



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## **Threptrā and Invincible Hands: The Father-Son Relationship in Iliad 24**

Nancy Felson

Arethusa, Volume 35, Number 1, Winter 2002, pp. 35-50 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/are.2002.0008](https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2002.0008)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/are/summary/v035/35.1felson.html>

**THREPTRA AND INVINCIBLE HANDS:  
THE FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN *ILIAD* 24**

NANCY FELSON

**T**he *Iliad* calls what you gratefully give back to the parents who reared you *θρέπτρα*, a shortened form of *θρεπτήρια*, which denotes “that system of *gêrotrophia* whereby sons cared for their parents in old age” (Falkner 1995.12ff.). A warrior who is short-lived, *μινυνθάδιος*, or has a short fate, an *αἶσα μίνυνθα*, is unable to bestow it. Both to give back *θρέπτρα* and to raise or nourish, *τρέφειν*, describe ongoing activities that determine the quality of the recipient’s life.<sup>1</sup> Their pairing and the semantics of the verb *ἀποδιδόναι* or *ἀποδοῦναι*, “to give back,” make the expression “to give back *θρέπτρα*” doubly reciprocal. What constitutes *θρέπτρα* may vary over time and place and with a parent’s particular needs, but certainly it would include the necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter), as well as the preservation of honor and protection from one’s enemies and detractors (cf. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.1165a.15–35). According to Plato, one must minister to an aged parent in regard to his property, his person, and his soul (Plato *Laws* 4.717b–c).<sup>2</sup>

- 
- 1 Note that a primary meaning of *τρέφειν* is “thicken or congeal a liquid,” *γάλα θρέγειν*, “curdle it” (LSJ, s.v. *τρέφω* I, citing *Od.* 9.246); likewise Cunliffe, s.v. *τρέφω* 1: “to solidify, curdle, coagulate,” supported by Chantraine, s.v. *τρέφω*. Cunliffe gives, as the second meaning, “to bestow a parent’s or a nurse’s care upon, bring up, rear, nurture.” The word normally applies to females, but Peleus is the subject of the verb at *Iliad* 23.90, in the speech of Patroclus’s shade.
- 2 “A legitimate son was obliged to maintain his parents in old age; and the penalty for failure to do so was loss of citizenship” (Richardson 1969.56, citing Diog. Laert. 1.7.55). This practice was codified under Solon, but a son was exempted from this obligation if his father had failed in his duty to teach him a trade (Plutarch *Solon* 22). The Attic codification

In a number of texts of the archaic period, a gendered division of labor is evident in the rearing of a boy, with maternal care (by mother, nurse, or, in myth proper, various *κουροτρόφοι*) ending when he reaches the “measure of youth” (*μέτρον ἡβης*). Then, in his prime (*ἡβησας*), he embraces the male world, supervised by his father or a surrogate.<sup>3</sup> In the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* 166 (= 221), for example, Demophoon is being raised (*τρέφεται*) in the *megaron*. If Demeter, as his nurse, should successfully rear him (*ἐκθρέψαι*) “until he reaches the measure of his youth,” she will receive the envy of women and *θρεπτήρια* (“repayment as a nurse”). Likewise, in Hesiod’s *Myth of the Five Races*, silver-age sons are raised (*ἐτρέφει*) at their mothers’ sides, within the household, for a hundred years; “but when they come of age and reach the measure of manhood,” they live just a little (*Works and Days* 130–33). In the *Odyssey*, Telemachus is in danger of experiencing a prolonged childhood at the side of his mother and his nurse Eurycleia; but the goddess Athena (as *Mentes*) intervenes, and he embarks, somewhat late, on his maturation journey. During that period away from home, father surrogates contribute to his ongoing maturation and then, once he returns to Ithaca, his own father oversees him. In general, a father’s supervision of his son, either directly or through a surrogate, seems to continue all through *ἡβη*, at least in theory, until the son marries and establishes a household of his own or inherits the patrimony upon his father’s death.

In the representation of masculinity in Homeric epic, a crucial ingredient for a positive father-son dynamic is the father’s act of sharing center stage with his son, especially a son who is in his prime (*ἡβησας*). A gentle, loving father shows the youth how to perform male activities, as Nestor guides Antilochus in chariot racing (*Il.* 23.306–48), Athena-Mentes (and then Athena-Mentor) instructs the young Telemachus in the *Telemachy*, and Peleus advises Achilles with his parting words (*Il.* 9.254–59). Con-

---

thus acknowledges the divide between good and bad parenting. Ancient references to laws about how to repay one’s living parents are collected in Richardson 1969.55–58, esp. n. 69; see also Lacey 1968.116–18 and 290 n. 115, Powell 1988.381 and n. 258, Garland 1990.256–58, 261–62, and Strauss 1993.229 n. 8.

