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The Upper and the Under World in Homeric and Archaic Epic

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Always a mother: Antikleia and her son

When one thinks of the role of women in the Greek world, one takes it for granted that motherhood was seen as the natural fulfilment of womanhood¹. One also takes it for granted that once a Greek woman had married and had a child, thus achieving her special *telos*², she would be a most protective mother, bound to her children, especially the males, by a strong, possessive bond. In this regard the prologue to Aristophanes' *Ekklesiazusai* is telling: the heroine, Praxagora, in giving her reasons why the government of the *polis* should be taken from the male citizens and entrusted to the female says that the women, being mothers, would try their utmost to save soldiers' lives and do everything they could to find them the essential supplies (vv. 233-235)³.

However, when we look at the Homeric poems and archaic epic, the picture is more complex and detailed. Obviously Homeric mothers love their children and take care of them. Scenes in which a mother talks to her child in language that shows the depths of her feelings are frequent in Homer: for example, the words τέκνον ἐμόν are often used in addressing a child, and this conveys the biological aspect of motherhood⁴. On the other hand, there are few instances where a mother shows her feelings to her child in a one-to-one encounter that excludes or dismisses others; on the contrary, a mother in Homer is usually aware that her relationship with her son is played out in a wider social context, and it is here that it finds fulfilment.

The model of the protective mother wrapped up in her child and obsessed with its well-being is limited to the realms of the gods. It is applicable to two goddesses who by definition are mothers, for motherhood is an essential

¹ POMEROY 1976, 78; REBOREDA MORILLO 2009, 51.

² LORAUX 1990, 22-23.

³ SCHAPS 2008, 416.

⁴ Cf. *Iliad* 1.414, 5.382, 19.8, 22.82, 24.128; *Odyssey* 11.155, 216, 22.105. However, the same formula can be also be used by a father (Zeus, Peleus, Menoitios), or by the nurse Eurykleia.

component of their identity: Thetis, the loving and grieving mother of Akhilleus (“the son of a goddess”), and Demeter, whose role as a mother is writ large in her name. As Pindar tells in *Isthmians* 8, Thetis is she who arouses the desire of Zeus and Poseidon by her beauty. They both want to marry her, and argue about it. Themis, however, intervenes and puts them both on their guard. She explains that Thetis is destined to bring into the world a son who will be mightier than his father and thus potentially able to overthrow his father’s power⁵: therefore it would be better for the two gods to renounce their pretensions to such a dangerous wife and consign her to a mortal.

So Thetis was married to Peleus, the most pious of men, and from their union sprang Akhilleus. Peleus, however, is a pale figure in this family triad; he is little more than a *paredros*. Above all, he is not the model of a hero for his son⁶. Akhilleus was born to overshadow his father and to surpass his glory: he does not belong to him, but to his mother Thetis, she who, by giving birth to him, called him to greatness. Akhilleus depends on Thetis in two ways: he owes his heroic stature to her and he is attached to her in a very tight bond of affection⁷. Although Akhilleus is described formulaically as Peleides, son of Peleus, throughout the action of the *Iliad*, inasmuch as it is in fact driven forward by the characters, he constantly seeks his mother. In the *Iliad* Thetis twice “rekindles” Akhilleus’ heroic vocation, in two scenes built on the same pattern. In book 1 she hastens to his laments after Agamemnon has compelled him to hand over Briseis and publicly humiliated him; she listens to his protests and promises to go Olympos to ask the help of Zeus. In book 18 she hears her son shouting in despair at the death of Patroklos and rises up again from out of the sea; she comforts him, knowing full well that his own death is near, and promises to get him new arms; these she hands over at the beginning of book 19, and there is another exchange between them. Particularly significant are the words that Thetis addresses to the Nereids, (which she later repeats to Hephaistos), when she presents Akhilleus as the fruit of her womb and of her

⁵ SLATKIN 1991, 73; MURNAGHAN 1995, 75-76.

