

Maternal Genealogies in Homer's *Iliad*
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Through religious ritual, polis affiliation, and kin ties, mothers played an important role in negotiating male identity in ancient Greece. This paper looks at maternal genealogies in Homer's *Iliad* for further perspective on this question. Although much attention has been given to the use of patronyms in the *Iliad*, not much has been said about the instances in which a character is defined wholly or in part by his mother. This is especially surprising given that a mother-son relationship frames the entire poem (Slatkin 1991). This paper will show that the naming of the mother both enhances a hero's status and yet underscores his mortal vulnerability.

The naming of mothers may function honorifically, linking the son to a divine or heroic father, as with the consorts of Zeus (14.315-328; 6.197-99); the *parthenoi* seduced by Hermes, Astyoche (2.513-15) and Polyemele (16.179-90); Astyocheia, the mother of Tlepolemos by Heracles (2.658), Hypsipyle, the mother of Euneos by Jason (7.460). Liaisons between rivers and mortal women also fall into this category, as for example, Polydore, mother of Menesthius, by Spercheios (16.173-178) and the unnamed mother of Simoeisus (4.473-489). Mothers are mentioned when a hero is conceived outside of wedlock, either through an encounter with a naiad, like Iphition, "conceived under the snows of Tmolus" (20.381-388), or as the offspring of a concubine, such as Priam's children with Castianira (8.302-8) and Laothoë (21.84-91).

Conversely, allusions to the mother can denote weakness and vulnerability: Nireus, the son of Aglaea, is said to rival Achilles in beauty, but of poor strength and in command of a small army (2.672). Aphrodite's rescue of Aeneas by wrapping him in her robe (*ekalupsen*, 5.315) undermines his heroism, especially as she has just done the same for the cowardly Paris (*ekalupsen*, 3.381). Indeed, he claims that his mother bore him "not utterly lacking in warcraft" (13.777), despite the constant references to his weakness as a fighter (3.40-45; 11.385-90). Hector, in contrast, seeks to withstand the debilitating effects of the mother when he refuses the wine Hecuba offers him upon his return to Troy (6.264-5). Allusion to the mother just before a hero's demise serves as a stark reminder that conception and death are closely bound (Murnaghan 1992; Burgess 2001). When Helen refers to her absent brothers as "born with me of a single mother," they are already dead (3.238-244). Lycaon's mother is also evoked just as Priam notices the hero missing (22.46). Just before his death, Patroclus is described as a young girl hanging on the skirts of his mother (16.7-8), while his corpse is likened to a new-born calf beneath its mother (17.1-5).

Because the mother evokes weakness and even death, the hero seldom refers to her in recounting his ancestry. Although the poet mentions that Asteropaeus is the son of the river Axios and his mother Periboea just before his death at the hands of Achilles, the hero himself does not mention her when he explains his lineage (21.139-60). Aeneas does not insert his mother into his genealogy, saying, "I am Anchises' son" (20.240). Not even Achilles names Thetis in his account of his birth, exclaiming instead, "I am the generation of great Zeus" (21.187).

Select Bibliography

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Murnaghan, S. 1992. "Maternity and Mortality in Homeric Poetry." *ClAnt* 11: 242-64.
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