3 Note, however, the prominence of the father’s role in rearing the child in most occurrences of the formulaic line: *ὁ σ’ ἔτρεφε τυτθὸν ἐόντα*, “He reared you while you were still a child.” This is said of Telemachus rearing Teucer at *Il.* 8.283, a brother-in-law rearing Aeneas at *Il.* 13.466, Eetion rearing Andromache at *Il.* 22.480, and, in the *Odyssey*, of Laertes rearing Odysseus at 11.67. The very same formula, at *Od.* 1.435, describes Eurycleia rearing Telemachus.

versely, in the negative pattern, a hostile or egocentric father tends to neglect his son's education, take a young woman for himself, and even curse his son to sterility, like Amyntor in Phoenix's autobiography (*Il.* 9.445–77). A hostile father invokes his son's hatred and desire for revenge, while a nurtured son yearns to repay his parent's loving care.

The term *θρέπτρα* itself occurs twice in the *Iliad*, both times in abbreviated "obituaries" that contain the same formula (*Il.* 4.477–79 = 17.301–03):

οὐδὲ τοκεῦσι  
 θρέπτρα φίλοις ἀπέδωκε, μινυνηθάδιος δέ οἱ αἰὼν  
 ἔπλεθ' ὑπ' Αἴαντος μεγαθύμου δουρὶ δαμέντι.

Nor could he  
 pay back nurturance to his dear parents; he was short-  
 lived,  
 conquered beneath the spear of high-hearted Ajax.<sup>4</sup>

Two victims of Telemonian Ajax, Simoeisius at 4.477–79 and Hippothous at 17.301–03, have this destiny, both struck down in their prime. Hector, who is also "short-lived" (15.612ff.), nearly falls victim to Telemonian Ajax at 14.418–20, but soon gets his wind back (14.436, 15.240 and 263). The formulaic lines are focalized through the son who has just died, not his bereaved parents—an effect I have tried to reproduce by "nor could he pay back." They implicitly acknowledge that such "loving and loved parents," having nurtured their son and raised him to manhood, deserve *θρέπτρα*, which their short-lived son would have wanted them to have. "Plutarch," in *Peri Homerou* 185, cites these lines from the *Iliad* to illustrate how "Homer showed in a single phrase that it is right (*δίκαιον*) for parents to be supported in their old age (*γηροτροφείσθαι*) by their children, for they owe it to them in exchange (*ἐξ ἀμοιβῆς*) for their upbringing" (Keaney and Lamberton 1996.274–75).

Achilles epitomizes the short-lived warrior whose father grows old, alone, in the far-off homeland (Slatkin 1991.34–38 and 102, Falkner

---

4 All translations are my own. I use D. B. Monro and T. W. Allen, *Homeri Opera* I and II, 3rd ed., Oxford 1920, for the *Iliad*, and T. W. Allen, *Homeri Opera* III and IV, 2nd ed., Oxford 1917 and 1919, for the *Odyssey*.

1995.13–14, and Mills 2000.3–18, esp. 15–16). At various moments, he expresses an awareness of his father’s sad plight. At 24.527–42, for example, he characterizes Peleus’s destiny as a mixture of good and evil. The gods gave him gifts from birth, he tells the grieving Priam—wealth, kingship, and an immortal wife, but evil also befell him: “He sired a single all-untimely child, and I do not / minister to him as he grows old (γηράσκοντα κομίζω), since far / from the land of my fathers I sit in Troy, and bring sorrow to you and your children” (24.540–42). Here he collocates the care not given Peleus with the distress he brings to Priam as he reassesses the effects of the work of his hands (cf. Richardson 1993.32–33, Zanker 1996.62 and n. 15). Achilles and Priam play their surrogate roles “in a shattered institution, Achilles in effect rendering to Priam the *θρεπτήρια* he will not provide for Peleus, Priam receiving it from the man who has taken the life of the son who should have provided it” (Falkner 1995.14). What liberates Achilles to experience the full humanity of this suppliant father and, indeed, to move forward imaginatively in his development, is Priam’s extraordinary gesture of kissing Achilles’ terrible, man-slaughtering hands, of taking to his lips the hand that killed his son (24.477–78 and 504–06).

Psychologically, a key ingredient of the positive familial pattern of father-son relations is the presence of a *πατήρ ἥπιος*, a gentle father who is not primarily a rival but instead supports his son. He is a dear parent, a *τοκεὺς φίλος*, with whom a youth can identify while maintaining his own power. This father endorses his son, enjoys his success, and says to him (in words and gestures): “You can be like me.” He rears a son who may at times *desire* to outstrip him, but who refrains out of admiration and gratitude. Basking in paternal attention, the son feels sufficiently gratified and affirmed to want to repay his parent. This gentle father, like the nurturing mother, deserves *θρεπτήρια* in his old age.