⁶ The two most significant places where Peleus is mentioned are *Iliad* 9.393-400 and 24.534-542. In the first, Akhilleus, deluding himself, cherishes the idea of going back home to enjoy riches and the wife chosen for him by his father; in the second, he pities his father for the sad old-age that awaits him. In both cases Peleus is represented as non-heroic, or even anti-heroic.

⁷ FOLEY 2005, 109.

care, whom she launched on his career as a hero; in other words, an extension of her own person, indissolubly linked to the figure of his mother⁸.

Iliad 1.348-363

But Akhilleus

burst into tears and drew apart from his comrades and sat down
on the shore of the grey sea, looking out over the wine-dark deep;
and earnestly he prayed to his mother with outstretched hands:
“Mother, since you bore me, though to so brief a span of life,
honour surely ought the Olympian to have given into my hands,
Zeus who thunders on high; but now he has honoured me not at all.
In fact the son of Atreus, wide-ruling Agamemnon,
has done me dishonour; for he has taken away and holds my prize.”
So he spoke, weeping, and his lady mother heard him,
as she sat in the depths of the sea beside the old man, her father.
And speedily she came out from the grey sea like a mist,
and sat down in front of him as he wept;
and she stroked him with her hand, and spoke to him:
“Child, why do you weep? What sorrow has come upon your heart?
Speak out; do not hide it your heart, so we both may know.”

Iliad 18.54-60 (56-60 = 18.437-441)

“Ah me, unhappy that I am; ah me, who bore to my sorrow the best of men,
for after I had borne a son incomparable and mighty,
preeminent among warriors, and he shot up like a sapling,
then when I had reared him like a tree in a rich orchard plot,
I sent him in the beaked ships to Ilios
to war with the Trojans; but never again shall I welcome him
back to his home, to the house of Peleus.”

The story of Demeter is told in the Homeric Hymn dedicated to her. When Hades abducted Persephone, Demeter suffered anguish. She could not bear to lose contact with her daughter, which was vital to her emotional balance. The same was true of Persephone, for whom the closeness of her mother’s body

⁸ EDWARDS 1991, 151 links 18.55-60 with the laments of Hekabe over the body of Hektor (22.432-436, 24.749-759: but Hekabe, unlike Thetis, is proud not only of her role as a mother but also of what Hektor meant to the whole community.

afforded a security she could not renounce⁹. Both mother and daughter see themselves as an extension of the other¹⁰. The vocabulary used emphasizes the depth of their affections: both Demeter's longing for her daughter and Persephone's yearning for her mother are referred to as *πόθος* (vv. 201, 304, 344), which expresses a consuming, enfeebling desire. Antikleia uses the same word in the Nekyia in the *Odyssey* (11.212) explaining the causes of her death: it was *πόθος* for her son that carried her off to Hades, the long absence of Odysseus that she could not bear. When Demeter begs Helios to help her find her daughter, she calls her a "sweet sprig" (v. 66 *γλυκερὸν θάλος*), a plant metaphor that recurs in Hekabe's words to Hektor (*Iliad* 22.87 *φίλον θάλος, ὃν τέκον αὐτή* "dear plant, whom I myself bore") in the scene where she desperately tries to exert her rights as his mother. Demeter's wounded motherhood is also seen in what she does while she wanders throughout the world: in particular, the care she bestows on the little Demophoon and her efforts to make him immortal can be seen as an attempt to gain another child, a sort of surrogate for Persephone, bound to her in an exclusive and unbreakable bond¹¹. In fact, the whole hymn is dominated by the personality of a mother who sets up her own motherhood – understood as direct control, both physical and emotional, over her daughter – as the central element, to which every other relationship is subordinated: Demeter does not hesitate to plunge the whole world into chaos and to upset the relationships that the gods have between them; indeed she exploits the cosmic disaster to put pressure on Zeus and compel him to restore Persephone to her, at least for part of the year.

