



## Of Gods and Men: Defining Hegemonic Masculinity in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*

### *Sobre deuses e homens: definindo masculinidade hegemônica em A canção de Aquiles e Circe, de Madeline Miller*

Tiago de Melo Cordeiro

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais / Brasil

timelocordeiro@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4971-1033>

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the rise of the rewriting and reinvention of the ancient Greek world through two novels, *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, by North American writer Madeline Miller. Instead of focusing solely on the female characters' roles in relation to patriarchy, I explore how the male heroes in the novels, such as Odysseus, Achilles, Telegonus, Telemachus, and Patroclus, construct their identities in terms of their distance from women, pursuit of glory, and sexual prowess. By analyzing specific passages from the novels and comparing ancient and modern definitions of masculinity, I aim to define and understand the concept of hegemonic masculinity as depicted in Miller's works. Additionally, I aim to establish a connection between hegemonic masculinity and its impact on the personal identities of heroic men.

**Keywords:** hegemonic masculinity; hero; glory; Madeline Miller; Homer.

**Resumo:** Esse artigo investiga a ascensão da reescrita do mundo grego antigo através dos romances *A canção de Aquiles* e *Circe*, da autora norte-americana Madeline Miller. Ao invés de focar na construção de personagens femininas em relação ao sistema patriarcal, eu exploro no artigo como os heróis, tais como Aquiles, Odisseu, Telegonus, Telêmaco e Pátroclo, constroem suas identidades masculinas em termos de distanciamento do feminino, a busca por glória, e a dominância sexual. Através da análise de passagens específicas dos romances de Miller e da comparação entre definições antigas e contemporâneas de masculinidade, eu foco em definir e compreender o conceito de masculinidade hegemônica nos escritos de Miller. Ainda, o artigo estabelece uma conexão entre a masculinidade hegemônica e seu impacto negativo na identidade pessoal de homens heroicos.

**Palavras-chave:** masculinidade hegemônica; herói; glória; Madeline Miller; Homero.

## 1 Tracing Hegemonic Masculinities in Homer and in Miller

Literary critic Harold Bloom (1930-2019) (1975, p. 33) argues, “everyone who reads or writes in the West, of whatever racial background, sex or ideological camp, is still a son or daughter of Homer”. That is certainly the case with Madeline Miller (1978-), the classicist who pens the novels investigated in this paper, *The Song of Achilles* (2012), and *Circe* (2018). Miller’s fiction revolves around the rewriting of Greek and Roman myths for a more contemporary audience. Besides *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, her work also encompasses the short stories “Heracles’ Bow” (2012) and “Galatea” (2021), as well as several essays and reviews in newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

Acclaimed as revisionist myths, Miller’s novels tend to be categorized as part of feminist rewritings of Homer; however, the focus on her female characters has resulted in a lack of discussion of the figure that puts Homer’s epics in motion: the hero. According to Kevin Boon (2004, p. 303), “the hero figure is primarily a male figure; thus the hero figure is part of a metanarrative of masculinity”. Therefore, I consider that any approach that overlooks the intrinsic construction and reformulation of male identities in Miller’s novels may result in a rather incomplete inquiry. In Miller’s novels, the hero works as a two-edged sword that is intertwined with the representation of men in literature and with the demotion of their male identities.

Male maturity is also one of the main themes found in Miller’s debut novel, *The Song of Achilles*, which rendered the author the 2012 Orange Prize for Fiction.<sup>2</sup> It covers the story of Patroclus and Achilles from their childhood until their deaths on the shores of Troy with a special focus on their homoerotic relationship. More than a war tale set during the Greek age of heroes, *The Song of Achilles* presents to its reader the Trojan War through the eyes of Patroclus, a first-person narrator, who, contrary to the one found in *The Iliad*, is a reluctant warrior-prince.

For this reason, *The Song of Achilles* can be considered a *bildungsroman* (a coming-of-age novel) that traces opposite and complementary trajectories pursued by Patroclus and Achilles toward

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<sup>1</sup> Miller’s essays and reviews can be found on her personal website (see Miller, c2023).

<sup>2</sup> Now The Women’s Prize for Fiction.

the construction of their male identities. While Achilles engages with the ideal project of maleness through war and his godhood, Patroclus distances himself from it through his empathy toward – and almost partial identification with – some female characters and his anti-war attitude. *The Song of Achilles* demonstrates to what extent masculine identities are shaped by the notion of *kleos* (glory) and military prowess.

Similarly, *Circe* – shortlisted for The Women’s Prize for Fiction in 2019 – is also a *bildungsroman* that narrates, in an autobiographical manner, the existence of the eponymous narrator-character from her childhood until she decides to become a mortal woman. The novel emphasizes the encounters she has with humanity throughout the plot. The goddess, who is pivotal to the plot of Homer’s *Odyssey*, presents to her audience different versions of old figures in Western literature, such as Prometheus, Penelope, Odysseus, and Telemachus.

Additionally, her experiences with gods and mortal men offer wide, diverse portrayals of male characters. In the novel, Circe’s body and her island, Aiaia, symbolize the juncture where masculinity representations are amalgamated with the violence men promote against women. Circe is condemned to exile by her father, Helios; her island is ransacked by pirates, and her nymphs are targeted as easy sexual prey by gods and mortal men alike. Not surprisingly, the novel leaves in its reader the quite poignant impression that masculine identity seems to be – indeed, must be – closely intertwined with women’s oppression.

*The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* are told by different narrators who have in common how they perceive the faults of Homer’s heroes. Both Circe and Patroclus judge these men’s actions and depict them in a more critical, sensible way. To a certain extent, their accounts counter Boon’s (2005, p. 304) claim that “whether the [hero’s] status is deserved is irrelevant”. I consider that, by reinventing Homer’s heroes, Miller also contributes to reshaping our perception of heroic and contemporary masculinities. In approximating theories of masculinities to both novels, it is possible to conclude tentatively that whereas Achilles, Telegonus, and Odysseus are exemplars of one culturally dominant form of masculinity, Patroclus and Telemachus offer a rather different portrait of maleness. These depictions demonstrate how crucial it is to

question the notion that the hero figure is not harmed by the position he occupies in a patriarchal society.

Nevertheless, defining concepts such as masculinity or femininity has been a difficult task for those who have endeavored the attempt. So far, one of the most common definitions – if it can be perceived as a definition at all – is that masculinity is that which femininity is not, and vice versa. Consequently, instead of an accurate understanding of either term, what one has in one's hands is a logical statement, a mathematical (in)equation.

Therefore, in this paper, I promote a short review of masculinity studies and establish the links to promote what entails hegemonic masculinity in the society Miller depicts. As Simon Yarrow (2011, p. 117) acknowledges in “Masculinity as a World Category of Analysis”, “[i]t is difficult to think of the history of masculinities independently of feminist historiography”. The three topics I consider crucial to the building of male identities in the society Miller portrays in both novels are: distancing from women, divine bloodline, and sexual prowess.