Odysseus epitomizes such an idealized father in the *Odyssey*, where he fulfills the Iliadic description that he applies to himself, “father of Telemachus” (*Il.* 2.260 and 4.354). He is supportive of Telemachus from their first encounter in Eumaeus’s hut when they finally reunite after twenty years and he yields him his seat (*Od.* 16.42: *ὑπόειξεν*). His paternal generosity as they plan the slaughter of the suitors compensates, in some sense, for the rearing he could not offer because he was away, and it inspires filial loyalty and obedience, despite their long separation. At the contest, as he stands on the threshold and attempts to string his father’s bow, Telemachus intensely wants to prove his manhood and hereditary mettle—to himself, the suitors, and his father. His participation in a contest for the hand of his

father's wife has a powerful Oedipal ring. That he yields to his father's nod is extraordinary; the plot could easily have gone otherwise. Telemachus's self-restraint repays Odysseus's gentle inclusion of him and sustained respect for him from their first encounter in Eumaeus's hut to this moment of potential conflict. His obedience honors his exemplary father and, as a repayment, it restores equilibrium—*δίκη*—a just order in the Ithacan *οἶκος*.

At different points in the poem, Odysseus comments self-consciously on the state of his own manhood, claiming that he can still perform manly acts though no longer in his prime and that youths, even those in *their* prime, will not outstrip him. This he demonstrates most unambiguously when he competes with the Phaeacian youths at the games at *Od.* 8.186ff., wrestles with the younger beggar Iros at 18.88ff., and defeats the suitors at the contest of the bow in Book 22. In light of these scenes in which he insists that he is still in full vigor, Odysseus's generosity toward Telemachus is all the more spectacular, epitomizing what it means to be a gentle father (Felson 1999.89–98).

An egregious example of the hostile father in the *Iliad* is Agamemnon, to whom Peleus entrusts his son (cf. Avery 1998, esp. 393). Achilles reacts negatively to all of Agamemnon's ungenerous behavior toward him—from his tone at the assembly and the removal of Briseis in Book 1, to his arrogance at 9.160–61 when he insists that Achilles submit (*ὑποστήτω*) to him, insofar as he claims to be “kinglier” (*βασιλεύτερος*) and older by birth: this is the part of the message that Odysseus omits but Achilles “hears” nonetheless. These provocations make the younger warrior vehemently refuse all entreaties and gifts, including the offer to become Agamemnon's son-in-law (9.144–47 = 286–90).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, having complained in Book 1 of Agamemnon's greed and hunger and of his habitual hoarding of the booty, Achilles informs the embassy that he will not return to battle before Agamemnon “*gives back* to me the whole heart-rending outrage” (9.387: *πρίν γ' ἀπὸ πᾶσαν ἐμοὶ δόμεναι θυμαλγέα λώβην*). The negative reciprocity here is underscored by the use of *ἀπὸ . . . δόμεναι*, “to give back.” Agamemnon has taken instead of giving, like a gentle father, and *θυμαλγέα λώβην* sums up the injury he thereby inflicted. In a kind of reverse-simile, Achilles sees himself as the adult mother bird bringing back morsels for her unfledged young ones, while faring poorly herself (9.323–25). All the “food” keeps going to Agamemnon and the other Achaeans, and

---

5 On the *ἄποινα* offered by Agamemnon in Book 9, see esp. Wilson 1999.131–47.

Achilles plays the parental role of provider that should belong to Agamemnon (Mills 2000.8f.). Indeed, between Books 1 and 19, when Achilles publicly renounces his anger at Agamemnon (19.67: ἐγὼ παύω χόλον), the two warriors enact the negative form of the father/son pattern. They vie over status, power, and a girl who is both a γέρας, “prize of honor,” and, to Achilles, an object of affection for whom he cares from the heart (9.342–43: ἐκ θυμοῦ φίλεον).

In the world of epic, the foundation of *θρεπτήρια* is emotional solidarity between parent and child, where cooperation prevails over competition and confrontation.<sup>6</sup> For men, this ideal finds its fullest expression in three-generational patriline, a rare phenomenon, since most epic lineages are shattered by the wartime deaths of a father or a son—though, in some cases, exile (as a result of a murder or of parental abuse) may cause the disruption.