Let us now turn from the realm of the gods to that of mortals, and consider human mothers, beginning with the female character to whom Homer devotes the most space. When one thinks of Penelope, one thinks especially of her role as a faithful wife, which makes her a literary prototype. It is precisely because of her heroic fidelity as a wife that she became the model for female protagonists in later romances and novels; if every one of these is a rewriting of the *Odyssey*, then every fictional heroine is the very image of Penelope. Penelope, however, is also a mother. Her relationship with her son Telemakhos is one of the great themes of the *Odyssey*, especially in the Telemakhos and the last section of the poem, when the action again centres on the palace in Ithaka.

⁹ The unique and complex relationship of the two goddesses had naturally attracted the attention of scholars, some of whom have offered anthropological and/or psychoanalytical interpretations, e.g. FOLEY 1994, 118-137; CHODOROW 1994.

¹⁰ FOLEY 1994, 127.

¹¹ FOLEY 1994, 114. In some versions of the myth (Apollonios Rhodios 4.869-879) also Thetis tries to make Akhilleus immortal by exposing him to the fire: obviously her aim is to make her own motherhood eternal.

The depth of Penelope's feelings for her son can be seen at the moment of Telemakhos' departure for Pylos, especially when the danger of the ambush that the suitors have set in order to kill him is highlighted. Telemakhos, who knows his mother's state of mind very well, decides to keep his journey from her. He orders Eurykleia to say nothing to her, at least for a certain length of time, so that she may not suffer too much. The expressions he uses clearly show the particularly intense relationship that he has with his mother. In his eyes Penelope is a beautiful, fascinating woman who has been courted for years by dozens of young men determined to marry her; he considers her in terms of physical desirability¹², and thus he is worried that her grief at his absence might mar her beauty (*Odyssey* 2.376 μὴ κλαίουσα κατὰ χροῶν καλὸν ἰάπτῃ).

However, after several days the herald Medon tells Penelope of her son's absence and the plot of the suitors against him. She is profoundly distressed; her anxiety paralyzes her momentarily and prevents her from speaking. On recovering she exchanges a few words with Medon, but remains distressed. She vents her rage on her maids, accusing them of keeping her in the dark about everything. She says that had she known of her son's intentions, she would have kept him back by force or died of grief, and wonders whether to seek the help of old Laertes. At last she finds some rest in sleep. Athene sends a phantom of her sister Iphthime¹³ to her in a dream, which assures her that Telemakhos shall return safe and sound, because he is protected by the gods. When she wakes, Penelope is full of joy.

Odyssey 4.696-705

Then Medon, wise of heart, answered her:

“I would, my queen, that this were the greatest evil.

But another far greater and more grievous

are the suitors planning, which I pray that the son of Kronos may never bring to pass.

They mean to slay Telemakhos with the sharp sword

on his homeward way; for he went in quest of tidings of his father

to sacred Pylos and to stately Lakedaimon.”

So he spoke, and her knees were loosened where she sat, and her heart melted.

For long was she speechless, and both her eyes

were filled with tears, and the flow of her voice was checked.

¹² On the “desirability” of Penelope (explicable in terms of her beauty, intelligence, and virtue) cf. STEINER 2010, 25-26.

¹³ The scene is discussed by MURNAGHAN 1995, 68.

In book 16 Penelope learns that Telemakhos has come back safely to Ithaka, but is still convinced that his life is in danger. She therefore decides to confront the suitors. She goes down into the megaron and severely rebukes Antinoos. She accuses him of ingratitude, for his father was saved by Odysseus when the people of Ithaka wanted to kill him, yet he, Antinoos, does not scruple to lie in wait for the son of his benefactor (vv. 424-432). In book 17 when Telemakhos arrives at the palace, Penelope goes to meet him, kisses his head and eyes, and speaks lovely words to him; in particular, addressing him as “sweet light of my eyes” (γλυκερὸν φάος)¹⁴ is most tender. She wants a detailed account of his journey, but he asks her to compose herself, go back to her rooms and thank the gods with due offerings. Later on he satisfies her curiosity, but she seems to harbour some resentment and vents when in book 17 she reproaches him for not having stopped the fight between Iros and the stranger.

