeans. He was in extreme pain. “A mist of black grief enveloped Achilles. He scooped up fistfuls of sunburnt dust and poured it on his head, fouling his beautiful face” (*Iliad*, p538). Achilles had completely lost the arrogance and coldness of divinity. A series of actions that defiled his purity indicated that his humanity was now in the ascendant. His actions carried a nature of self-punishment. The oppression of divinity over humanity made Achilles pray to the gods for help for the Trojans and refuse to go to war, causing the Greek coalition to suffer successive defeats. And his humanity, represented by Patroclus, attempted to rebel and asked to go to war on his behalf but was placed on the death list by the gods. Therefore, Patroclus stepping in to fight in place of Achilles was a manifestation of the eruption of human nature after it was suppressed by divinity, and it was also the last counterattack of human nature against divinity. In Wei Chaoyong’s article, it was mentioned that Patroclus was a “self-owned” love for Achilles (Wei, p. 640). This kind of love is love that is full of human nature between humanity and divinity. But it was awakened while also being destroyed at the same time. The absence of this “human love” made Achilles fall into unprecedented anger and self-punishment. He is punishing his former arrogance and immaculate divinity, and striving to find a way to make up for it.

5. Struggle—The Maintenance of Honor

When Patroclus was attacking the city, Homer believed that if it weren’t for Apollo’s intervention, Patroclus could have completely breached the walls of Troy (*Iliad*, p. 694). Patroclus climbed up the walls three times, and Apollo sent him back three times because he and Zeus did not want Patroclus to violate the predestined outcome and breach the city gates. When the Sun moved westward, the Achaeans gained the upper hand. If it weren’t for Apollo’s intervention, Troy might have been breached in this battle.

The gods were clearly biased towards the Trojans in this battle. Apollo knocked Patroclus unconscious with his own hands and removed his armor. Marie Christine Leclerc proposed that the way gods help their favored objects is usually only to offer advice and foretell danger, and they do not personally kill enemies for them. Gods usually achieve intervention through the hands of mortals. In this event, Apollo did not disguise himself at all and personally attacked at close range. She also mentioned that the act of stripping off the armor was done only for the dead. At the beginning of the battle, Patroclus was literally disarmed, while other defeated warriors only became so after death. So, Marie Christine Leclerc defined Patroclus’ death as “strange” (Leclerc, pp. 22-23). In the *Homeric Epic*, no hero has

ever suffered such treatment, being personally defeated by a god and stripped of his armor like a corpse. It can be said that this was a humiliation for Apollo towards Patroclus. Patroclus never prayed to the gods during the battle, nor did he intentionally offend the gods. Unlike the Atreus clan, his actions were entirely for the sake of the lives of others and the collective honor. Patroclus did not have a god strike down his enemies for him or break their spears and arrows for him. There was only human flesh and blood. From his background, he was not as noble as Achilles or Odysseus. He committed murder in his father's territory and fled to the palace of Peleus to grow up with Achilles. Compared to the leaders of the Trojans who participated in the war, he was representative of the commoner class. A landowner who crossed the ocean to attack a foreign city would be regarded as brave and glorious. A person who could have returned home to enjoy life with the lord but chose to fight against the gods out of not being able to bear the death of his own camp's soldiers was demonstrating human's counterattack against fate. From this perspective, Patroclus shared the collectivist spirit with Hector. He did not pursue personal interests but rather maintained the interests of the entire alliance of ancient Greece as an individual within the collective.

Such a challenge was destined to fail. After Patroclus' death, the Greeks and Trojans engaged in a protracted battle over his body. The gods might have wanted to use his death as a warning to make the Greeks give up the idea of resisting fate. If the Trojans had taken Patroclus' body and thrown it to the dogs to tear apart, it would have even more clearly declared the complete failure of the Greeks' resistance against fate.

"Men hacked slowly at each other in pain, the sweat from their labor coating. Their thighs and knees, pooling under their feet, spattering from their arms into their glazed eyes" (*Iliad*, p. 521).

The Greeks fought with all their might for Patroclus' body. They did not want the Trojans to take it away easily. During the struggle, the Greek coalition repeatedly mentioned "glory", "Achilles' surrogate", and also mentioned how friendly and amiable Patroclus was to us in his daily life. The Greek coalition forces recognized Patroclus' sacrifice and regarded guarding his body as a glorious act. Patroclus' body held three meanings for the Greek coalition forces: 1) He was a comrade who sacrificed his life to save the Greek coalition forces. 2) He was Achilles' close companion. 3) He symbolized the collective glory of the Greek coalition forces. If Patroclus' body was taken away by the Trojans, first of all, the morale of the Greek coalition forces would definitely be severely undermined. A comrade who saved the Greek coalition forces from a decline died, but the Greek coalition forces were unable to protect his body. Every lord and his soldiers would doubt the possibility of victory in this war. Secondly, Patroclus was Achilles' cherished companion. If the Greek coalition forces easily gave Patroclus' body to the Trojans, the stubborn and easily angered Achilles was very likely to blame the Greek coalition forces, making the possibility of victory in this war even more remote. Finally, Patroclus was a representative of collectivism among the Greeks, and his engagement in battle was a rebellion against gods and fate. For the Achaeans, preserving Patroclus' body intact and bringing it

back to a suitable burial place might be crucial. Letting the body be taken away further violated them and was shameful. Patroclus embodied the collective consciousness that was often overlooked by the Greeks. Before the intervention of the gods, he performed extremely well and approached the gates of Troy. The Greek coalition forces did not abandon Patroclus' body, which also represented not giving up the resistance against fate. The struggle for Patroclus' body was also a representation of maintaining the collective honor of the Greek coalition forces.

6. Conclusion

In the *Homeric Epic*, we can see that Homer's attitude towards Patroclus is one of appreciation and pity. Why did Homer love Patroclus so much that he always had a compassionate tone when telling his fate? Just looking at Patroclus, although his origin as a hero was not as noble as Achilles, Agamemnon, and others, this character pushed the development of the entire war. He was a fleeting hero and also a representative of the Greek common people. Sacrificing himself and being harmed by the gods, he led the Greek people to resist their predetermined fate. This might be the most perfect embodiment of the humanistic spirit in ancient Greek common people.

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