The idealized family presented in the *Odyssey* is a patriline of three intact generations joining battle against the enraged relatives of the slain suitors (Felson 1999, with citations). Their harmonious relations are predicated on a family tradition, upheld by Odysseus, of sharing center stage, father with son, son with father. That harmony is all the more remarkable in Odysseus’s case, since he is still (insistently) in his prime and not ready to relinquish his authority to Telemachus, whom he nevertheless includes and encourages in manly pursuits. This type of parenting contrasts with the overtly conflictual model, where the son tries to usurp his competitive father’s power and where each party insists on dominating the other. Aspects of conflict also appear in the reciprocal model—in the father’s desire not to be displaced and the son’s to prove his manhood—but they are not fully activated. If the father recognizes the subjective desire of the son, this acknowledgment in and of itself elicits filial respect.<sup>7</sup>

Among the Trojans, it is Andromache who most vividly articulates the importance of male reciprocity and male bonding. She has already experienced the fall of her own city and the death of her father, brothers, and

---

6 On intergenerational cooperation versus competition, see Adkins 1971.1–14, Strauss 1993.1–20 and 61–99, esp. 82–86; also Felson 1997.67–91 and 1999.89–98, Thalmann 1998.109–13, 130–31 and n. 50, 206–23. For a judicious critique of Adkins 1960, see Long 1970.121–39. Wörhle 1999 provides a recent, though somewhat superficial, overview of fathers and sons in epic.

7 In cases where the son does surpass his father, perhaps the father is expected to yield his position of authority in time, as Laertes does to Odysseus. For a fascinating analysis of the recognition scene between Odysseus and Laertes in *Odyssey* 24, see Pucci 1996.

mother. She relies completely on her husband, who is all the family she has left (cf. *Il.* 6.429–30), and begs him to preserve *his* family by not fighting outside the city walls. Once Hector falls, Andromache bewails the reciprocal benefits no longer available to Astyanax or Hector: “Neither will you be a benefit (ὄνειαρ) to him, Hector, / any more, since you are dead, nor he to you” (22.482–86). Schooled in disaster, she understands how much a father and son need one another and in what ways a son who survives his loving father will suffer from his lack of paternal support. She reiterates this theme in her formal dirge for the fallen Hector (24.725–45). Here she woefully predicts that Astyanax will not survive to become the heroic son of his father, but instead “someone of the Achaeans, / taking you by the hand, will hurl you from the tower into a horrible death / resentful . . .” (24.734–36). As Andromache realistically envisions her own and Astyanax’s future after the fall of Troy, she alludes to the child’s traditional mythological destiny: to be flung to his death from the city walls. (That Astyanax was hurled from the battlements of Troy [Eur. *Tr.* 724] is attested in the *Little Iliad* fr. 21 PEG and *LIMC*, Astyanax I.27.)

Hector himself does not question the heroic code as he fights for his own glory and that of his father and attempts to avoid deep shame before the Trojans (cf. *Il.* 6.444–46).<sup>8</sup> He comes closest to being a gentle father when he expresses paternal pride in his son’s future deeds as a warrior and ruler of an un-sacked Troy and when he removes his helmet so as not to frighten the child (6.472–73). He prays that Astyanax may be pre-eminent, as he himself is, and rule strongly over Troy, and that “one day someone would say of him as he comes in from the fighting: ‘This man is far better even than his father’” (6.476–81). But his prayer unrealistically presupposes the survival of Troy; in reality, Priam’s line is being extirpated by the war.

While three-generational patrilineal families will not endure for close families such as Hector’s, they never come into being in dysfunctional families where the father curses the son to sterility and the son threatens or desires to murder the father. Phoenix’s autobiographical tale of near parricide and quasi-incest (*Il.* 9.445–91) illustrates what happens when intergenerational tensions are not resolved. His father Amyntor resembles Laius in the Theban cycle and Uranus and Cronus among divinities: these are the most ignominious and ungentle fathers of the epic and theogonic traditions. Phoenix

---

8 On Hector’s position as general among the Trojans and the fact that his authority is limited to the battlefield, while the war effort is directed by the elders, see Sale 1994.63–64.



recounts how, as a young man, he reluctantly complied with his mother's repeated pleadings to sleep with his father's concubine so that she would hate the old man. The mother's use of her son's sexuality as a weapon against her unfaithful husband is thoroughly inappropriate and objectionable. Her influence should end once the son reaches the μέτρον ἥβης. Amyntor curses his son with childlessness, wiping out his own lineage; the young Phoenix, at the peak of youth, wants to kill his father, but kinsmen restrain him, keeping him under house-arrest. He escapes, leaves home, and wanders, eventually arriving in Phthia where Peleus receives him hospitably and loves him "even as a father loves his own only son, late born" (9.481). There, in turn, Phoenix nurtures Achilles tenderly,<sup>9</sup> explicitly replacing the child he would never have: "I made you, godlike Achilles, my own child, so that some day you might fend off hard affliction from me" (9.494–95: ἵνα μοί ποτ' ἀεικέα λοιγὸν ἀμύνης).<sup>10</sup> After fleeing his deeply destructive natal family and being welcomed by Peleus, Phoenix becomes integrated into his new household with its ideally reciprocal family dynamic. He not only receives his own kingdom, but can even anticipate protection from his social son, Achilles, against unseemly destruction.<sup>11</sup> Phoenix nurtured Achilles through childhood, in place of the absent Thetis, and, as one of Peleus's surrogates, he continues to mentor Achilles throughout the expedition to Troy, with uneven success.

