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## **The Father-Son Relationship in the Iliad:**

### **The Case of Priam-Hector Introduction**

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It is widely accepted that the *Iliad* is not merely a tale of the Trojan War and its battles, but also a literary product that yields interesting insights into the nature of human interactions. Arguably, one of the most prominent expressions of these interactions is the father-son relationship, through which the epic narrative keeps constantly at the background the existence of a world beyond the battlefield, where fathers and sons engage in a tense and intimate interaction characterised by mutual feelings of love, affection, concern, and, most importantly, interdependency.

The significance of the Iliadic father-son relationship has already been noted by a number of scholars. Greene (1970) was the first to draw attention to this topic by aptly characterising the *Iliad* as 'a great poem of fatherhood', and a few years later Lacey observed 'how completely family-centred the society of Homeric poems is' (1968: 34). Likewise, Redfield (1975), and Finlay (1980) examined the prevalence of the father-son bond in the epic narrative, while Griffin (1980) focused on the theme of the bereaved parents. Crotty (1994) dealt with different epic pairs of fathers and sons, being particularly concerned with the standards that the former impose on the latter. Interestingly, Ingalls (1998) centred on the attitudes towards children in the epic and argued for their high value in the Homeric society. Felson (1999) expatiated on the same subject, while Mills (2000) acknowledged the father-son relationship as an essential component of the epic. Felson (2002) and Pratt (2007) provide us with the most recent contributions to this area of study.

Notwithstanding its recurrence in scholarly treatises, the subject of the father-son relationship in the *Iliad* has by no means been exhausted. Many of its aspects need to be revisited, while others are still to be explored. The present article aims to examine this specific blood-relationship through one 'major' - in terms of poetic emphasis - father-son couple, Priam-Hector. Through the examination of this case, the article attempts to prove the significance of the father-son bond and shed light on the reciprocal dynamics it involves. As it will show, Priam and Hector engage in a strikingly intimate and strong interaction. On the one hand, the father cares for his son, instils in him the values of the heroic society, and expects him to become a prestigious individual. On the other, the son endeavours to satisfy his father's expectations and to 'recompense' for the services he has offered him by taking care of him in old age. The article shall also examine the extent to which paternal feelings and filial obligations are compatible with the dictates of the heroic code, arguing that the father-son relationship is often made problematic within a warrior society; the father attempts to prevent his son from joining the battle, while the son, being prematurely killed, fails to protect his aged father and his own son.

### **Priam and Hector relationship**

According to Seymour, 'the household of Priam is the best Homeric illustration of a patriarchal family'.<sup>1</sup> The Trojan king lives in his palace with his wife Hecuba, his fifty sons and twelve daughters, as well as their families and children, and for this reason he is regarded as fortunate and happy.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, by the end of the *Iliad* most of his sons will have been killed and he will have been reduced to the status of a miserable suppliant. The epic narrative illuminates mainly his relationship with Hector, presumably because this hero is one of the most distinguished protagonists and, arguably, the best Trojan warrior.

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<sup>1</sup> Seymour 2004: 150. <sup>2</sup> See Achilles' remark at 24.546: 'men say, you, old sire, were preeminent by reason of your wealth and your sons.'

The examination of the bond that ties the two men will be initially carried out through the lenses of Priam. More precisely, two episodes will be primarily taken into consideration: firstly, his attempt to prevent his son from fighting with Achilles in Book 22, and, secondly, his daring initiative to visit Achilles' tent in order to plead for the return of his son's corpse in Book 24. The discussion will then centre upon Hector's stance toward his father and, especially, on the way in which he tries to prove himself worthy of his expectations. As will be pointed out, their relationship is based on positive dynamics; Priam cares for his son and even risks his life in order to offer him adequate funerary rites, while Hector endeavours to find his own way to fulfil his filial duties and make his father proud.

