

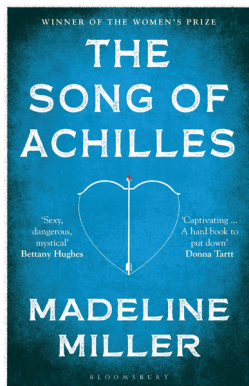
## Book Reviews

### The Song of Achilles

Miller (M.) Pp. 352. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011 (first published in paperback 2017). Paper, £9.99. ISBN: 978-1-4088-9138-4.

Sophia Drake

Independent Scholar, UK  
sdrake@hotmail.co.uk



For someone who loved Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*, reading Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* was a logical next step. Rather than focusing on the unseen and unheard women of the story, *The Song of Achilles* takes the relationship between the hero Achilles and his male companion Patroclus as its central focus, interpreting their relationship as a romantic one and following it from when they meet through to when they part. My students have been waxing lyrical about it – it has even inspired a student who doesn't take any classical

subjects at A Level to write an EPQ on whether retellings like this dilute Homer's original. Simply put, I was not disappointed.

The title initially appears deceptive; the story of Achilles is in fact told in the first person through the eyes of his companion Patroclus. This is a nice piece of Ovid-esque misdirection and puts the reader off-balance immediately when the curtain rises on Patroclus in his father's palace, especially when he describes himself on the first page as a 'disappointment'. It is made more effective by the fact that his name is not mentioned until page 20, after Patroclus has accidentally killed a boy, although we are aware from page 5 that Achilles is a separate entity to our mysterious, hitherto nameless, narrator.

It is immediately clear that this is far more than a retelling of the *Iliad*; it is wide-ranging, both in time frame and geographical location. It could be argued that this broader focus detracts from the storyline, but I appreciated the deviation from the narrow time confines of the *Iliad* to explore, for example, the story of Achilles on Skyros (told by later authors such as the Roman poet Statius in his *Achilleid*) where he is hidden as a woman to prevent him being called up to fight. While students might struggle to discern where Homer's story ends and Miller's (or indeed Statius') story starts in this section of the text, the sympathetic and human portrayal of these characters ultimately brings the story to life in ways in which more formal translations of the *Iliad* can struggle to.

While I would not hesitate to recommend this work to A Level students, I would question its suitability for younger years,

especially KS3, as there are fairly explicit scenes of a sexual nature. It neatly complements students' studies on the World of the Hero for A Level Classical Civilisation and provides a way to stretch and challenge A Level Latin students as an accessible teaser of epic poetry beyond Virgil.

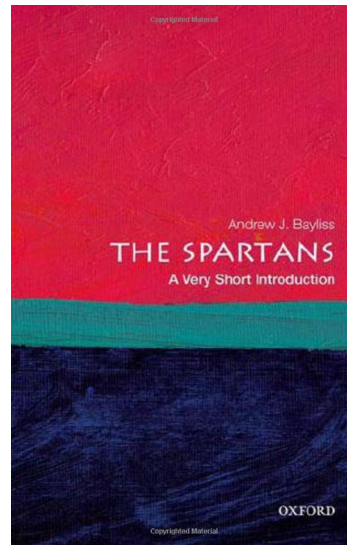
doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000168

### The Spartans: A Very Short Introduction

Bayliss (A.J.) Pp. xxiv + 145, ills, maps. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Paper, £8.99, US\$11.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-878760-0

Jo Lashly

Former Head of Classics, Shrewsbury High School, Shrewsbury, UK  
jolashly@gmail.com



Full disclosure: I have always been interested in the Spartans but was confirmed in this view in 2014 when I visited Sparta for the first time, and saw, in the middle of the main street, a board detailing every Spartan victory in the Olympic Games (with the event) going back to the 8th century BC. These people are proud and are not afraid to show it! Andrew Bayliss had a similar 'moment' when he learnt about the battle of Thermopylae and the bravery of the Spartan soldiers as told by Herodotus. It is a stirring tale, retold most recently, with some licence, in *300* (2006), but also in 1962 in

*The 300 Spartans*, where Sir Ralph Richardson plays Themistocles. The story is often 'adapted' but the general idea is of a suicide mission which delayed the main Persian forces and thereby allowed the remaining Greek city states, Athens in particular, to gather at Salamis. Thermopylae was a defeat for the Spartans but Paul Cartledge (*The Spartans: An Epic History*, C4 Books 2002) rightly points out that although Leonidas must have been aware of the Delphic oracle saying 'only the death of a Spartan king would ensure an eventual Greek victory against the Persians', it was really a battle fought for freedom, and it was this lesson that Xerxes had to be taught. But was that the most important thing we know about the Spartans? Probably not. Bayliss writes in an engaging manner under seven major headings: the story of Thermopylae; the civic structure