---

9 The myth of Cheiron's role in tutoring the young Achilles is not used by the *Iliad* poet, probably because he chooses to focus more on the human father/son relation. Hainsworth 1993.121 (on *Il.* 9.442) attributes this choice to Cheiron's identity as a centaur, a mountain-dwelling beast whom Homer "banishes to the sidelines of the *Iliad*."

10 The name Amyntor means "Protector" or "Defender" (Chantraine, s.v. ἀμύνω). The father who should be Phoenix's protector ends up first neglecting, then cursing him. On the association of λοιγὸν ἀμύνειν or ἀμύναι with Achilles as one who brings ἄχος and can fend off disgraceful devastation, see Nagy 1979.69ff., esp. 75–76. Slatkin notes that "the successful capacity to λοιγὸν ἀμύνειν (or ἀμύναι) within the framework of the *Iliad* is restricted to the two figures of μῆνις—Apollo and Achilles—who, like the third, Zeus, can both ward off devastation for the Greeks and bring it on them as well" (1991.87). Normally, the expression "to ward off (unseemly) destruction" does not apply to an individual, with the exception of Sarpedon at *Iliad* 5.662. Here Phoenix links his expectation of θρέπτρα from Achilles with the urgent request that Achilles immediately ward off destruction from the Achaeans.

11 Normative loving relations are brought into high relief in epic by the few egregious conflictual family sagas, as in Phoenix's autobiography of Book 9, which Scodel 1982 sees as a parody of the tragic father/son conflict, and in the Oedipus story briefly told at *Odyssey* 11.271–80. For a full narrative analysis of the autobiography of Phoenix, see Rosner 1976.

The three generations of Peleus, Achilles, and Neoptolemus will never realize their potential for solidarity. Despite loving intentions on the part of Achilles toward both his father and his son, the war and premature death preclude such day-by-day rapport. Such is the case for every short-lived warrior destined to die at Troy. Peleus is the most important of the many Achaean fathers who will never receive  $\theta\rho\acute{\epsilon}\pi\tau\rho\alpha$  from a son. Achilles, however, differs from all other short-lived warriors in that he alone will be able, at least symbolically, to pay a father back—not Peleus but Priam.

Peleus in the *Iliad* is a beloved and loving, if absent, father to Achilles, a  $\phi\acute{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$   $\tau\omicron\kappa\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\varsigma$ , who himself and by means of surrogates raised Achilles through childhood and early manhood, and who therefore deserves  $\theta\rho\acute{\epsilon}\pi\tau\rho\alpha$  from his only son. He had delegated some of the nurturing of the young Achilles to Phoenix and, later, to Patroclus—both welcomed as fugitives to his estate. At opportune moments, Odysseus, Nestor, and Phoenix recount the words of Peleus when his son left for Troy (cf. Avery 1998.389–97, Crotty 1994.39, Hainsworth 1993.97)—benedictions meant to shape and guide his son on his venture. The memory of his words, often invoked at crises, exerts power not unlike the near-at-hand advice of the aged Nestor to Antilochus (Segal 1971.90–115 and Falkner 1995.8–9, 14–20, with citations).

Achilles himself describes Peleus as a father who will provide for his son—in contrast to Agamemnon, who only takes from his men. When he refuses Agamemnon’s offer of his daughter in marriage, Achilles confidently tells the embassy at 9.394–97:

Peleus will presently seek out a wife for me himself.  
There are many Achaean maidens in Greece and Phthia,  
daughters of the best men who defend strong citadels;  
of these whomever I please, I will make my dear wife.

There, “I will enjoy with her the possessions won by aged Peleus” (9.400), a reference to the many possessions in generous Phthia that he left behind (9.364). Later, at 18.330–32, when Achilles knows for sure that he will die at Troy soon after killing Hector, he imagines Peleus not welcoming his son back home. He again captures a parent’s focalization at 19.321–25 when he tells the shade of Patroclus:

I could suffer nothing else at all worse than this, not  
even

if I were to hear news of my father perishing, who now, I  
 suppose,  
 in Phthia lets fall a tender tear, destitute of such a son, I  
 who,  
 in a strange land, make war on the Trojans for accursed  
 Helen's sake.

When Achilles measures his grief for Patroclus against the ultimate suffering—news of a father's death—grief for his comrade comes out ahead. Before, he had hoped that he alone would perish here in Troy and that Patroclus would return to Phthia (19.331–37):

so that you might lead my son on the swift, dark ship  
 from Scyros,  
 and point out to him all my possessions,  
 my property, my serving men, my great high-roofed  
 house.  
 For, by this time, I think that Peleus has either altogether  
 perished or, still barely alive, grieves  
 in hateful old age, always anticipating  
 news of me, whenever he should learn of me perishing.