### **Priam as a father**

Priam's attitude toward his son in Book 22 reveals his profound concern and love. While Hector is waiting outside the Scaean Gates for the enemy, his parents make an ultimate attempt to protect him by preventing him from fighting with Achilles. Prior to his speech, Priam reacts in a very characteristic way: he utters a groan, beats his head with his hands, raises them up, and stretches his arms out (22.33-6), begging his son not to face Achilles. His speech and attitude bring out two different sets of tensions developed between opposing forces: father versus king, and paternal desire versus heroic dictates.

To start with the first set of polarities, one would assert that his paternal role outweighs his royal one, for in his speech he tends to experience everything from the viewpoint of a father rather than that of a Trojan king. For instance, his hatred toward Achilles is not motivated by the fact that he is a deadly enemy of the whole Trojan population that he himself rules, but rather by the fact that he has robbed him of most of his sons (22.415). Later on, when he recounts his misfortunes he does not really refer to the ruin of his land or his people; it is the decomposition of his family that actually distresses him (22.60-5). From the viewpoint of the Trojan king, the forthcoming fight between Hector and Achilles can be interpreted in two opposite ways depending on its final course; if Hector wins, it will condition a victorious result in war, while if he is

defeated, it will be a step toward massive destruction. The paternal instinct prompts Priam to consider only the latter possibility and to present his son's abstention from this fight as equivalent to the rescue of Troy (22.56-8). Obviously, Priam subordinates his royal identity to the needs of his paternal role by ignoring the possibility of a victorious result and by stressing the link between his son's survival and his people's salvation. The climaxing course of his argument lends further corroboration to the fact that Priam actually speaks in his paternal, not royal, persona. His incitement contains three main points: firstly, that Hector must protect himself from the far mightier Achilles (22.38-41); secondly, that he must stay inside the walls in order to save the rest of the Trojans and not give to his enemy the opportunity for glory (22.56-8); and, thirdly, that he must stay alive in order to protect his father (22.59-76). In other words, Priam's persuasive rhetoric culminates in an emotional appeal to the father-son bond, which is expected to exercise the greatest influence on Hector. The conspicuous position of this latter argument, its length, and the striking images it conjures up – the killing of Priam's sons, the enslavement of his daughters and sons' wives, the death of the king, the tearing of his naked corpse, and the drinking of his blood by the dogs<sup>2</sup> – point to its leading significance in the speech.

As for the second set of polar oppositions – paternal desire versus heroic dictates –, Priam's appeal to Hector not to fight with Achilles is clearly at odds with the values of a warrior society. Priam actually encourages his son to act against the heroic code to which he himself has introduced him. In fact, when addressing Hector 'in the most poignant terms',<sup>3</sup> Priam endows his words with considerable emotional weight. In the beginning, he urges his son to have compassion on him (22.59-60), appealing to the emotion of *eleos* (compassion, pity). As Crotty observes, 'the pathos inherent in the relation between the aged father and his son is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Priam's anguished plea to Hector to return to the safety of Troy, and not to face certain death at Achilles' hands'.<sup>4</sup> However, to feel *eleos* at this crucial moment and hence

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<sup>2</sup> On this latter image, see Richardson 1993: 112.

<sup>3</sup> Crotty 1994: 24-5.

<sup>4</sup> Crotty 1994: 36.

withdraw from battle is to violate the heroic value of *aidos* (the feeling of reverence, shame and modesty). Apparently, 'the emotions of *aidos* and *eleos* are in tension: each flows from and supports values that do not easily coexist with each other'.<sup>5</sup> Priam, however, reverses the application and content of *aidos* and transforms it from a value traditionally associated with heroism into a value that is opposed to it.<sup>6</sup> In a way, the preservation of Priam's dignity depends on the distancing of his son from the dictates of the heroic code; if Hector stays inside the walls and refuses to fight with Achilles, he will rescue Priam from possible humiliation (22.75). As Crotty nicely puts it, Priam's appeal suggests that 'the heroic values of prestige and fame ... have their ultimate basis in the ardour of the ties binding father and son'.<sup>7</sup> In addition, such a statement points to the inter-dependence and reciprocity that underlie the relationship between father and son.