The concern with those concepts is not a new thing; however, it may seem that contemporary times have been paying particular attention to gender. The differences between men and women have been the subject of authors of the most distinct socio-historical background. Since the patriarchs and prophets of the Scriptures to the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, there has not been a time in which these differences have passed unnoticed. The intellectual agitation stirred by the French philosophers – the likes of Jacques Derrida, Simone de Beauvoir, and Michel Foucault – during the 1960s and 1970s shook the long-established impression that masculinity and femininity were natural, intuitive, and changeless features of one's constitution.

Interest in masculinity and, henceforth, men's studies could only flourish due to the dawn of feminist theories. The three waves of feminism saw, either as a reaction or as a counterpart, new ideas on masculinity take place. As Tim Edwards notes in *Cultures of Masculinities*,

[f]rom the 1970s onwards, many men working in political and academic circles alike were exposed to, if not forced to confront, feminism and indeed feminists whether in their working, academic, political or personal lives.

Simultaneously, the rise of small networks of men's consciousness-raising groups seeking to address some of these issues and perhaps more fundamentally to explore what it meant to be a man galvanised many men's early enquiries into masculinity more academically (Edwards, 2006, p. 22).

Likewise, Connell (1994, p. 12) emphasizes that the science behind masculinity has been concerned with three fronts. The first drawing from Freudian perspectives, the second firmly based on the notions of sex role, and the third weaving the connections between anthropology, history, and sociology (Connell, 2005, p. 7).

The three waves of feminism cast a light on the ever-lasting contrast between biological and socio-cultural ideas of doing/performing gender, which, as a result, made us "aware of masculinity in the twenty-first century like never before" (Edwards, 2006, p. 1). In fact, as Connell (2005, p. 5) points out, "these views of masculinity and femininity, uncontroversial in the biological sciences, are fiercely contested in the humanities and social sciences". The aftermath of this uproar in the North American social-political scene during the 1960s until early in the 2000s was a heated debate and the rising of some Men's Movements such as the famous Mythopoetic Movement.

Promoted by Robert Bly and his book *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990), the Men's Rights Movements claimed, under a strong anti-feminist bias, that men are not, in the least, privileged by patriarchy. Instead, according to these Movements, either men and women are equally oppressed or men suffer more the effects of the traditional gender structure. Men's Movements, however, made the mistake to overlook the fact that a substantial portion of feminist theories are aware of the harm to which men are vulnerable on account of their gender role.

Although these movements proved to have a short life, the debate they stimulated resulted in the foundation and rise of men's studies, a field of knowledge that encompasses men's experiences and men's lives. Under the aegis of these studies, it is possible to come to a reasonable definition of masculinity with which I concur and consider critical to this paper: masculinity is built in a view of establishing "the social roles,

behaviors, and meanings prescribed for men in any given society at any one time” (Aronson; Kimmel, 2004, p. 504). By using masculinities instead of masculinity, what comes to the center of the discussion is the notion that “masculinity means different things to different groups of people at different times” (Aronson; Kimmel, 2004, p. 504). Moreover, the use of a plural form acknowledges the perspective that, indeed, not only do men build their masculine identities in opposition to femininity but also in relation to themselves and to an ideal of masculinity that is promoted by a singular socio-historical context.

To exemplify that, Michael S. Kimmel (2006, p. 5) suggests in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* that “American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment”. The reason for that is the assertion that “[a]t any given moment, several meanings of masculinity coexist” (Aronson; Kimmel, 2004, p. 504). Being a white man differs significantly from being a black man in the U.S. Belonging to the work-class or to the middle class also affects the notion of a group of what it means to be a man. Considering this, it is noticeable that race, class, and sexuality shape men’s identities in the West. The most striking examples are the subordination of gay men and the marginalization of black men in the U.S. As Connell (2005, p. 78) exemplifies, while gay men are often excluded from cultural and political scenes, institutional racism is a component of black masculinities. What both types of masculinity have in common, however, is how they are easily oppressed and targeted as dangerous and/or deviant.<sup>3</sup>

This discloses in the Anglo-American context how the inner relations that intertwine gender, class, and race take their toll in the construction of masculinity and men’s identities. Kimmel’s (2006, p. 128) assertion endorses the perspective that any man who is not “a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a decent record in sports” lacks in masculinity.

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<sup>3</sup> To read more on black masculinities, see *Black Masculinity: The Black Male’s Role in American Society* (1982), by Robert Staples. To read more on gay masculinities, see *Homosexual: Oppression & Liberation* (1972), by Dennis Altman (1993).

Similarly, when analyzing the socio-historical context Miller depicts in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, conflicting definitions of masculinity also arise. Both novels are placed in the world of myth portrayed in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. A world that is echoed later during the classical period and spins around the figure of the hero; a figure that is, according to Kevin Boon (2005, p. 304), a metanarrative of masculinity. Theories and conceptions on what should encompass masculinity concerned the ancient Greeks from Homer to Plato. However, masculinity is not only performed or portrayed by boys and men in Homer or Miller but also by mythological beings. To get a better picture of what ancient Greek gender-structured society looked like, one should also take into consideration that the Greek cosmos is formed by gods, goddesses, men, and women and that the interaction among mortals and immortals composed the bulk of these stories and prospects. With that in mind, I turn this discussion to ancient Greece.

Sarah Pomeroy (1995, p. 1) notes in *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* that “Classical mythology provides the earliest glimpse of male-female relationships in Greek civilization”. However, not only does it differentiate male and female but also, at its core, gods and men. In Homer’s epics as well as in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, to comprehend both figures is crucial to any analysis of these pieces of work.

Although “[t]he physiology of the gods corresponds to and mirrors that of men” (Clay, 1983, p. 144), the greatest difference among gods and men can be spotted on the epithets to address both, *athanatoi* (deathless ones) and *thanatoi* (mortals). The mortal condition is, in fact, one of the key concerns of ancient Greek civilization, for it puts gods and men in distinct classes. In *Circe*, the eponymous character clarifies, “[o]f all the mortals on the earth, there are only a few the gods will ever hear of. Consider the practicalities. By the time we learn their names, they are dead. They must be meteors indeed to catch our attention. The merely good: you are dust to us” (Miller, 2018, p. 90). However, as Jenny Strauss Clay (1983, p. 141) argues in *The Wrath of Athena: Men and Gods in the Odyssey*, Homer’s gods are not only immortals: they do not grow old.

In several Greek myths that portray a goddess falling in love with a mortal man, the outcome is far from a joyful one. For example, in the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, we find the story of Eos, goddess of dawn, who asks Zeus to grant her lover, Tithonus, immortality, but forgets to ask also for eternal youth. Tithonus' destiny is a dreadful one, for he is condemned to grow older each year, without dying. On the other hand, there are a plethora of stories in which a god gets involved with mortals and immortals and grants them a few wishes.<sup>4</sup> Pomeroy (1995, p. 10) provides an explanation for that: “[i]mmortal females are expected to [have sexual intercourse] with males of similar ranks – that is, gods – while immortal males may enjoy females of lower, or mortal status”. In *The Odyssey*, Calypso, the nymph who had trapped Odysseus in Ogygia as a lover, scolds Hermes when she is ordered to free the Ithacan, “[y]ou cruel, jealous gods! You bear a grudge/whenever a goddess takes a man/to sleep with as a lover in her bed” (Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.118-120). Nevertheless, what is quite transparent in those myths is that in the relationship between a goddess and a mortal, the goddess – albeit female – remains the stronger part.

