

# Parental care for the sons and sisyphcean challenge in the works of homer

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In Greek myth, Sisyphus repeatedly rolls a giant boulder up a mountain only to have it roll back down the peak every time. He serves a sentence of eternal suffering for trying to escape from Death and Hades. Like Sisyphus, the warriors of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* suffer consequences when they push the limits of human achievement. The men attempt to win glory for their fathers, glory for their sons, and above all, glory for themselves (*The Iliad* 6: 529). They pursue power and omnipotence - an unattainable, ultimate goal. Fathers reap honor and set difficult benchmarks, and their sons strive to surpass them. This never-ending pursuit is at the center of the father-son relationships involving the heroes Hector and Achilles of *The Iliad*. Similarly, in *The Odyssey*, Odysseus and his son Telemachus also face important responsibilities in a world that embraces lineage and recognizes a man's superiority in the honor amassed by his line. The fathers and sons embark on endless quests for glory. In the Sisyphian challenge of winning power and glory that underlies father-son interactions, Homer's two epic poems mirror each other and provide a greater understanding of the patriarchal society of ancient Greece.

According to M. I. Finley in *The World of Odysseus*, the "perfect symbol" of power is the "father" (Finley 81). Patriarchies promote the rule of the father as a social ideal; fatherly relationships are not strictly biological but extend to all power-dynamics. In *The Limits of Heroism*, Mark Buchan asserts that Homeric society's male-centered, stratified, power-based structure makes a man's status as a father the cornerstone of "masculine identity" (Buchan 171). The status is the basis on which a man's worth is judged. Being a "father" inherently entails having great influence over his son and over men,

in general. A father works to fulfill his position as the hero in his son's eyes. He earns his son's idolatry through gaining the respect of the men around him - through gaining honor for his strength, for his wisdom, or for his talents. His essential aim is to become "the great tactician" or "the swift racer" (The Iliad 10: 173, 22: 230). Being his son entails succeeding him. The accepted tenet for all father-son relationships is that a father's world is perpetuated by his son. The son must fit, for example, the patronymic "Laertes' royal son Odysseus" or "Peleus' matchless son" Achilles (The Odyssey 18: 29, 11: 630). Once a son comes of age, he is expected to live up to his lineage, protect his father's honor, and perform deeds that he himself can pass on. A son must strive for greatness - in chariot racing, in war, in politics, in one form or another. Paradoxically, the expectations that are laid out for the father and the son pose a problem. There is no limit to honor. How does a man end his quest? A man accomplishes unimaginable feats, and even after he has become a hero among the people and a father of many sons, he is still invested into attaining greater glory. It is a ceaseless struggle similar to Sisyphus'; generations of men - fathers, sons - climb an insurmountable cliff, hoping that their names will be etched in history and power will be stored in their lines.

To have power - "whether over things, over men (by other men or some god), or over men and gods together (by Zeus)" - is the main goal of both fathers and sons of The Iliad and The Odyssey (Finley 81). In patriarchal Greek society, the father is the head "by might" (Finley 81). The men of Homer's epics, in hopes of fitting or of taking on one day the father figure,

seek to prove their “ might.” Hector, for example, “ staking all” on his might, tries to assume his role as father to Astyanax and as son to King Priam (The Iliad 22: 128). Hector pursues the complementary goals to be the glory-winning warrior and to be a father and a son. In the end, Hector does not fight the Achaeans out of social obligation; “ the honor of the hero is purely individual...fought for only for its own sake and his own sake” (Finley 119). Since glory is transferred from generation to generation, fighting for his own sake is also fighting for his son’s and his father’s sakes. Every father dreams of glory for his son “ when he comes home from battle bearing the bloody gear of the mortal enemy he has killed” (The Iliad 6: 572-573). At the same time, every son hopes to have “ the bravest fighter they could field, those stallion-breaking Trojans” as his father (The Iliad 6: 548-549). The honor gained by father and son will inevitably be compared and will immortalize them both. The Greek notion that internal worth is reflected externally and that the duty of a son or a father (at his prime) is to seize honor and power drive Hector. For Astyanax, for Priam, and for himself, Hector confronts Achilles and fate. When Hector dies, Priam laments in the presence of his surviving sons: “ If only you’d all been killed at the fast ships instead of my dear Hector” (The Iliad 24: 300-301). Priam’s condemnation of his surviving sons as “ good-for-nothings” epitomizes Hector as the ideal son, recognizing him for fulfilling his role (The Iliad 24: 284). Through the character of Hector, the destructive quality of the father and son relationship is evident. There are no limits to greatness - there is no cap to power - and men often find themselves in a Sisyphean undertaking. Hector is willing to die for Troy and his family, even though his death condemns both.