If Priam's grief at the loss of his child is almost self-evident and absolutely expected, the way in which this grief is expressed and the actions to which it leads are certainly peculiar to a particularly close and tight bond between father and son. Indicative is the fact that his lamentation is reported first, after a very brief reference to Hecuba's gestures of mourning, and it occupies a relatively large space in the epic narrative (22.408-28). He groans 'pitifully', throws himself in the mud, and in his frenzy expresses his desire to intrude on the camp of the Achaeans in order to get the corpse of his son back. His eagerness is so strong that his people can scarcely restrain him from abandoning the Sardanian gates (22.412-3). In his grief, Priam puts aside his royal persona and overtly speaks before his people as a mourning father. He does not lament Hector the warrior and the protector of the Trojans, but Hector the son. Indeed, his desire to visit and supplicate Achilles puts in danger not only his own life, but also the life of his whole nation, which, if bereft of its king, will be left headless. Moreover, Priam plans to supplicate the enemy not as a king, but exclusively as a bereaved old father and thinks that he can sway Achilles' intransigence, relying upon

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<sup>5</sup> Crotty 1994: 36-37.

<sup>6</sup> Crotty 1994: 37.

<sup>7</sup> Crotty 1994: 37.

the universal value of the father-son bond. Then, Priam once again estimates the destruction that Achilles has brought to Troy from the narrow viewpoint of a father, whose sons are slain in war, rather than the wide perspective of a king, whose country and people suffer.

The profundity of his relationship with Hector is explicitly reflected in his own evaluation of his feelings. As he openly states, he has not mourned so much for the death of all his other sons as he now mourns for Hector, who is clearly his favourite child.<sup>8</sup> He even proceeds so far as to assert that his grief will send him to the house of Hades (22.4256). In fact, his overall attitude exhibits an unspoken desire to undergo a virtual death himself, sympathizing in a way with his child and duplicating his fate. Later on, he will enjoy neither food nor sleep (24.635-42),<sup>9</sup> while his visit to Achilles' tent will include elements that traditionally pertain to *katabatic* narratives.<sup>10</sup> Last but not least, his final wish to have had his dead son in his arms in order to mourn him properly is revealing of his paternal affection as well as his tragic nature as a father-figure.

As presented in Book 24, Priam's decision to visit Achilles' tent and its subsequent accomplishment yield further insights into the form of the father-son relationship between Priam and Hector. Zeus judges Priam as the most suitable person for undertaking the dangerous enterprise of requesting Hector's corpse and therefore sends Iris to urge him on this course of action; Priam himself claims that he is ready to die once he has clasped the hand of his son and has lamented him (24.226-7); and when he addresses his nine remaining sons, he overtly states that it would be better if all of them were slain instead of Hector (24.253-4). The bold initiative of Priam to

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g. 22.38, 22.424-6, 24.255-260. Characteristically, Redfield 1994: 113 perceives Hector's social role as being that of a 'worthy son'.

<sup>9</sup> Not eating after a beloved person's death was common (see e.g. 24.613).

<sup>10</sup> For the interpretation of the visit of Achilles' tent by Priam as an infernal journey, see e.g. Mackie 1999: 488ff.

invade the camp of the enemy incontestably points to his deep fatherly love and affection towards his son.

It should be noted that the intervention of the gods for the successful completion of Priam's visit by no means undermines the courageousness of this initiative. When Zeus with the help of Iris urges him on to take back Hector's corpse, Priam has already expressed this desire and has proved his willingness to carry it out (22.416ff.); in fact, the people of Troy 'were barely able to hold back the old man in his frenzy, eager as he was to go out from the Dardanian gates' (22.412-3). Also, Iris does not reveal her true identity, but merely states that she is a messenger from Zeus (24.173). As a result, the successful outcome of Priam's visit cannot be completely guaranteed. Indeed, Hecuba vehemently reacts to the desire of her husband to undertake such a dangerous journey, whereas Priam himself does not rule out the possibility of his being slain by Achilles (24.224-6). On the other hand, in his dialogue with Hecuba he does not actually aim to negotiate his decision. He may ask for her opinion, but he clearly says that his heart commands him to go the camp of the Achaeans (24.197-9). Besides, when he calls her to him he is in the treasure chamber ready to prepare the ransom for the release of Hector's body (24.188ff.). Clearly, the divine will functions only as an additional – and even uncertain – motivation of an already expressed intention.