Another constant feature of these stories is the connection between Zeus and civilization. Zeus' rule began when he and the Olympian gods overthrew the Titans. An allegorical reading of some myths allows us to consider the Titans as representative of wild, unruly natural forces that had to be tamed. Several monsters and beings who refused to abide by the Olympians' order were female,<sup>5</sup> which renders Zeus the role of civilizer. Similarly, as Van Nortwick (2008, p. 50) points out, “women were also believed to be closer to the raw forces of nature than were males, [therefore] controlling their power was, for the adult male, part of the larger project of creating human civilization itself” with the social order mirroring the divine one.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the myth of Zeus and Ganymedes.

<sup>5</sup> In Hesiod's *Theogony*, seeking revenge against the gods, Gaia begets Typhoeus, the giant who almost defeated Zeus (*Theogony*, 820-881). The *Theogony* also displays the figure of Echidna, another female creature that quickens monsters. Several Greek myths embody this fear of femininity by demonstrating how females can be threatening to the social order.



Hence, in the society Miller depicts, “[t]he first level of organization to be managed was still the family. [A]s father and husband, [the adult male had] to establish his own branch, with himself as the controlling authority” (Van Nortwick, 2008, p. 50). That, however, does not address different constructs and ideals of masculinity in ancient Greek society, for controlling the household (*oikos*) was only one social task expected from men. To get a better understanding of the concept, in the next paragraphs, I discuss the two predominant views on masculinity in ancient Greece, the Spartan and the Athenian.

Scott Rubbarth (2014, p. 22), in “Competing Constructions of Masculinity in Ancient Greece”, notes that, although ideals of maleness might differ significantly in different Greek cities, courage in battle, control of one’s household, and the ability to speak well in public often delineated male power not only in Homer’s epics, but also during the Classical and Hellenistic periods.<sup>6</sup> By extension, these are also part of men’s identities Miller portrays. However, features that prescribed maleness to men in ancient Greek society did not hold the same value to distinct cities. This assertion concurs with what I have stated before that masculinity is something to be achieved instead of being something natural. Therefore, I start this discussion by the one feature that is inherently woven in every ideal of masculinity held by Homer’s heroes, courage.

In the ancient Greek world, courage as a masculine attribute does not come as a surprise once the word *andreia* (courage) shares linguistic properties with the word *aner/andros* (man); however, Athenians and Spartans differed on the importance of courage to the masculine formation. On the one hand, the Spartans were professional soldiers who were forbidden by law to engage with any kind of activity except soldiery. To a Spartan citizen, courage is the main aspect of his masculine identity. On the other hand, Athenian men trained and warred only when it was

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<sup>6</sup> History of Ancient Greece is often organized in four periods, the Minoan-Mycenaean period (circa 1600 BCE - 1100 BCE), Archaic period (circa 800 BCE - 480 BCE), Classical (480 BCE - 323 BCE), and Hellenistic (323 BCE - 31 BCE). The period between the ruin of Minoan civilization and the Archaic period, whose beginning is marked by Homer’s and Hesiod’s poetry, has been named by scholars as the dark ages, for there is not much information or data about it. See Van Nortwick (2008, p. xv-xvi).

necessary. Having a more pragmatic view, Athenians did not place *andreia* at the center of their activities as did the Spartans for two reasons: “the consequences of [cowardice] were less significant in Athenian society than [they were] in Sparta” (Rubbarth, 2014, p. 26) and being head of a household was far more important to their masculine identities.

The household (*oikos*) would include the wife, children and the slaves under the command of the *kurios* (master). By proving to be a good administrator as well as husband and father, Athenian men demonstrated male power. Conversely, as Rubbarth (2014, p. 27) argues, “[t]hose who failed to marry and produce children, or who squandered their inheritance, or failed to control their slaves also failed at being a man”; however, the Athenian state did not interfere in the way the *kurios* held the affairs of his household. In contrast, because Spartan men spent a great part of their lives either at camp or at war, they barely held – or were expected to – any responsibility to their states. In fact, several accounts – including Plutarch, one of the few sources we have on ancient Sparta – claim that Spartan women led their husbands’ states.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, approaching the political sphere, that is where the disparity between Athenian men and Spartan men is more strongly delineated. Whereas politics did not occupy a central concern in Spartan men’s lives, Athenian men were expected to have a broad and active role in the city-state affairs. Athenian citizens were evaluated by their peers by their use of rhetoric. The more a man could swing his audience, the more he was seen as manly. Conversely, a man who could not speak well in public would be perceived as immature, lacking masculinity. For example, when Mentès advises Telemachus to gather the city’s council and publicly reproaches the suitors, Odysseus’ son answers that he is inexperienced and feels awkward when talking to elders (Homer, *Odyssey*, 3.22-25). Even though Telemachus is almost twenty-one when *The Odyssey* starts – old enough to have warred and even attended some

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<sup>7</sup> I do not hold Sparta as an example of gender equality in antiquity, as some scholars or public opinion may do. It is true that Spartan women held more freedom than their contemporaries in Athens, but the whole gendered system in Sparta reared girls for what they perceived to be their paramount task – and duty – in Spartan society, to give birth (see Rubbarth, 2014, p. 20-21).

public meetings –, he evinces in these lines he has not matured enough yet. His claims – although legitimate and fair – are amusingly rebuked by the suitors due to his lack of maleness.

In comparing and contrasting these two models of masculinity in ancient Greece and approximating them to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, I notice that the Homeric epics also differ in establishing their main masculine feature. After all, as Clay (1983, p. 141) emphasizes, “The *Odyssey* is obviously a very different kind of poem from the *Iliad*, and Odysseus a very different kind of hero from Achilles”. The *Iliad* values courage – especially in its context of bravery in battle – whereas *The Odyssey*, a poem of *nostos* (homecoming), reinforces the Athenian ideal that the adult man must succeed in his roles as head of the household and as citizen. Conversely, as I perceive it, *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* acknowledge a cluster of characteristics that, in the end, champion neither Achilles nor Odysseus.

The discussion above allowed us to notice to what extent the study of men’s representations in literature stems from men’s studies and how the parameters that work as a cornerstone for men’s identities alter. Still, one of the essential ideas men’s studies has provided for literary analysis is the concept of hegemonic masculinity. It has been acknowledged by several authors that although hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed concept,<sup>8</sup> it can be perceived as a culturally constructed idea that reinforces some male characteristics in a specific socio-historical setting. In the Anglo-American context, the most accepted definition of the term considers that it “embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, [as] it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically [legitimizes] the global subordination of women to men” (Connell; Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). However, what Connell’s definition fails to consider is that, as pointed out by Victor J. Seidler (2006) and Kimmel (2006),<sup>9</sup> hegemonic masculinity can promote

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<sup>8</sup> James W. Messerschmidt (2018, p. 47-70), in *Hegemonic Masculinity Formulation, Reformulation and Amplification*, discusses the history and further elaboration of the term.