Lines 19.322 and 337 correspond to one another and reflect the reciprocity of Peleus's and Achilles' father-son bond: "not even if I were to hear news of my father perishing" (οὐδ' εἴ κεν τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποφθιμένοιο πυθοίμην) and "whenever he should learn of me perishing" (ὅτ' ἀποφθιμένοιο πύθηται). Imaginatively, Achilles is transported back to Phthia where once again he enters the subjectivity of his father—shedding a soft tear and waiting for news of his son's death. Moreover, his earlier fantasy, recollected here, that Patroclus could replace him as Neoptolemus's father, gives way to a new reality now that Patroclus is slain and no longer able to bridge the generations in his stead.

The understanding that he will die at Troy is consonant with one pathway of his "twofold destiny" (9.410–16; cf. 18.95–96). Yet Achilles' perspective broadens once he envisions his aging father. For the wealthy Peleus, sustenance is not an immediate issue, but he will need an heir for his kingdom and his property, protection from his enemies, and, ultimately, burial rites (cf. Edwards 1985.53–59).

At *Odyssey* 11.488–503, in the first Nekyia, Achilles' shade ex-

presses his anguish over his inability to defend Peleus. His language evokes the Iliadic theme of thwarted *θρεπτήρια*. He refuses to be consoled by Odysseus for his premature yet glorious death, saying he “would rather serve another man even as a field hand than rule over all the perished dead.” After he inquires about his son, Achilles’ shade asks Odysseus to tell him if he has heard (*πέπυσσαι*) any news of blameless Peleus: whether he still has a position of honor (*τιμὴν*) among the many Myrmidons or if they dishonor him (*ἀτιμάζουσιν*) because old age constrains his hands and feet (498–503):<sup>12</sup>

οὐ γὰρ ἐγὼν ἐπαρωγὸς ὑπ’ ἀγῶος ἠελίοιο,  
 τοῖος ἐὼν, οἴος ποτ’ ἐνὶ Τροίῃ εὐρείῃ  
 πέφνον λαὸν ἄριστον, ἀμύνων Ἄργείοισιν·  
 εἰ τοιόσδ’ ἔλθοιμι μίνυθ’ ἀπερ ἐς πατέρος δῶ·  
 τῶ κέ τεφ στύξαμι μένος καὶ χεῖρας ἀάπτους,  
 οἳ κείνον βιόωνται ἐέργουσίν τ’ ἀπὸ τιμῆς.

For I am no longer his defender under the sun’s rays,  
 not so great a man as I once was, when in broad Troy  
 I killed the best of their host, defending the Argives;  
 if only for a little while I could come as such a one to  
 my father’s house,  
 I would make someone bitterly regret my force and my  
 invincible hands,  
 those who would coerce that one and keep him from  
 honor.

On the one hand, this scene distinguishes the two epic heroes, to the advantage of Odysseus, who *will* have the opportunity to return to *his* ancestral home and rescue Laertes from his uncared-for state (cf. 24.226–34; Edwards 1985.53–59, Schein 1996.12). On the other, Achilles in Hades seems to reflect intertextually on his Iliadic self: in particular, mention of his force and invincible hands (*Od.* 11.502) may evoke the hands he used to *destroy* Priam’s sons at Troy, but which he now imagines defending Peleus.

---

12 Edwards 1985.52–59 discusses this scene, pointing out a number of parallels between the Odyssean and Iliadic Odysseus: “Achilles’ wish to defend Peleus, which is precluded by his death, is realized by Odysseus through the successful completion of his *νόστος*” (57).

In *Iliad* 24, these hands are designated both by the narrator and then by Priam as “child-slaying” at 478–79: κύσε χεῖρας / δεινὰς ἀνδροφόνους, αἷ οἱ πολέας κτάνον υἷας and 505–06: ἔτλην δ’ . . . / ἀνδρὸς παιδοφόνου ποτὶ στόμα χεῖρ’ ὀρέγεσθαι. This phrasing is so distinctive that any mention of Achilles’ hands in another context, such as *Odyssey* 11, might well recall this scene of *Iliad* 24.<sup>13</sup> The Odyssean Achilles, however, would prefer to use his Iliadic “force and invincible hands” to render θρεπτήρια to his own father, not *only* to his symbolic father at Troy.