In a similar manner, the father-son relationship between Peleus and Achilles has a devastating impact on the “hard, ruthless” warrior (The Iliad 9: 771). At Troy, Achilles’ thoughts often drift to his old father in Phthia, “with no one there to defend him” (The Iliad 24: 573). Achilles cannot physically “defend” his father; however, he can protect his and his father’s honor. Because Peleus does not have a direct influence at Troy, an “adoptive” father illuminates more clearly Achilles’ relationship to his father (Buchan 173). As Achilles’ “adoptive” father, King Priam makes an appeal to Achilles:

Remember your own father, great godlike Achilles- as old as I am, past the threshold of deadly old age! but at least he hears you’re still alive and his old heart rejoices, hopes rising, day by day, to see his beloved son come sailing home from Troy. (The Iliad 24: 570-576)

With these words, Priam draws a parallel between himself and Achilles’ father, Peleus. Priam’s situation resembles Peleus’ on a broad scale. Hector is Troy’s bulwark; Achilles is Phthia’s bulwark. Moreover, unknown to Priam, Peleus also will never see his son alive again, for Achilles’ fate is to die at Troy. “The old man’s words arouse in Achilles ‘the desire to mourn for his father.’ The killer, for a brief moment, is a man again, burdened with childhood and death,” describes Rachel Bepaloff (Bepaloff 80). He is reminded of why he is willing to shed his blood – it is for glory for himself, for his father. The triangle formed by Priam, Peleus, and Achilles reflects the tragedy sprung from a son’s pursuit of greatness. Achilles is consumed like a wild animal by the Sisyphian struggle to prove his worth. Left unchecked, a son’s desire for glory ironically disrupts the very patriarchal order that

fosters it. An early death – a loss of the chance to be a better son or father – may accompany the glory won in battle. Thus, The Iliad does not repudiate the patriarchal order but exposes its destructive potential when its imperatives are pursued to extremes.

From where The Iliad leaves off, The Odyssey begins the exploration of the father-son dynamic and its malignant nature through Odysseus and Telemachus. R. B. Rutherford claims, “ There seems to be a deliberate contrast between and juxtaposition of Odysseus and Achilles, the planner and the warrior, the pragmatist and the romantic...” (Rutherford 124) But, it is this juxtaposition that reveals the similar circumstances of the heroes. “ Hungry” for glory, Odysseus “...rig ed and rode his long benched ship on the barren salt sea, speeding death to enemies” (The Odyssey 17: 315-316). His exploits in Troy elicit more admiration than love from his son (Telemachus was only an infant when Odysseus left Ithaca). Because he places Odysseus on such a high pedestal, for him to come to terms with himself, Telemachus must “ make his name” and validate that he is Odysseus’s son (The Odyssey 13: 482). He must wipe way any doubts, including his own: “ My mother has always told me I’m his son, it’s true, but I am not so certain” (The Odyssey 1: 249-250). In Odysseus’ absence, Telemachus tries to honor his father and preserve his estate – to “ hold the reins of power in his house” (The Odyssey 1: 414). Telemachus leaves home for news of his father and searches for the beacon of light to guide him in “ becoming” and fulfilling the responsibility of Odysseus’ son. That Telemachus’ name, “ far-away fighter,” describes Odysseus and Neoptolemus’ name, “ young warrior,” describes Achilles

demonstrate how sons are considered their fathers' extensions. When fathers cannot act, sons act for them. However, with such a father as Odysseus, it is difficult to equal - and much less top - him in strength, which is usually expected of a son for the preservation of a lineage. His house having been seized by his mother's suitors, Telemachus unsuccessfully persuades the plunderers to stop and helplessly witnesses his father's honor being disgraced. It is only with the prophesied homecoming of Odysseus that justice prevails and "no line more kingly than his" returns to its reign. Thus, another light is shed on the dark side of the father-son dynamic. If the achievements of a human being are bounded, sons will be unable to outshine their fathers and defend the glory of their line. Their never-ending struggle corresponds to Sisyphus' futile efforts in pushing his boulder. The Sisyphean challenge undertaken by men is costly; it drains the blood from their enemies and from themselves. Ultimately, lineages will break off and the heroes of the ancient Greek patriarchy will be forgotten. What remain will be the legends of men, scattered throughout history, and a void once filled by the all-important father-son relationship.

For the Homeric audience, the father-son relationship governs heroic interaction and is a pivotal cultural construct. The contrasting, and at the same time very similar, father-son depictions of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* suggest deliberate, complementary construction. Both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* depict in a connected progression the problems of the patriarchal society of ancient Greece. Fathers are the admired role models of their sons. At the same time, there are dangers produced by the father-son dynamic;

the dynamic alters the concept of glory, making an unachievable end seem achievable. Indeed, it is tough to define “ clearly the achievements and limitations of mortal men” (Rutherford 123). It is inevitable for heroes to be “...bound to their own torture/...heaving, hands struggling, legs driving... ... time and again” - heroes are filled with an insatiable desire for glory (The Odyssey 11: 681, 683, 685). Conceivably, all in all, the flaws of the patriarchal ideology are presented through the father-son relationships of The Iliad and The Odyssey to forewarn men who seal their Sisyphean fates and lose themselves in seeking glory.