

Parents: The Forgotten Heroes of *The Iliad*

In Homer's *The Iliad*, parental figures such as Thetis and Priam are the real heroes of the story, as they strive for protection or for justice on their children's behalf, demonstrating what it means to be an ideal parent.

Thetis is an immortal being, but her son, Achilles, is not. Thus, she works hard to look after his well-being, just as any mother should. Thetis also recognizes that her son must constantly suffer while he is still living. In this epic alone, he first loses Briseis, and then he loses his best friend, Patroclus. After hearing Achilles' cry following the death of Patroclus, Thetis expresses her concern to the other nymphs: "Now my life is pain for my great son's dark destiny! ... I brought him to manhood like a blossoming orchard tree, only to send him in the ships to Ilion to war with the Trojans. ... But even while he lives, beholding sunlight, suffering is his lot" (364). Thetis knows that Achilles is fated to die soon and that he will not be able to return home after the Trojan War. This knowledge naturally worries her, but she does her best to help him in any way that she can. Unlike most of the mortal mothers, Thetis is able to visit her son while the men are away at war, and she takes advantage of this ability to try to comfort him. Once she discovers that Achilles wishes to rejoin the fight, she makes sure that he doesn't do so unprotected, and she begs Hephaestus to create a shield for her son. Hephaestus can clearly see the motherly love behind this request, and he does not hesitate to satisfy her. Ultimately, Achilles is remembered as the hero, but Thetis's deeds are still worth commemorating, as she doesn't hesitate to perform her duty as a loving mother.

Although Priam's heroic deeds don't necessarily come in until after his son, Hector's, death, Priam's actions prove that he, too, is a worthy parent. After losing his heroic son, he wants

nothing more than to ensure that the young man's dead body is properly honored. Priam recognizes Hector's value to all of Troy, but for him, the father, Hector is all the more precious. When he dares to retrieve Hector's body from the man who had killed him, Priam recognizes the danger he is putting himself in, but his love for his son is too great to let the boy go unmourned. Priam even goes on to say: "May I but hold my son and spend my grief; then let Akhilleus kill me" (403). He is willing to risk his life to obtain the dead body, but some of the gods are on his side. They, too, believe, that Hector's dead body should not be disgraced, but should instead receive a proper burial from those who had loved him most. In addition, many of the gods themselves are parents, and thus they recognize Priam's pain and are willing to help him achieve his ultimate goal. Once Priam reaches Achilles, he draws on this fatherly pain when he says: "And take pity on me, remember your own father" (411). By calling upon Achilles's image of his father, Priam strikes a chord with the Greek hero, as he finally comes to understand the importance of the Trojan king's request. These two individuals, although enemies, are able to momentarily connect because of their associations with the unbreakable bonds between fathers and sons. Thanks to Priam's effective use of pathos, he is able to complete his heroic quest to bring Hector home.

Although they are often ignored in favor of younger heroes, parental figures like Thetis and Priam are equally worthy of praise. There is nothing like parents' love, as they would risk everything, including their own lives, just to protect their children. Their selfless acts may sometimes go unrecognized, but these acts are heroic all the same.