Different characters comment on and acknowledge the courageousness of Priam's initiative, implicitly inviting the interpretation of this act as a symbolic self-sacrifice.

Firstly, Hecuba is startled with Priam's resolution to visit the camp of the enemy and regards this decision as incompatible with his famous wisdom; Achilles is ruthless and will certainly kill him (24.201-8). Likewise, Hermes expresses his surprise when he sees an old man fearlessly intruding upon an inimical place at night-time and bringing with him such a treasure (22.364-9). More importantly, Priam's bravery will be acknowledged by Achilles himself, whose first words connote admiration as well as astonishment:



Ah, unhappy man, full many in good sooth are the evils you have endured in your soul. How have you the heart to come alone to the ships of the Achaeans, to meet the eyes of me that have slain your sons many and valiant? Of iron verily is your heart. (24.518-21)

Noteworthy is the fact that Priam's care for Hector is completely altruistic, for it is directed toward a dead son from whom he cannot expect any sort of repayment. As Pratt aptly puts it, 'through his act above all, the *Iliad* suggests that self-sacrifice out of love, the kind associated in the poem with parents, is sufficient in itself, that the investment that ... parents make in their children is worthwhile, even if it is never paid back'.<sup>11</sup>

The disagreement between father and mother in 24.193-227 is suggestive of deeper gender-related attitudes. Hecuba the mother is rather acquiescent *vis-à-vis* the death of Hector. There is nothing they can do, for that was his fate: to be slain by a violent man far from his parents while performing glorious deeds. She therefore accepts the facts as they are and limits her reaction to a sorrowful lamentation within the palace (24.208-9), while pointing out the dangerousness of such an enterprise (24.206-8). On the contrary, Priam the father can neither accept nor be reconciled with the fact that his son's corpse lies desecrated in the enemy's tent. He is eager to act and reverse this situation, even if this puts his own life in danger. His irreconcilable and fierce attitude, which makes even Achilles exclaim 'of iron surely is your heart' (24.521), creates a strangely 'heroic' image of him. It is as though he wants to 'prove himself' to his dead son and reach his heroic stature. In fact, Priam latently appeals to the heroic ideals of the warrior society when he rebukes his nine surviving sons for their unheroic nature, while praising those slain, especially Hector, as brave and manly (24.253-62). His courage, boldness, determination, and vigorous commands for the preparations of the visit are distinctive traits of the hero-figure. While his young, living children simply prepare the wagon for the journey, Priam actually makes this

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<sup>11</sup> Pratt 2007: 40.

journey, paradoxically proving himself more heroic than his living warrior-sons, despite his old age. Interestingly, the previous image of the unheroic Priam, who was earnestly begging his child not to join the war, is replaced by an active and heroic man who is ready to encounter the enemy and jeopardize his life. These two contradictory attitudes are motivated by the same driving force, paternal love.

The intensity of Priam's paternal love defines his behaviour toward Achilles and renders his mission possible.<sup>12</sup> Despite the profound hatred he feels, he clasps the knees of the enemy and kisses the 'man-slaying hands that had slain his many sons' (24.478-9).<sup>13</sup> His great desire to get the corpse of his child back prompts him to set aside his negative feelings and beg Achilles to take pity on him. His role as father is not only the motivation of his actions, but also one of the reasons of their success, for, as we have already shown, it is through the appeal to the father-son bond that Priam manages to affect the emotional state of Achilles, establish a sense of closeness between them, and compass his end. As Crotty mentions, 'the father looms large in the climactic encounter of Priam and Achilles: Priam is moved to supplicate by his fatherly feelings for Hector, and in appealing to Achilles, he expressly invokes the memory of Peleus, Achilles' father'.<sup>15</sup>

### **Hector as son**

When seen from the viewpoint of Hector, the tension between the father-son relationship and the dictates of the heroic code is somehow attenuated. Nowhere does he feel any sense of guilt similar to that Achilles feels for his father, and nowhere does he perceive his role as a warrior as incompatible with his filial obligations. On the contrary, to Andromache's pleas to withdraw from war Hector answers that what he has learnt is 'to excel always and to fight among the foremost Trojans, striving to win great glory for my father and myself' (6.444-6). In other words, he sees his heroic and filial identities as inextricably interwoven and interdependent. In this respect,

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<sup>12</sup> See Lynn-George 1996: 5.

