



Malta
Classics
Association

The MCA Newsletter

Editorial – The Malta Classics Association

The origin of the name of this month, April, is shrouded in mystery. Some believe that it has its root in the Latin verb *aperire*, to open, and is possibly a reference to the blossoming of trees or the opening of flowers around this time. Others believe that the month owes its name to a corruption of the name of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, although why the Romans would name the month after the goddess' Greek name instead of the Latin Venus is never explained.

What is far less of a mystery is what the MCA is planning to do in the coming months. The MCA is organising two INSET courses, one in July and the other in September, for primary and secondary school teachers of all schools in Malta and Gozo that will explore the ways of integrating classical elements into lessons for all subjects in a way which makes them more interesting for students of all ages.

The MCA is also very excited to be introducing the *Literacy through Latin* project to Malta during the next scholastic year. Thanks to the MCA's hard-working volunteers, six classes of Year 5 primary

school students will be introduced to very basic Latin through a series of modules that have been proven to greatly improve their literary skills. More information on this project will surely make its appearance in future issues of this newsletter.

In the meantime, if you haven't checked it out already, we encourage you to check our new and improved website, offering information about all the MCA's many services, events and projects. The blog will also be regularly updated with posts about the most exciting, if not necessarily well-known, Greek myths, Classical works of art, and quotes from our favourite Classical and Classically-inspired authors.

This issue of the newsletter, meanwhile, presents you with a new Classics related book to add to your reading list and another entertaining instalment of our mythology series. Make sure to send in your entry for this issue's writing competition for a chance to win this issue's prize!

Samuel Azzopardi

Contact Us

If you'd like to become a member of the Malta Classics Association, please visit the MCA website at <http://www.classicsmalta.org/>. There you will find even more information about the MCA and its work.

Alternatively, if you'd like more information about the MCA and what it does to promote the Classics in Malta or even why it seeks to do this, email us on classicsmaltasoc@gmail.com or look us up on our Facebook page.

For information on upcoming courses in Latin, Greek, Sanskrit or Classical Culture please email the Education Sub-Committee on classicsmaltasoc.educ@gmail.com.

Learning Outside the Classroom

Nothing in the world can replace well-planned lessons in the classroom and diligent study at home. At the same time, however, it cannot be denied that other media such as games and historical fiction books can help students interact with and immerse themselves into a historical setting so much different than their own. Perhaps the time has come to recognise this and, instead of possibly simply encouraging students to dedicate even more time to study at the expense of recreational pursuits, guide students towards media that can supplement their study. In this issue, we introduce Madeline Miller's award-winning novel, *The Song of Achilles*.

Book Review

The Song of Achilles

by Madeline Miller

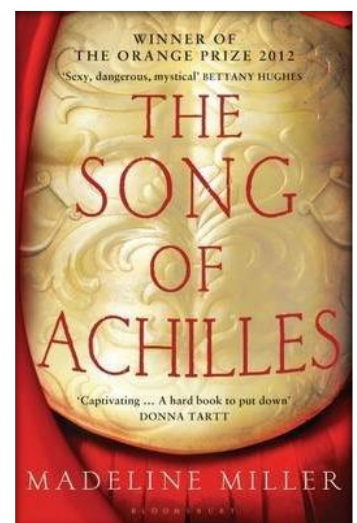
Madeline Miller's award winning 2012 novel *The Song of Achilles*, inspired by Homer's *Iliad*, follows the life of the central Homeric hero Achilles, and of his companions and rivals in the epic Trojan War, as seen through the eyes of Patroclus, who is here, unlike in the actual *Iliad*, presented as Achilles' lover, just as he is portrayed in Classical literature after Homer, such as in Aeschylus' *The Myrmidons* and Plato's *Symposium*.

Whereas Homer places his work in the ninth year of the war and sheds light on important previous events by means of flashbacks and passing references in conversation or description, Miller starts off her novel in Patroclus' infancy, indeed right before his exile from his own country. This allows her to explore the character of Achilles in a way that Homer's war-time epic cannot.

In *The Song of Achilles*, Miller presents an Achilles who is kind, sometimes brooding, passionate about his music, engaged and gregarious, but also somewhat reserved. Miller presents a young Achilles who is surrounded by possible companions but who, aware of the uniqueness of his birth and the fate that this allots him, holds back from choosing one above the others. He is a demigod, placed from birth upon a pedestal and held up high. Sometimes, it is even hard to see in this youth the human aspect that makes up at least half of him.

Then Patroclus arrives. Patroclus is different from the other boys. He is moreover different from Achilles in all aspects. Achilles is fit and athletic, Patroclus is slow and somewhat chubby. Achilles is a master in the use of weapons, gifted in the playing of the lyre, and his father's pride and joy but Patroclus is none of those things, and he is cast out from his father's palace into exile. But Patroclus hangs back – unlike the other boys he is unassuming, and he does not attempt to ingratiate himself with the son of Peleus or seem to care to. Perhaps it is this sharp difference in their character, Miller seems to theorise, that brings these two characters together. The book follows their progress of learning and self-exploration, highlighting the two youths' differing qualities.