<sup>9</sup> Seidler (2006, p. 3) argues that Connell’s theory poses masculinity as a problem to be solved. Kimmel (2006, p. 4), however, acknowledges that the history of manhood must encircle at least two narratives: the dominant one and the marginalized.

men's self-destruction, because it sentences men to a Stoic silence, disavows men of processing their feelings, and fosters commonplace notions of men as untouchable and invulnerable.

Nonetheless, as Connell strongly defends, male hegemony is most recognizable in patriarchal societies by its endorsement of male features that eventually lead to women's domination. If one is acquainted with feminist theories, the connections between women's oppression and masculinity may seem obvious; however, the same cannot be stated about the anxieties that inhabit the relations among masculinities. In order to tackle this issue, in *Masculinities*, Connell (2005, p. 7) systematizes four types of masculinities found in contemporary Anglo-American societies: the hegemonic, the complicit, the subordinate, and the marginalized.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold (2003, p. 63) in "Homeric Masculinities: ἡνσέ and ἀγῆνσέ" claim Homer's epics favor two kinds of masculine portrayals: proper maleness (ἡνσέ) and excessive maleness (ἀγῆνσέ). The former is associated with men's proper behavior toward each other and camaraderie on the battlefield, whereas the latter would be used to indicate men who trespass the limits between men and beasts and, out of the inability to respond reasonably to their feelings, would put themselves and their companions in harm's way. By comparing Connell's to Graziosi's ideas, I consider that both, proper maleness and excessive maleness, are two faces of the same coin, hegemonic masculinity. Connell, Kimmel, Rubbarth, and Graziosi make it possible to state that, when approximated to a literary text, theories of masculinities offer a powerful tool to investigate the formation and the undoing of masculine identities in a piece of literary work.

By acknowledging that masculinities are built historically and culturally, I affirm that a thorough observation of the society Miller

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<sup>10</sup> According to Connell (2005, p. 76), complicit masculinity is characterized by men who do not perform hegemonic masculinity but still benefit from patriarchy, while subordinate masculinity is marked by the oppression of gay men or men who are associated with feminine traits by the hegemonic type. However, hegemonic, complicit, and subordinate masculinities are relations internal to the gender order. Conversely, marginalized masculinity is marked by differences among men of other classes and races. In the Western patriarchal context, black men are considered marginalized (Connell, 2005, p. 76-81).

depicts in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* provides valuable insight to identify which men are hegemonic and which are not. After all, as Aronson and Kimmel (2004, p. 504) point out, “[i]n every culture, men contend with a definition that is held up as the model against which all are expected to measure themselves”. For this reason, although masculinity is defined against femininity, the hegemonic model of masculinity is simultaneously built in relation to other masculinities and women.

By approximating the concept of hegemonic masculinity to the agonistic society portrayed in Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, I infer that hegemonic men in these novels would aim to occupy the status of *Aristos Achaion* (the best of the Greeks). Therefore, in the next parts of this paper, I propose why hegemonic masculinity in both novels encompasses these factors: distance from women, the pursuit of *kleos* (glory), divine bloodline, and sexual prowess. As a result, I also argue that each one of these factors leads men in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* to promote physical, social, or psychological self-harm.

## 2 Distance from Women

I justify my criteria for, as conflicting and complex as a definition hegemonic masculinity may be, it certainly covers one thing: hegemonic masculinity fears resemblance with femininity. As Judith Butler (1990, p. 10) states in *Gender Trouble*, “[f]or [Simone de] Beauvoir, women are the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself”. Similarly, Rubbarth (2014, p. 30) argues that in classical antiquity,

[m]uch of the rhetorical discourse and vituperative literature relies heavily on identifying perceived female characteristics in men as a form of attack, insult, or moral admonition. The key theoretical move underlying the moralizing of gender discourse was the idea that men and women represent opposite impulses.

Thus, it is possible to perceive the reason why Achilles, Telegonus, and Telemachus distance themselves from the epitome of

femininity in their lives: their mothers.<sup>11</sup> In the patriarchal society Miller depicts, it is imperative that the separation between mother and male child occurs as soon as it is possible. In the very first scenes of *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus tells his audience that “[when he] was delivered, [he] was plucked from [his] mother’s arms by [his] father” (Miller, 2012, p. 1). It is no coincidence that Menoitius, the one responsible for this violent separation, fits the model of hegemony proposed in Miller’s novels for, according to Van Nortwick (2008, p. 27), heroes, kings, and warriors – hence, hegemonic men – in ancient Greek society must be in charge of this separation.

Conversely, in *Circe*, Telegonus – Odysseus and Circe’s son – and Telemachus, Odysseus and Penelope’s son, willingly break from their mothers to go on a journey after their father. After all, it is Odysseus’ responsibility to teach his sons “those arts of mortal men, swordplay, archery, hunting, speaking in council” (Miller, 2018, p. 249). As noted by Connell (2005, p. 135) and Van Nortwick (2008, p. 7), masculinities seem to be formed under two requirements: supportive mothers and absent fathers. That is why “[t]o reach full manhood, heroes in Greek and other Mediterranean literature always need to separate from their mothers and come to terms with the world of their fathers” (Van Nortwick, 2008, p. 7). In fact, Odysseus is absent during the major part of the events in *Circe*. By contrast, the tales about Odysseus that both boys hear during

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<sup>11</sup> In *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Homer presents us two immature young men, Achilles and Telemachus. To be perceived as an adult, respectable man in *The Iliad*, Achilles must stop resorting to Thetis every time he is hindered from achieving what he wants. In a similar fashion, Thetis should stop protecting her child and finally accept that he is, indeed, mortal. In *The Odyssey*, Telemachus is the one who strives to go away from his mother, Penelope. The longer he stays at her palace in Ithaca, the less he will be able to gather glory for himself. For this reason, he leaves after Odysseus’s news. Miller rewrites the relation mother-child – and notably the relation immortal mother-mortal child – in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* and its impact on Telemachus, Telegonus and Achilles’s formation. Both immortal mothers, Thetis and Circe, are excessively shielding and overprotective. Nevertheless, their offspring decide to break the tie by engaging with masculine activities. Achilles goes to Troy to war while Telegonus sails to Ithaca aiming to be acknowledged by Odysseus, his father. The Homeric epics and the novels *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* evince how crucial it is to boys to disengage from their mothers in order to build their male identity fully.

their upbringing thrust Telemachus and Telegonus to mature as men, for they depict their father as the model of masculinity by which Telemachus and Telegonus are measured in the society Miller depicts in *Circe*. Their choice of leaving their homelands and going after Odysseus symbolizes their promptness to mature and accept their place in the social fabric as aristocratic, hegemonic men.