Many scholars have written on the relation between Priam and Achilles in Book 24 and on other surrogate fathers of Achilles in the *Iliad*.<sup>14</sup> They point to textual elements that contribute to our sense of the relationship between Achilles and Priam in a scene poised “between reconciliation and repudiation” (Lynn-George 1988.243). The two virtually adopt one another as father and son; Priam’s desperate supplication touches Achilles because “Priam is in an even worse condition than Achilles, with an even greater need for consolation and elemental human solidarity” (Schein 1984.99). Before this encounter, Achilles could do nothing for “the various men who stand to him, at least symbolically, as father to son: Peleus, Phoinix, Agamemnon, even Patroklos” (Schein 1984.107). Following the lead of Whitman (1965.216–18) on Hermes as Guide of the Dead for Priam, Lynn-George (1988.242) describes Priam as “a voyager to what is almost the land of the dead . . . an outlying site in which an impossible reunion of father and son is restructured by the possibilities of relations between other fathers and other sons.” Crotty, in considering the significance of the ceremony of supplication in Book 24 and its implications for the poetics of the *Iliad*,

---

13 At both 18.317 and 23.18, Achilles lays his “manslaughtering hands over the chest of his dear friend” (χεῖρας ἐπ’ ἀνδροφόνους θέμενος στήθεσιν ἑταίρου), in anticipation of their transformed use in *Iliad* 24 and *Odyssey* 11.

The formulaic χεῖρες ἄπτοι occurs two other times in the *Odyssey* when the suitors describe the “invincible hands of Odysseus” at the Contest of the Bow (22.70 and 248). In the *Iliad*, it appears twice in threats issued by Zeus: at 1.567 (in a different position in the line) and at 8.450 (οἶον ἐμόν γε μένος καὶ χεῖρες ἄπτοι); twice of a warrior who “bespattered his invincible hands with gore” (at 11.169 of Agamemnon and at 20.503 of Achilles son of Peleus: λύθρω δὲ παλάσσετο χεῖρας ἀάπτους); and once, at 8.49, of Poseidon denying that he fears the “invincible hands of the Trojans.” Each time it is used in the *Odyssey*, it evokes the kind of warrior heroism characteristic of the *Iliad*.

14 See Whitman 1965.181–220 (esp. 216–20), Schadewaldt 1975.69–74, Finlay 1980.269–70 and 270–73, Macleod 1982.1–35, Schein 1984.99, 103, 129, Rutherford 1982.145–60, Lynn-George 1988.136–39 and 242ff., esp. 246–47, Richardson 1993.21–24 and 320–48, Zanker 1996.37, 117, 122–25, 128, and 1998.73–92, and Crotty 1994.3–41 and 211–15.

concludes that, by the poem's completion, Achilles "approaches the perspective of the *Iliad's* poet" (1994.98), in that he finally attains an understanding of the poetics implicit in the epic, which have to do with the memory of grief (1994.99). In an overview of father surrogacy, Mills concludes that Priam is "paradoxically the one father figure that he [Achilles] does not entirely fail" (Mills 2000.16–17); in a reversal of roles, he offers hospitality to Priam as to an exile, playing the role for the Trojan king that Peleus had played for Phoenix and Patroclus (Mills 2000.15–16). Achilles' desire and ability to assume the subject position and role of his own father is a natural consequence of their ongoing positive relation, even at a distance, and of his growth toward manhood as the epic draws to a close.

The yearning to repay *θρέπτρα* to his parent contributes to Achilles' sympathy for Priam in Book 24. Earlier, as he mourned Patroclus, he lamented not only the loss of a dear comrade but also, proleptically, his own death.<sup>15</sup> Now, as he and Priam remember their loved ones, he names Peleus before Patroclus—not so much as the *object* of his grief, but rather as a *subject* who will grieve for him once he dies. He has evolved from a youthful son thinking about his own short life and his own losses (first of Briseis, then of Patroclus) to a grown son thinking primarily of the sorrow that will befall his father.

In his consolation to Priam at 24.527–42, Achilles responds to Priam's lead in aligning the Trojan king's destiny with that of Peleus. He understands that both of these gentle, nurturing fathers have lost (or will lose) beloved sons. Here Achilles collocates his neglect of Peleus as he grows old with the sorrow he brings Priam and his children (24.538–42). He also bestows *θρέπτρα* on Priam, acting as a surrogate for the dead Hector—in a belated positive response to Hector's earlier plea (22.342–43) to "give my body to be taken home again, so that / the Trojans and the wives of the Trojans may give me in death my rite of burning."

The combative, conflictual side of the father/son pattern erupts fleetingly in the exchange between Priam and Achilles. First, Achilles, whom Athena at 1.207–14 had to restrain from killing Agamemnon, now

---

15 For examples of "surrogate mourning," cf. *Il.* 18.51–64, where Thetis leads the lament for Patroclus, yet, in all but the last four lines, appears to be lamenting for her own mortal son, who is still alive. Achilles, in his response to her (79–93), likewise treats Patroclus's death as his own when he says: "But as it is, there must be endless sorrow in your heart / for your son's perishing, whom you will not again welcome / returning home" (88–90). Cf. 19.301–03, where the women moaned around Thetis, "for Patroclus as a pretext, but each for her own woes."

restrains *himself* at 24.560–61 and 568–70 by telling Priam ahead of time how not to incite his anger:

No longer stir me up, old man. I myself intend to release  
 Hector to you . . .  
 Therefore now you must not further rouse my spirit in  
 my sorrows,  
 for fear, old man, I not spare you in my shelter,  
 suppliant as you are, and might transgress the god's  
 commands.