Eventually, the two boys grow on to become the Homeric men that are so familiar to every audience of every age and they sail together to Troy in the company of their Myrmidons and their famed Achaean companions. Miller's treatment of the war itself is interesting: she brings to the fore those characters



that Homer's heroic epic leaves in the background. Miller focuses on the medics and their wounded patients, the priests, the captives and the non-combatants. She conjures up the images of the warriors not in their moments of glory but when they return tired to their tents, covered in someone else's blood.

The gods, with the exception of Thetis, are absent in Miller's work. This is a novel about the mortal men and women, caught in the throes of fate, helpless in the fulfilment of their destiny. It is a reflection on the inevitability of human suffering, alleviated by those things that make life worth living such as love, and music, and the joy of other minor pleasures. Even Thetis, who is a goddess, is not explored as a divine being as much as a mother who, although immortal herself, is burdened by the mortality of her dear son, in the face of which fate she is as helpless as the meekest mortal. Whereas the tone in most of the book is hopeful, Thetis, aware of the inevitability of Achilles' fate, is morose and remorseful throughout the book. She despises Patroclus. At first there seems to be no reason for it, and she is thought poorly for it. But eventually we can't help but feel that her emotions foreshadow the fact that it is his death that decides Achilles' fate.

Through flowing writing and impassioned words that inspire the most gripping emotions in her readers, Miller brings out familiar Homeric characters and lays them bare for re-examination. She invites her readers to look beyond Achilles' anger and see in him a man torn by internal dilemmas. She explores what it is to live resolutely in the shadow of your death but to fear and weep the demise of the other. "And perhaps..." she reflects, "it is the greater grief, after all, to be left on earth when another is gone."

This book is a must-read for all lovers of Homers, classicist and amateur alike. It is a retelling of an old but familiar tale through fresh and contemporaneous eyes, and a moving account of the tragedy of the human condition.

Samuel Azzopardi



'Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus' by Gavin Hamilton (1760-3), oil on canvas.

Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh

Chapter 3

Before the Gods: The Children of Gaia and Uranus – Part 2

Eos

Riding her chariot across the sky in the company of Helios was winged Eos, goddess of the dawn, described as ‘rosy-fingered’ in *Odyssey* Book II and ‘saffron-robed’ in *Iliad* Book XIX; colours of the early-morning sky. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod says she ‘shines upon all who live on earth, and upon the immortal gods living in the wide heaven’, as she brought the first flicker of dawn to man. Hemera (Day) offspring of Erebus and Nyx, was often identified with Eos.

Eos was married to her cousin, the Titan Astraeus (Gr. Astraios). She gave birth to all the stars, the most important of which were Hesperus (Gr. Hesperos) the evening star and Phosphorus (Gr. Phosphoros) the morning star¹ which announces the arrival of dawn.

In the *Theogony*, Hesiod describes Astraeus as the father of all the stars. In 100-36, Aratus (Hellenistic poet c. 315 – 240 B.C.) suggests that Astraea (Gr. Astraia) the last of the immortals to leave earth in the depraved Iron Age, was the daughter of Astraeus and is usually identified with the constellation of Virgo.²

For having gone to bed with Ares, the god of war and the lover of Aphrodite, the goddess of erotic love, Aphrodite, punished Eos to be always falling in love with one mortal after the other, despite being married to Astraeus. Consequently, she had several lovers, most prominently Tithonus (Gr. Tithonos) brother of Priam, king of Troy, and son of King Laomedon. Tithonus was Eos' most faithful companion. The earliest account of his story occurs in the Homeric Hymn³ to Aphrodite. Eos' love for him was so ardent that she begged Zeus to grant him immortality. However, she did not think to ask Zeus to confer on him eternal youth and ‘when grey hair appeared on Tithonus’ cheeks and his temples, more and more Lady Eos avoided their once happy bed.’ (Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite) so that when he became frail, she put him away

¹ The planet Venus – Cassell’s Dictionary of Classical Mythology

² Ancient peoples needed to use the heavens as indicators of times and seasons, and especially the heavens by night, when the stars and planets are visible. Most of the stars do not change their relative positions and can readily be thought of in groups, or constellations, which act as though they were fastened to the inside of a great sphere and revolve with it around the earth.

Seven planets (Greek ‘wanderers’) known to the ancients seem to follow a different path and to move at different speeds relative to each other. These seven – Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn – pass along a group of twelve constellations, the zodiac (Greek ‘animal show’) in an apparently irrational way. The zodiac includes Aries (Ram) Taurus (Bull) Gemini (Twins) Cancer (Crab) Leo (Lion) Virgo (Virgin) Libra (Balance) Scorpio (Scorpion) Sagittarius (Archer), Capricorn (Goat) Aquarius (Water-bearer) and Pisces (Fishes)

Libra (scales) had no good mythical model, but in the Roman Empire was said to be the spirit of Julius Caesar, famous for his fairness and clemency. Classical Myth

³ The Greek hymns of the eighth and later centuries B.C. are known as the ‘Homeric Hymns’ of whose authorship little can be said, apart from the Hymn to Apollo. The Hymns were probably recited and sung by professional bards (rhapsodes) in competitions held publicly at festivals or thanksgiving ceremonies or privately at funeral games. Myths of the Greeks & Romans

behind closed doors where he continued to gibber away until, in a version dating from the Classical period, she finally changed him into a cicada.