As has been noted, the separation between mother and male child in ancient Greek society is mediated by patriarchy. One example in the ancient world is the Spartan *agoge* (leading). The Greek historian Xenophon (430-354 BCE) in *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* (1925) explains the system thus,

[h]aving dealt with the subject of birth, I wish next to explain the educational system of Lycurgus,<sup>12</sup> and how it differs from other systems. In the other Greek states parents who profess to give their sons the best education place their boys under the care and control of a moral tutor as soon as they can understand what is said to them, and send them to a school to learn letters, music and the exercises of the wrestling-ground. [...] Lycurgus, on the contrary, instead of leaving each father to appoint a slave to act as tutor, gave the duty of controlling the boys to a member of the class from which the highest offices are filled, in fact to the “Warden” as he is called. He gave this person authority to gather the boys together, to take charge of them and to punish them severely in case of misconduct. He also assigned to him a staff of youths provided with whips to chastise them when necessary, and the result is that modesty and obedience are inseparable companions at Sparta (Xenophon, 1855, p. 706).

This passage from Xenophon illustrates that young boys are to be led by their fathers together with the state. As soon as they come to the age of seven, they are to be parted from their mothers – who, after

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<sup>12</sup> According to Herodotus (*The Histories*, 1.65) and Plutarch (*Life of Lycurgus*), Lycurgus is the semi-mythical figure who gave the Spartans their laws and founded the principles of their society. Scholars, nowadays, cannot seem to agree on whether he was a real individual.

having gone through labor,<sup>13</sup> have no more say in the boy's life – and to be educated to serve their fatherland.

Nevertheless, distance from women and femininity was not a requirement to maleness only in ancient societies. It still concerns configurations of modern Anglo-American making of male identities. In *Masculinities*, Connell (2005, p. 20) discusses how our notions of men's psychosexual development have as a starting point Freudian studies, which marked as pivotal the separation from the mother; the gap between pre-Oedipal and Oedipal status. The Oedipus complex is "the key moment in psychosexual development" (Connell, 1994, p. 12) in Psychoanalysis, which was based during much of the twentieth century on the dichotomies masculinity/femininity and activity/passivity. Although Freud never discarded the social aspect embedded within the psychic-biological separation between mother and male-child, for he perceived adult masculinity as a complex construction, many of the following decades saw the socio-historical construct of gender overlooked to make room for the dichotomy normal/pathological masculinity.

Firstly, during the rise of fascist regimes in Europe. Secondly, due to the takeover of conservative thinking in the West as an aftermath of the Cold War (1947-1991). Regarding the Interwars context, Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) reached the conclusion that Fascism could only thrive where the family would function as "the factory of the authoritarian state" (Connell, 1994, p. 28). Reich observes that authoritarian regimes use the social function of sexual repression to radicalize and exploit their societies. Hence, to Reich, "fascist movements [are] the culmination of repressive tendencies in capitalist society" (Connell, 1994, p. 28). Reich's research on Fascism opened the doors for exiled German scholars to tackle Nazism from a psychological standpoint, which culminated in the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, 1950). To Connell, *The Authoritarian Personality* is one of the first studies that depicts

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<sup>13</sup> "[Lycurgus] believed motherhood to be the most important function of freeborn women. Therefore, in the first place, he insisted on physical training for the female no less than for the male sex: moreover, he instituted races and trials of strength for women competitors as for men, believing that if both parents are strong they produce more vigorous offspring" (Xenophon, 1855, p. 705).



masculinity not only as a biological-psychological construct, but also as something deeply intertwined to the social-political setting that creates it.

Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, psychoanalysis practice had also been aligned with conservative views of society in the years that followed World War II (1939-1945), and, as a conservative tool, it was working in order to establish the dichotomies in terms of healthy/unhealthy psychological identities. As Connell explains,

[c]linical psychoanalysis in the United States, both with and without libido theory, thus evolved a normalizing psychology of gender whose main effect in practice was to reinforce social convention and whose main effect in theory was to define departures from hegemonic masculinity as actual or potential pathologies. Because this definition of healthy masculinity is given from outside the science, that is, by the dominant gender order, no theoretical consensus is required — and none exists (Connell, 1994, p. 27).

As a matter of fact, a large portion of the science concerned with gender in the first half of the twentieth century aimed at theorizing masculinity as a way to prevent the young boy from returning to a stage of identification with femininity, embodied in the figure of the mother (Connell, 2005, p. 33).

This corroborates David D. Gilmore's perspective that in patriarchal societies masculinity is rather an achievement than "a timeless essence that resides deep in the heart of every man" (Kimmel, 1994, p. 119). Additionally, this strengthens the perspective that not only is masculinity an achievement, but also "a theory of the patriarchal organization of culture and the mechanism of its transmission between generations" (Connell, 1994, p. 15), because boys are required to build their gender identity through emotional detachment from their mothers. In fact, as Aroson and Kimmell (2004, p. 504) claim, "[t]he boy comes to define himself as a boy by rejecting whatever he sees as female, by devaluing the feminine in himself and in others". The flight from femininity – marked by the passage from pre-Oedipal to Oedipal masculinity – is henceforth a constant feature in men's lives in patriarchal

societies as the one depicted in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* and it starts as soon as the boy is forced to distance from his mother.

To exemplify that, in Homer's epics, as well as in other cornerstone works of Mediterranean literature – such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* –, part of the center is occupied by the struggle between the hero-to-be and his mother. In the first book of *The Iliad*, the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles makes the Phthian prince go back to his mother for help (Il, 1.413-416). An attitude perceived as immature, for Achilles moves away from the company of men to seek out a feminine one. As Van Nortwick notes in *Imagining Men: Ideals of Masculinity in Ancient Greek Culture*,

Thetis will indeed give Achilles unquestioning support [in *The Iliad*]. This is the principal role of mothers in the heroic tradition. We observe, however, that this devotion and validation, although they may make Achilles feel loved, in fact work against his progress toward mature manhood (Van Nortwick, 2008, p. 7).

As a result, from the hero's withdrawal in book 1 until his return to the battlefield in book 19 of *The Iliad*, Achilles is considered selfish, rash, and immature by his peers and other commanders of the Greek army.

Likewise, in *The Song of Achilles*, Peleus, Achilles' father and the one in charge of his upbringing in ancient Greek tradition, strives to keep Achilles away from Thetis' influence. Peleus is the one who trains Achilles in fighting before the boy is sent to Chiron and the one concerned with his reputation when the hero chooses Patroclus as his *therapon* (companion, brother-in-arms). Peleus asks Achilles, “[w]hy this boy? [...] He [Patroclus] will add no luster to your reputation” (Miller, 2012, p. 37). Nevertheless, the main issue that prompts Peleus to thrust Achilles to his world – instead of the heavenly one inhabited by Thetis – is war.

Peleus is aware that fighting is crucial to build a masculine identity, for it is through war activity that men achieve glory (*kleos*) in the society Miller depicts in her debut novel. When Achilles finally accepts sailing to Troy, he metaphorically starts his journey from the overprotected, feminine world of Thetis to the masculine one full of perils, danger and *kleos* (glory) of his father. In choosing to go to Troy, Achilles yields to Peleus' bidding and takes the first steps to break away

from Thetis. In rewriting the hero's story from childhood until death, Miller explores his immaturity by demonstrating how it is connected with Thetis' unwillingness to abide by the conventions of the mortal world.