<sup>13</sup> For the number of Priam's sons or kinsmen killed in the course of the *Iliad*, see the interesting comment of Griffin 1976: 168, n.29. <sup>15</sup> Crotty 1994: 24.

when Hector rejects his father's pleas to avoid fighting with Achilles he neither neglects his filial duty nor shows disrespect toward his father.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, he remains clung to the heroic code to which his father has bound him. Priam's appeal to a different kind of *aidos*, which can potentially prevent Hector from facing Achilles in battle, does not affect the heroic content of the notion as endorsed by him. He has already made clear that *aidos* is a powerful motive for his participation in war (6.441-2) and he now shows that he has managed to internalize shame 'so that it grows from and reflects his own unwillingness to behave in a manner other than what he and others expect of himself'.<sup>15</sup>

All in all, the relationship between Priam and Hector presents us with another positive pattern of father-son bond. On the one hand, Priam shows genuine paternal affection and care, and is driven to bold and dangerous deeds out of love for his son. Hector, on the other hand, expresses his desire to prove himself worthy of his father's expectations. If Hector manages to reconcile the obligations of his heroic and filial personas, Priam has difficulties with extenuating the tension between his paternal and royal roles as well as resolving the conflict between his paternal desire and the precepts of the heroic code. At crucial moments, he tends to set aside his royal identity and to disregard the values of the warrior society, defining his attitude and actions in accordance with his fatherly quality.

## **Discussion**

The conclusion drawn from the above analysis is that the father-son relationship is firmly rooted within the Homeric society, defines in various ways the life of Homeric characters, and constitutes an integral part of their identity. The present study not only lends further support to the significance of the father-son relationship, but it also reaches a series of additional conclusions regarding the attitude of the father toward

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<sup>14</sup> Contrast Pratt 2007: 33, who talks about Hector's 'heedlessness' toward his father's care.

<sup>15</sup> Crotty 1994: 32.

his son, the duties of the son toward his father, and the way in which paternal and filial obligations often conflict with the dictates of the heroic code.

The father undertakes the instrumental task of raising his son according to the values that underlie the warrior society. His advice and instructions are extremely important, since they mould his son's character and determine his transformation into a complete man and warrior. The values of the warrior society can also include the notion of spiritual superiority as well as the development of a feeling of shame (*aidos*), 'an emotion that always tends to make the individual esteem the values of warrior society'.<sup>16</sup> Characteristically, Glaucus' father sends him off to war, ordering him not to bring shame upon their family, being the bravest and pre-eminent above all (6.207-10), while Peleus instructs his son on how to gain the honour of the Argives (9.254-8). It is interesting that the heroic values can be taught even by fathers like Peleus or Priam, who are not presented as distinguished warriors. In these positive father-son relationships, the ultimate desire of the father is to see his son surpassing him in excellence and prestige.

When a person is endowed with the paternal role, he never ceases to be defined by it, not even when his son or he himself dies. This is made manifest by the figure of Priam, who takes care of his son's corpse, even by putting his own life in danger. In reality, the offer of adequate funerary rites is an important duty of the son toward his father, but in wartime the balances are reversed and it is very often the case that it is the father who undertakes this sorrowful task. On the other hand, the paternal role transgresses the boundaries between the two worlds and continues to preoccupy deceased fathers like Achilles, who eagerly asks Odysseus about his son Neoptolemus<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Crotty 1994: 34.

