

Epic Aging

The two Homeric epics in received form (that is, with controverted *Odyssey* 24 included) and Virgil's *Aeneid* treat aging, old age, and old men in complementary fashion.

Older (!) *Iliad* ends with somberly venerable Priam, with a look overseas toward Achilles' sire—the Trojan many times bereaved, the Phthian poised to mourn his only son. In contrast junior *Odyssey* ends, after an aged father who thought he was sonless meets long lost Odysseus, with old man's rejuvenation!

Iliad keeps Peleus, Achilles, and Achilles' son apart. Peleus may never meet atrocious grandson Neoptolemus, Euripides' *Andromache* notwithstanding, he may mourn him sight unseen. On the deliberate contrary, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* offer memorable scenes showing three heroic generations together, albeit under likewise deliberately contrasted circumstances.

Other old persons add breadth. e.g. stubborn Nestor in both Greek epics and counterpart Evander in the Roman one. *Iliad* anticipates death of Nestor's son Antilochus, *Odyssey* remembers it. *Aeneid* does both regarding Evander's Pallas. Here I concentrate on Peleus-Achilles-Neoptolemus, Laërtes-Odysseus-Telemachus, and Anchises-Aeneas-Ascanius/Iulus, with a glance at Priam-Hector-Astyanax: Priam like Peleus has a great son to mourn.

I examine three topics: upbringing of an elder's son and grandson; the experience of growing old, living past youthful prime, finally rendered *hors de combat*; and seniors' bereavement and mourning.

His father has limited hand in raising Achilles, who matures precociously under tutelage of Cheiron. Too old to go to war himself, Peleus gives his son armor, a team of horses, and advice. Grandson Neoptolemus grows up in the absence of father, who *is* mindful of him, and

faraway grandfather. Since that youth lives on Scyros, his grandfather at Phthia may never meet him. He turns out brutal, knowing nothing of Achilles' usual chivalry, and deserves early death.

Laërtes' son Odysseus, though growing up on Ithaca, owes much of his character to maternal grandfather Autolycus. Reckoned among the older Achaean warriors during the war, Odysseus misses those two decades during which Telemachus rises to physical manhood. Laërtes seems to have played little role in his grandson's proto-heroic development, which instead Odysseus' local friends took in hand. Nonetheless Telemachus becomes a young man of whom forebears should be justifiably proud. In him Odysseus finds a worthy comrade in defeating the Suitors. In the sequel briefly rejuvenated Laërtes fights proudly alongside the two younger generations.

Trojan Anchises in *Aeneid* and the fated son whom divine paramour Venus has left in his care seem to be close. Although Peleus suffers similar abandonment by Thetis, the Nereid gives their demigod son information and advice. Venus appears seldom to have advise Aeneas, yet prompts him to rescue venerable father and pre-teen son from burning Ilium. The *pius* hero continues to be with and for both, through years of wandering exile, till Anchises' death, whose special timeliness I shall explain. Priam dies too late, but Laërtes presumably happy among his kin.

Those ascendant men are already old when we meet them. At Troy Peleus is a distant yet intermittently vivid memory to Achilles, who is increasingly aware of his father's advancing old age, intensely so when confronted with pathetic old Priam (whose age *Iliad* 24 makes an ostinato motif). Laërtes is also pathetic in quasi-mourning for his son, and for a time fears for Telemachus' life. However, his self-abasement is radically different. Attired as a humble horticulturalist he tends perennial plants, some as old as Odysseus, others quite young—assets

for Telemachus if only *he* lives. The ancient Ithacan clings to life (like a certain unforgettable hound?). In contrast, Anchises is ready to die with Ilium but finds reason to live on when a miracle indicates grandson Ascanius' high destiny. Selfless service to Fate is a family trait.

The old men's hero-sons are similarly and, I believe, intentionally contrasted in attitude toward life past its prime and vigor. Ego-centric Achilles will have none of it, though precisely that is an alternative fate which he eschews. He accepts that he will never see father or son again. In contrast Odysseus clings to life, but faces aging as part of life, rejecting eternal youth and Calypso in favor of growing old with Penelope and knowing, all grown up, that son he was so proud of at Troy. As Penelope finally rejects too-young Suitors to (re) marry her middle-aged husband, so does he nubile Nausicaä. Virgil's Aeneas gives the impression that he himself is getting rather old for more warfare or for a new bride (and another son whom he barely gets to know), yet to all that his duty calls—and his dear father Anchises' ghost.

Therefore, while *Iliad* regrets and heroically defies old age, *Odyssey* accepts it. Who can doubt that Odysseus would choose Achilles' alternative fate, as Plato, *Rep.* 620c-d suggests. Laërtes lives it! *Aeneid* is indifferent, accepting Fate's "borrowed time," even Evander's, as instrumental.