Separation from the mother in order to gain maturity and enter the world of men is a theme often present in *The Odyssey* and Miller's rewriting of Odysseus' tale, *Circe*. If in *The Iliad* Achilles is the one who must mature, in *The Odyssey*, this task is left for Telemachus, Odysseus' son. Although there may be many similarities between both young men,<sup>14</sup> what distinguishes Telemachus from Achilles is that the former has not yet left his mother's home, which renders Achilles as a figure a bit riper than Odysseus' offspring. As Van Nortwick (2008, p. 14) suggests, "[t]o grow up, a boy must find a way to separate from the protected world of childhood, which is represented by his mother. Going out from the household, run by women, into the public world of men requires him to achieve some distinction among his peers". However, when it is likely that the boy will not find his path alone, patriarchy must intervene. In Telemachus' case, having his father absent from home, patriarchal order assumes the form of Athena.

Even though Athena is a goddess, she often represents, in ancient Greek literature and mythology, Zeus' – therefore male – authority.<sup>15</sup> As Pomeroy points out,

Athena is a masculine woman [...] She is female in appearance and associated with the handicrafts of women and the fertility of the olive, but many of her attributes are those traditionally associated with males. She is a patroness of wisdom, considered a masculine quality by the Greeks [...] She is patroness of a number of mortal warriors and heroes. At times, she disguises herself as a man to facilitate personal contact with favorites (Pomeroy, 1995, p. 4).

<sup>14</sup> See Homer, *Il*, 1.263-289; Cf. Homer, *Od*, 2.32-83. Both scenes portray Achilles and Telemachus addressing other men in an assembly. In order to illustrate their immaturity – hence, lack of some masculine traits –, both passages end with Achilles and Telemachus throwing, in a tantrum-like fit, the scepter – a symbol of male power – to the ground.

<sup>15</sup> See Van Nortwick (2008, p. 53).

Since Zeus is a patriarch, Athena – born from his head – can be perceived as part of his civilizing power, one of the forces behind his order in the Greek cosmos.<sup>16</sup> The fact that Athena chooses to guide Telemachus disguised as Mentès<sup>17</sup> emphasizes, according to Van Nortwick (2008, p. 28), “that her mission is at least in part about nudging Telemachus over the threshold into manhood, where he can summon the necessary authority to assert control over the suitors and his inheritance as a man”. Athena’s advice to Telemachus is, “[you] must not stick to childhood/you are no longer just a little boy” (Homer, *Od*, 1.296-297). Instead, he should “[b]e brave and win [himself] a lasting name” (Homer, *Od*, 1.302). Moreover, the plan she devises for Telemachus includes hiding every piece of information from his mother, Penelope.

In *Circe*, Athena also prompts Odysseus’ sons, Telemachus and Telegonus, to assume their place as hegemonic warriors by distancing themselves from their mothers. After all, Athena is Odysseus’ patron and, as Clay (1983, p. 42) notes, both bear some similarities, which explains why she seeks them out to carry on their father’s name throughout the Greek world. If Odysseus’ sons succeeded with the goddess’s aid, then Odysseus’s name would be deathless, and so would his glory. What Athena attempts to do in *Circe*, by instigating Telemachus and Telegonus to fight and to found new cities, can be explained by the virtue for which men lived in Homeric society, *kleos aphthiton* (deathless glory).

### 3 Divine Bloodlines and *kleos*

As Clay (1983, p. 238) points out, in the Homeric world “heroes, to be sure, need the gods to win that glory and immortal fame which compensates at least in part for their mortality”. The pursuit of glory and the hero’s bloodline are intertwined because ancient Greek culture was concerned with the amount of *kleos* (glory) a man could gather in war, the quintessential place where men could achieve their hegemonic status in patriarchal societies. According to Van Nortwick (2008, p. 92),

<sup>16</sup> See Hesiod, *Theogony*, 924-926.

<sup>17</sup> Athena disguises herself twice in her first meetings with Telemachus. Once as Mentès (Homer, *Od*, 1.102-106), and, then, as Mentor (Homer, *Od*, 2.267-269).

“[w]ar is [...] where masculinity is forged and expressed most vividly in Greek culture”. Similarly, in the patriarchal society Miller displays, if a man wants glory, he must put himself to the test.

However, it is not only at war that a man would thrive and achieve glory. As Lorenzo F. Garcia Jr. (2020, p. 167) notes, “[the Greek] noun *kleos* means [fame, reputation, rumor]. It is cognate with the Greek verb *kluein*, [to hear], and indicates, literally, that which is heard of or about someone – hence, their [fame] or [reputation]”. In fact, any deed worthy of mentioning would enlarge the hero’s reputation that, in turn, should compensate for his death. To exemplify that, if one pays close attention to the very first lines of *The Odyssey*, one can notice that the poem’s scope is Odysseus’ doings and travels,

Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost  
when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy,  
and where he went, and who he met, the pain  
he suffered in the storms at sea (Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.2-6).

All cities Odysseus visits, all enemies he destroys, all goddesses he takes as lovers encompass his *kleos*, for those tales would travel and reach the confines of the Greek world. Given the first lines, it is clear that the poem is deeply concerned with Odysseus’ *kleos*. In *Circe*, this concurs with Telemachus’ assertion that “[Odysseus] would rather be cursed by the gods than be No one” (Miller, 2018, p. 279). Being no one in the patriarchal context of ancient Greek culture is similar to gathering the opposite of *kleos*, social shame (*aidos*).

In *The Rhetoric of Manhood: Masculinity in the Attic Orators*, Joseph Roisman (2005, p. 66) points out that “[a]mong the many duties of the Athenian man was the duty to guard against shame both by avoiding shameful actions himself and by condemning the shameful deeds of others”. *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* present at their core this intrinsic connection between *kleos* (glory) and *aidos* (shame) that will appear in Miller’s rewritings of Homer. Achilles withdraws from combat because Agamemnon takes Briseis, his war prize, away, promoting a direct offense to the hero’s glory. As Patroclus explains, “[because Briseis] is Achilles’ prize [...] to violate her is a violation of Achilles himself, the gravest insult to his honor. Achilles could kill [Agamemnon], and

even Menelaus [Agamemnon's brother] would call it fair" (Miller, 2012, p. 292). Likewise, when the suitors rampage Odysseus' living, they are in fact attacking his masculinity, for, consequently, they put in jeopardy Odysseus' role as lord of the household. Both actions, Achilles' withdrawal and Odysseus' slaughtering of the suitors, are proof of the extension to which men are willing to go to guard themselves against shame and defend their glory. Since glory is subtly intertwined with hegemonic masculine traits in the society Miller portrays, it is possible to concur that when a hero defends his portion of *kleos*, he is, in fact, protecting his hegemonic status.