<sup>17</sup> Characteristically, when Odysseus visits the Underworld, he meets Achilles' shade (11.387ff.), who asks first about his son, and then more extensively about his father. Once he hears that Neoptolemus is brave, victorious, respectable, and skilled in speech he departs, glorying at his son's military and intellectual excellence (11.538-40).

As outlined above, sons are indebted to their fathers and feel the need to pay back what they have previously done for them. Certainly, the so-called *threpra* (the return for rearing)<sup>18</sup> is a feature of the positive father-son relationships. This recompense is based on a sort of exchange and is defined by reciprocity; a caring father like Priam deserves and can expect to be aided by his son in old age.<sup>19</sup> One might argue that this filial obligation undermines the altruistic character of the parental services. Yet, several examples suggest that this is not the case. Priam tries to protect his son even when the latter is nothing more than a desecrated corpse; and Achilles, though an infernal denizen, is still concerned with the wellbeing of his son. Obviously, even when this service exchange between father and son can no longer operate, fathers do not renounce their parental roles.

Although the father-son relationship is extremely significant, it is often incompatible with the warrior society within which it operates. The warrior's father tends to be overwhelmed by his love and affection, going so far as to contradict the values that he himself has laboured to instil in his son. On the other hand, the warrior himself, who actively participates in war, prioritizes his heroic role. The conflict between the filial and heroic identity is more intense in Achilles' case, since the hero chooses to remain in Troy and die gloriously, even if this means that he will fail to take care of his old father Peleus and young son Neoptolemus, while for Hector, who does not have such a dilemma, to fight for one's country reconciles the filial and heroic obligations.

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<sup>18</sup> As defined in Liddell and Scott 1963: 369. For the theme of *threpra*, see Falkner 1995: 12 and Strauss 1993: 13. See also *Il.* 4.477-8 and 17.301-2 for examples of young men who cannot render this prescribed service to their fathers; for instance this system of *gerotrophia* does not apply to the relationship between Amyntor and Phoenix; the cruel and competitive attitude of the former invokes the latter's hatred and desire for revenge.

<sup>19</sup> In *Laws* 4.717b-c, Plato outlines this filial obligation well; sons must look after their aged fathers in regard to their property, person, and soul, return the care they offered to them and the pain they spent on them in bygone years, and recompense them when they need it the most, namely in their old age.

## Conclusion

Having proved the significance of the father-son relationship and having investigated its various aspects and expressions, we can at this point answer a crucial question: why is this bond stressed so much in the epic? Differently put, what is its narrative significance? As far as we can tell from the above analysis, the father-son bond performs two functions that serve the broader needs of the epic narrative. Firstly, it brings out the human aspect of the Homeric characters and presents them as complete men; they are not only members of an army, but they are first and foremost members of a family, sons and fathers themselves. Their contextualization within a family structure magnifies their heroism, for it shows how they prefer to sacrifice everything for their fatherland and even neglect their filial and paternal obligations, despite their tight and intense bonds with their father and/or son. Secondly, in the context of a poem that focuses on heroic military achievements, the father-son relationship brings to the fore the negative sides of war, especially through the figure of the bereaved father. As Mills rightly puts it, 'the *Iliad* is full of parent-child relationships which have been fatally damaged by war'.<sup>20</sup> A characteristic – and perhaps the most tragic – example is Priam, who outlives his fifty sons.<sup>21</sup> These premature and unnatural deaths that separate sons from fathers underline the vanity of war, which reverses the normal order of things and obliges fathers to bury their children. At the same time, the conflict between the filial/paternal role and the dictates of the heroic code sheds light on the disruption of the family ties and their precariousness in the framework of a warrior society.<sup>22</sup> It would not be farfetched to assert that, although the poet is primarily concerned with the glories of men war in wartime, he manages to communicate, by means of the father-son relationship, anti-war messages.

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<sup>20</sup> Mills 2000: 16.

<sup>21</sup> Postlethwaite 2000: 303.

<sup>22</sup> Yet, as Pratt 2007: 30 argues 'the very precariousness of the connections between mortals makes them more precious in the poem'.

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