One of their sons, Memnon, king of Ethiopia, fought on the side of the Trojans in the Trojan War when he was killed by Achilles, perhaps the most important warrior-hero of the Greek army. With a tilted vase full of tears for her son, it was Eos who poured out the morning dew.

A colossal statue of Memnon was erected in Egypt. When struck by the first light of dawn, the statue used to produce a musical note. In the 3rd century A.D., repairs were carried out on the statue and Memnon was silenced.



'Eos and Memnon', interior from an Attic red-figure cup from Capua Italy, so-called the 'Memnon Pieta. Eos is seen lifting up the body of her son Memnon. Louvre Museum, Paris.

The Winds

Eos and Astraeus were also the parents of the winds. The four chief winds were Boreas, the North wind, Notus (Gr. Notos) the South wind, Eurus, the East wind and Zephyrus (Gr. Zephyros) the West wind.

In *Iliad*, Books XVI & XXIII and *Odyssey*, Books V & VII, Zephyrus was a violent and threatening wind until later he softened into a gentle breeze. It is thought that one of Zephyrus' wives was Iris, goddess of the rainbow. He was also the lover of the nymph Chloris who at the soft touch of the warm wind became Flora, goddess of spring and flowers.

Notus brought autumn storms in his wake, which were much feared for they destroyed the crops.

Boreas is usually represented as bearded with unkempt hair. From the Thracian caves he would emerge, bringing with him the icy blasts of wind that chilled the Greeks. Clamorous, always swirling and stirring up trouble, yet it is said that he and his brothers were subject to Aeolus (Gr. Aiolos). 'At Aeolia, the home of the clouds...Aeolus is king and here in a vast cavern he keeps in subjection the brawling winds and howling storms, chained and bridled in their prison.' (Vergil, *Aeneid*, Book I). The keeper of the winds let them loose on the orders of the gods.

The Athenians especially revered Boreas whom they regarded as kin through marriage to Oreithyia (Gr. Oreithuia) an Athenian princess. The author of the *History* - a nine-book narrative of the Greek and Persian wars, with many digressions, Herodotus,⁴ in 7.188, says that, when threatened by the Persian fleet in 480 B.C., the oracle had advised the Athenians to seek the help of their 'son-in-law' which they interpreted as referring to Boreas. The Athenians duly offered sacrifices to Boreas and the North Wind soundly defeated the Persians by scattering their ships.

The Furies

In the *Theogony*, Hesiod goes on to say that the huge drops of blood that fell onto the earth from Uranus' gaping wound, impregnated Gaia who brought forth the Furies (Gr. Erinyes). They were sometimes called the Eumenides 'Kindly Ones' by the ancients as a euphemism by way of propitiation.

The Furies were three goddesses named Alecto (Gr. Alekto) 'unceasing', Tisiphone 'avenging murder' and Megaera (Gr. Megaira) 'grudging'. They dwelt in Tartarus, there to torture those consigned to eternal damnation. The grisly sisters were a form of 'divine justice' who haunted those guilty of heinous crimes, such as murder, those crimes committed against one's kin⁵ and, we are told by Homer in *Iliad* Book XIX,

⁴ Herodotus has been termed 'the father of history'. The word – *historie* – existed before him; it meant enquiry. The Penguin History of the World

⁵ It is therefore fitting that Hesiod should present them as having been born as a consequence of an offence that had been committed by a son against his father. They embody early ideas of justice from the time before it came to be appreciated that animus (mind, spirit) is a necessary part of every crime, and that a deed which is committed through mere accident or as a result of *force majeure* (circumstances not under one's control) does not carry with it the full moral or legal responsibility of a deliberate act. Yet even so, they are a long way from representing the most primitive stages of moral consciousness, for they punish, not families or clans, but solely the individual who commits the deed. They may, however, be said to represent the moral ideas of the clan for they are regularly on the side of the elders. The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology

swearing a false oath. Wreathed with snakes, with eyes oozing pus and baying like dogs, the winged creatures would swoop down on their prey armed with whips and torches. For their wretched victims, there could be no escape.



'The Remorse of Orestes' by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1862)

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, U.S.

Mythology Competition

Are you as excited about mythology as we are? This time, instead of a crossword puzzle as our competition, we would like to invite you to send in your retelling of your favourite myth. Send your submissions by email to newsletter.classicsmaltasoc@gmail.com or send it by post to "The Editor, 9, Gorg Zammit Street, Attard, ATD 2355" by Wednesday 21st June. There is no minimum or maximum word count required. The winner will be chosen by the newsletter's editorial team, and will receive a copy of Fagels' translation of Homer's *Odyssey*.