The other trait of male hegemony in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* is godhood. In *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, kings, princes, and heroes descend directly or indirectly from the gods, which puts male hegemony not only as a project but also as an imposition for these men. While Achilles is a demigod, Odysseus is Hermes' great-grandson.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, such a distinguished lineage renders the heroes to be isolated from their peers for two reasons: firstly, because, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 832) argue, hegemonic masculinity is not "assumed to be normal in the statistical sense". As a result, very few men fit the hegemonic role. Secondly, as Van Nortwick (2008, p. 14) claims, isolation is the key feature that depicts the divine hero. Because he is placed above all men due to his ancestry, he deserves the title of *Aristos Achaion* (the best of the Greeks). Yet, such a status has its costs. The hero may be above all men; nonetheless, he is still mortal and is utterly distant from the gods. Hence, the heroic status only enhances his uniqueness and insulation.

#### 4 Sexual Prowess

Finally, regarding sexual prowess, when we compare it to the ancient Greek context, it is possible to notice that in *The Song of Achilles* or in *Circe*, contrary to contemporary constructions of masculinity, homosexual desire does not negate masculinity. To exemplify that, in *Circe*, the homonymous character states "[g]irls and boys would sigh over

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<sup>18</sup> The Messenger of the Gods, son of Zeus and Maia.

[Telegonus]” (Miller, 2018, p. 241), implying that Telegonus’ beauty will be the object of affection of both sexes without, however, diminishing his maleness. Rather, what the society Miller portrays in both novels expects from hegemonic men was their role as the dominant party.

As David M. Halperin (1990, p. 25) argues, ancient Mediterranean cultures “tended to construe sexual desire as normative or deviant according to whether it impelled social actors to conform to or to violate their conventionally defined gender roles”. By contrast, in the light of contemporary Anglo-American societies, “[i]t is, indeed, difficult to find any aspect of modern life that does not include men desiring women and women desiring men as a premise, as necessary to being human” (Aronson; Kimmel, 2004, p. 383). What Aronson and Kimmel point out is the fact that contemporary culture is molded by heteronormativity, the practice of presuming and establishing heterosexual desire embedded within social organization.

What both approaches to sexual desire have in common is, again, some contempt for biological and social female traits, which brings shame to a man in patriarchal constructs of masculinity. Whereas in contemporary Anglo-American society, masculine identity and male hegemony are connected to desiring women (Connell, 2005, p. 123), in Athenian society, hegemonic men must never accept being dominated. After all, in the views of ancient Greek and contemporary Anglo-American societies, both actions – desiring men and being the weaker part in sex – are performed by women. As I have argued before, Patroclus’ father can be perceived as hegemonic not only due to his attitude toward his wife and son but also because he hints at his sexual appetites by mentioning that he can have sex with either female servants or young boys (Miller, 2012, p. 1).

What Miller states here is the institutional pederasty that took place in classical Athens and shaped the ancient Greek approach to sex and male desire.<sup>19</sup> Halperin (1990, p. 32) claims in “A Hundred Years of

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<sup>19</sup> In the classical period (479-323 BCE), the sexual relationship between an older male (*erastes*) and a younger male (*eromenos*) was encouraged among members of the Athenian aristocracy. Although there is not a consensus on the age of the parties, scholars agree that the growth of facial hair would put an end to the courtship.

Homosexuality” that “sex [in ancient Greek society] was a manifestation of personal status, a declaration of social identity”. Because sex is hierarchical and men are responsible for guarding civilization (Van Nortwick, 2008, p. 52), hegemonic men must perform hegemony in this area as well. Male hegemony that, in this case, would reflect the Athenian moral ideology. Therefore, as Halperin (1990, p. 31) points out, “[s]ex between members of the superordinate group was virtually inconceivable”, whereas sexual intercourse that endorsed the social hierarchy was highly encouraged.

Moreover, considering the *aidos/kleos* system, which either rewards or shames men in ancient Greek society, sexuality can be “perceived through a competitive idiom by which men jockey for control over women as objects to achieve gratifications and dominance over other men” (Conway-Long, 1994, p. 65). To that system, it is not enough to excel in battle – albeit, it is crucial –, for the man who would embody patriarchal/hegemonic masculinity would also attempt to dominate other men. Although Agamemnon is not the best warrior, the king can take any man’s prize, any female slave he desires. The possibility of doing so shows the extent to which Agamemnon rules over the Greek soldiers and over other kings. Similarly, in *Circe*, Odysseus is the only one who can share Circe’s bed. Because he is the captain, the king – therefore, the best man among his crew –, he is the one apt to be with a goddess and have a child with her.

Even though Achilles, as Miller rewrites him, complies with several hegemonic traces – more specifically, the disregard for women –, his status is sometimes threatened/questioned due to his relationship with Patroclus. In *The Song of Achilles*, before sailing to Troy, Odysseus, the agent of patriarchy, suggests the hero should leave the rumor concerning his role in sex behind, for, as Patroclus affirms, “such things were given up as [aristocratic men] grew older, unless it was with slaves or hired boys” (Miller, 2012, p. 176).<sup>20</sup> Achilles dismisses Odysseus’ suggestion;

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<sup>20</sup> Textual evidence in Homer points out that Achilles was the *eromenos* while Patroclus was the *erastes* (Homer, *Iliad*, 11.937-939). Authors from the classical period reinforce this notion. For example, Plato’s *Symposium* and Aeschylus’ lost play, *Myrmidons*, demonstrate this formulation.



nevertheless, the outcome of their relationship is that Patroclus is always perceived as a lesser man in the social fabric.

However, it may be injudicious to discuss sexuality as part of gender construction without adding any reflection on the male body, for, as Halperin (1990, p. 38) claims, “[t]he social body precedes the sexual body”. Taking this into account, before analyzing *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, I discuss the relation between the male body and how its representation in Homer and in Miller enhances the male hegemonic features I have categorized in this paper. Nonetheless, I must point out that I do not consider biological aspects of gender as conclusive, definitive features. What I do acknowledge is that the construction of masculinity and/or femininity entails physiological parts that civilizing forces weave together in a symbiotic relationship.

To exemplify that, I return to the discussion on psychic separation of mother and male child. From a psychoanalytic perspective – endorsed by medical approaches prior to the gay liberation in the 1960s –, any man or woman who does not comply with their gender prescription is to be considered unfit. As Arthur Flannigan Saint Aubin (1994, p. 241) argues, “a man’s most basic sense of self necessarily stems from or at least must necessarily include a conception and image of the body as male”. Similarly, the corporeal aspects of masculinity and femininity are to be understood by the ancient Greeks as opposite by nature, which establishes the following dichotomies: female/male, wet/dry, cold/hot, soft/strong.

Such differences were intertwined in the social fabric and used as a way to organize and guide the tasks men and women should perform in ancient Greek society. According to Xenophon (431 BCE-354 BCE),

[the Gods] from the first adapted the woman’s nature [...] to the indoor and man’s to the outdoor tasks and cares. For [they] made the man’s body and mind more capable of enduring cold and heat, and journeys and campaigns; and therefore imposed on him the outdoor tasks. To the woman, since he has made her body less capable of such endurance, I take it that [the gods have] assigned the indoor tasks [...]. Thus, to be a woman it is more honorable to stay indoors than to abide in the fields, but to the man it is unseemly rather

to stay indoors than to attend to the work outside (Xenophon, *Economics*, 6.18-25).