What provokes Achilles at this point? Explicitly, that Priam urges him to do what he already intends to do and what the gods command, namely, to return the corpse of his enemy. But the break in rapport is also triggered by Priam's innocent error in referring to Achilles' joyous homecoming: "May you enjoy these things and may you / return to your fatherland, since you were first to let me / myself be alive and see the light of the sun" (24.556–57). For Achilles, who knows he will never return home, Priam's error breaks the illusion that he is in fact *with* his own father, repaying *θρέπτρα*.<sup>16</sup>

At 24.583–86, in narrator-speech focalized through his character-lens, Achilles again avoids clashing with Priam. He has the serving maids wash, anoint, and then shroud Hector's corpse:

so that Priam would not  
 see his son, lest in his grieving heart he not hold back his  
 anger  
 at the sight and rouse the heart of Achilles, and so that  
 he  
 would not kill Priam and transgress the god's  
 commands.

---

16 These words of Priam "spark a dangerous shift in Achilles' mood," as Martin 1989.145 points out, "precisely because Agamemnon had made the same mistake, as if mere goods could persuade Achilles. Adding insult, Priam has mentioned Achilles' return home, a detail offensive to Achilles' sense of the epic tradition he is destined to enter."

Achilles' generosity to Priam as the poem moves toward its conclusion restores equilibrium and expresses reciprocity, at least on a symbolic plane.<sup>17</sup> Achilles is gratified to have the opportunity to be magnanimous to Priam by returning Hector's corpse and allotting the Trojans twelve days for burial rites. He himself now knows with certainty that he will not be giving  $\theta\rho\acute{\epsilon}\pi\tau\rho\alpha$  to Peleus and that no one will ever return *his* remains to Phthia. Yet he yearns for his father to get his due, a yearning he provisionally fulfills when he complies with the gods' commands, conveyed by Thetis. For Achilles, to return Hector's corpse, graciously and of his own will, is the metaphoric equivalent of repaying Peleus: Hector's *nostos* to the citadel of Troy for burial satisfies Priam in a way that Peleus will never experience, since *his* son will not return home from Troy. The audience is aware of events to come, that Achilles will be killed by Paris and Priam by Neoptolemus in an exact reversal of the reciprocity the two heroes enjoy in their rapprochement.<sup>18</sup>

In *Iliad* 24, as Achilles envisions the lot of his unprotected father in Phthia, his imagination is fed by the language, gestures, and image of Priam as suppliant and virtual exile. When Priam says, "I put to my lips the hand that killed my child," he releases Achilles' generosity; this marks the turning point for Achilles. Using his child-slaying hands, Achilles now takes the old man by the hand (24.515), offers him protection from his enemies (24.650–55), and gratifies his specific needs (24.656–58 and 660–67).

In a sense, the *Iliad* shows Achilles going through all the stages of manhood in his short life-time. As he nears his own death, he even becomes a "welcomer of the exile," like his father Peleus (Mills 2000.15–16). Remembering his loved ones alongside the grieving Priam intensifies his longing to tend his own aging father. At this point, he collocates the fact that he has destroyed so many sons of Priam with the fact that he will never

17 For a debate about reciprocity versus altruism in the Achilles-Priam encounter of Book 24, see Zanker 1998.73–92, with citations. A more nuanced account of their rapprochement is in Kim 2000.9–34. My essay supports the notion that Achilles gains something for his spirit as a result of his generosity to Priam.

18 As Kakridis perceptively notes (1987.105): "Priam . . . is ready to entrust himself to his enemy and go to sleep in his hut. For a few hours the two foes will enjoy the common boon of sleep, near one another, reconciled, passionless and carefree—in twelve days fierce war will burst out again, till the fall of Troy, till Achilles is killed by Priam's son and Priam is killed by Achilles' son."



benefit his own father. In the *Odyssey*, the poignant need receives even stronger expression, as the shade of Achilles rues its inability to protect Peleus with the force of his hands. In the *Iliad*, Achilles' gifts to Priam of the corpse of Hector and a twelve-day truce to make possible a fitting funeral are the only θρέπτρα that he is able to give back. Yet by virtue of this provision of θρεπτήρια to a "father," Achilles comes into full-fledged adulthood and becomes the multi-faceted heroic figure of this Homeric epic.<sup>19</sup>

*University of Georgia*

---

19 I would especially like to thank John Peradotto, to whom this volume is deservedly dedicated, for years of inspiration and friendship. Thanks also to the editors Carolyn Higbie and Martha Malamud for organizing the conference and editing this volume. Seth Schein's careful reading of my essay helped me immeasurably to put it in final form. Any remaining errors belong to me.