Xenophon's argument also highlights another fact pertinent to gender construction in this society: exposition. Whereas women – hence, the feminine body – had to stay indoors, locked in the gynaikon (women's quarter) (*Od*, 4.119-120), men were always exposing their bodies not only on their farms, but also in games in order to establish their superiority.

In *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus' father is hosting the games where men's bodies are on display: "I remember the runners best, nut-brown bodies slicked with oil, stretching on the track beneath the sun. They mix together, broad-shouldered husbands, beardless youths and boys, their calves all thickly carved with muscle" (Miller, 2012, p. 2). This passage illustrates that strength and beauty in the male body were highly praised in ancient Greek society. Since power is associated with male hegemony, it must be intertwined with a man's physical condition.

In Miller (2012, p. 1), Menoetius is "a short man, as most [...] were, and built like a bull, all shoulders" and as Odysseus is "not so tall as some, but strong [...] [and] joints well seasoned" (Miller, 2018, p. 173). On the other hand, Miller shows us Peleus, Achilles' father. Although Peleus is a king, he is not hegemonic in Miller's rewriting. Instead, he might be considered a representative of complicit masculinity, for he still benefits from patriarchal structure without being hegemonic. He is given Thetis in marriage, despite her scorn for mortals because "the gods forced her to stay with her husband" (Miller, 2012, p. 19). Peleus' non-hegemonic traits are emphasized by his physical appearance: "[Peleus] seemed old, bent over, but he was no more than fifty, [Patroclus's] father's age. He did not look like a man who could have conquered a goddess, or produced such a child as Achilles" (Miller, 2012, p. 29). In light of this, I affirm that Miller's depiction of men accentuates features which allow us to consider that, to some extent, male hegemony must be connected to the male body. The stronger, the faster, the more handsome a man is, the more hegemonic he seems to be.

Moreover, since glory is to be linked to godhood, it is important to consider that in this society the union between gods and mortals created a superior being in the social hierarchy. As Patroclus suggests,

“[d]ivine blood purified our muddy race, bred heroes from dust and clay” (Miller, 2012, p. 19). Therefore, it seems critical to point out that, in Miller’s rewritings, men who descend from gods must have this mark recognized somehow. That is possible through the constant exposition of the male body for two reasons.

Firstly, as Conway-Long (1994, p. 62) notes, “[v]iolent testing of masculinity, trials of strength and endurance in which men risk their lives, and dangerous rites of passage and initiations seem to pervade all systems of masculinity”. Secondly, masculinity has some psychologic and cultural manifestations and metaphoric connections to the male body (Aubin, 1994, p. 239). It is possible to affirm that heroic men are hegemonic not only because they occupy the summit of social hierarchy, but also because their lineage provides them the physical requirements to be hegemonic.

On the one hand, associating masculinity to men’s bodies corroborates to sustain the hegemonic/heroic model. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* present several occasions in which men take part in contests aiming to prove how strong or how fast they are.<sup>21</sup> Again, these scenes make it clear that in patriarchal societies hegemonic masculinity is something always tested and always threatened, “a goal sufficiently beyond an individual man’s reach that it keeps him struggling on for a lifetime” (Conway-Long, 1994, p. 62). On the other hand, this implication opens the path to an undisguised problem, aging. Even though Homeric texts and Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* depict old men, there is no possibility of considering them as hegemonic, for, like children and women, they were not the focus of ancient Greek culture (Van Nortwick, 2008, p. 122).

To summarize the discussion on what hegemonic masculinity encompasses in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* and how it leads Achilles and Odysseus to their physical, psychological, and social undoing, it is important to mention that in *The Song of Achilles* and in *Circe* there are

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<sup>21</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 8.143-235. These lines show Odysseus in the Phaeacian court competing with the sons of Alcinous and other noblemen, winning their respect due to his victories in throwing darts and archery.

Homer, *Iliad*, 23.302-995. During Patroclus’s funeral, Achilles sets several prizes to the games taking place in honor of his dead comrade.

several moments in which Achilles, Patroclus, Odysseus, Telegonus, and Telemachus have the chance either to engage with or to deviate from the heroic ideal.

I do so in order to fit each one of these characters in Connell's hierarchy. As Alex Hobbs suggests,

[a]nalysis from a masculinity studies angle assures the reader is attuned to representations of men, and how they fit and relate to hegemonic ideals. In short, there are two linked applications of masculinity studies to literature: to consider the more private realms in which masculine identity may be formed and performed; and to isolate and examine positive examples of male protagonists who do not conform to masculine stereotypes (Hobbs, 2013, p. 390).

Because Odysseus is a mature man and fulfills all the criteria by which Athenian men were measured as hegemonic, he is, in Miller's *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, the most hegemonic of the five, while Telegonus, Achilles, and Patroclus could be considered *epheboi* (youths, from eighteen to twenty-one), and Telemachus in *Circe* is already an adult male like his father.

This separation based on age implies that Achilles, Telegonus, and Patroclus are not considered grown men in the society Miller depicts. Hence, they could not fulfill all requirements of hegemonic masculinity I established in this paper. By approximating Connell's system to Miller's *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, what is noticeable is that, apart from Telemachus and Patroclus, all the remaining characters I analyze may fall between the hegemonic and complicit models.

I consider thus because hegemonic masculinity – as Connell understands it – endorses patriarchy, a social system that is based upon masculine power and privilege (Kimmel; Aronson, 2004, p. 588). Conversely, the interaction of male characters with goddesses, female slaves, princesses, and queens shows clearly how ambivalent this relation is. As I have stated before, hegemonic masculinity also works as a double-edged sword, for it establishes the anxieties among masculinities in which one model must prevail above the others. From that perspective, even though Achilles is the greatest warrior in the Homeric epics and in

*The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, he is not the most hegemonic character because he never occupies the position of a *kurios* (lord of a household).

This title must go either to Telemachus or Odysseus who had their chance to rule over Ithaca, and it is almost impossible to discuss Telemachus's formation without having to analyze his relation with Odysseus and his brother, Telegonus. Moreover, as Aronson and Kimmel (2004, p. 506) argue, "[u]nderstanding how we do masculinities [...] requires that we make visible the performative elements of identity, and also the audience for those performances". In light of Kimmel's claim, it is possible to state that masculinity is simultaneously an enactment and a performance among members of the same social group. Some scenes in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* depicting a poet (*aedo*) singing the deeds of the greatest men of the past confirm this notion (See *Il*, 1.1-3; *Od*, 1.1-8; *Od*, 1.326-329; *Od*, 8.500-520). Considering that these poems were often sung in palaces, to ancient Greek society, performativity became not only a social prescription to a gender but also a way to achieve portions of *kleos*.

Nevertheless, what these songs rarely show is the price men had to pay to build their heroic identities in that society. On the other hand, Miller not only depicts the drawbacks of Homer's heroes but also the aftermath of their undoing to the ones closer to them, evincing how hegemonic men can harm themselves and everyone around them.

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