Odyssey 17.41-43

“You have come, Telemakhos, sweet light of my eyes; I thought I should never see you again after you had gone in your ship to Pylos – secretly, and against my will, to seek tidings of your staunch father.”

From this moment on the mother/son relationship seems to be redefined in the context of the new situation caused by the returns of Telemakhos and of Odysseus. During the long years of Odysseus’ absence Penelope took care of her little son with maternal affection, but also with the attitude of a regent preparing for the succession of a prince who was heir to the throne but still a minor. The queen, (as can be gathered from the conversations of various characters who talk about her in books 1 and 2), assumed the role of heroic custodian of the family and of the house. She could, and in the opinion of some should, have remarried (it is not clear whether she should have made her own choice or accepted that of her father or her son), but she avoided doing so, preferring to endure the daily siege of her suitors. For years she behaved with a conscious and controlled passivity in order to save what could be saved within an *oikos* that was unstable and under threat.

After Telemakhos’ return her attitude changes. Now Penelope moves and seizes the initiative. In book 18 she shows herself to the suitors and challenges them; she says she is now resigned to marrying again and invites them to offer her suitable gifts. This might seem strange in the light of her previous behaviour

¹⁴ The same words are used also by Eumaios in greeting Telemakhos on his return in 16.23-24.

and – at least at first sight – cast a shadow over her¹⁵, especially as the news brought by Telemakhos seems to have raised the possibility that Odysseus might still be alive. But Penelope knows that she cannot put off her remarriage any longer. Odysseus himself on his departure for Troy mentioned the possibility that he might die there and gave her precise instructions: to guard property and people, and then, when Telemakhos came of age, to find herself another husband and leave the palace. That moment has come: Telemakhos is now a man able to decide for himself and is ever more impatient of outside interference. Any prolongation of the suitors' residence in the palace would be a constant threat to his life as well as a limitation of his authority and a drain on his inheritance¹⁶. Penelope realizes she must follow Odysseus' instructions: find a husband, leave the palace, and leave room for her son. Penelope is in good faith when she recalls these words of Odysseus¹⁷: her address is to the suitors, but it contains a message for Telemakhos. There is nothing to suggest she is acting a part; indeed, the same reasons are repeated in book 19 when she explains to the stranger that the situation of Telemakhos obliges her now to remarry (vv.530-534 are particularly explicit); the proposal of the bow-contest is the decisive confirmation of a decision that has already been taken.

Odyssey 19.530-534

“Furthermore my son, so long as he was a child and irresponsible,
would not let me marry and leave the house of my husband;
but now that he is grown and has reached the bounds of manhood,
he even prays me to go back again from these halls,
being vexed for his property that the Akhaians devour to his cost.”

Of course, Penelope does not know that in reality Odysseus is alive and already in the palace. Telemakhos, however, knows full well. In the final books this difference dominates the mother/son relationship. For Telemakhos Odysseus is a physical presence that directs the action; on the other hand, he cannot tell his mother; he is abrupt with her because all that is required of her is not to hinder the planned revenge. He now assumes all the authority of the *kyrios* about to consign her to her rightfully wedded lord and master. In book 21 just before the denouement he orders her out of the megaron; in book 23, once

¹⁵ CANTARELLA 2002, 65; STEINER 2010, 27-28.

¹⁶ ZEITLIN 1995, 127.

¹⁷ FOLEY 1995, 102: “Because of her ignorance of both Odysseus' identity and his fate, the critical problem for Penelope is the timing of the decision, not the decision to remarry itself”.

vengeance is nicely over and done with, he is amazed that she hesitates to throw herself into the arms of her long-lost husband. Conversely, for Penelope her husband's return was a remote possibility: she was acutely aware of the instructions he had given her before he went to fight. It is this, the presence/absence of Odysseus, that redraws the mother/son relationship¹⁸.

Ample space has been given to a consideration of Penelope's motherhood in order to understand the role of Homeric mothers. There is a biological aspect: mother and son are tightly linked physically, and sometimes there is also strong bond of affection. All this, however, is played out within a family and social context. The mother/son relationship is not exclusive of all others: she is also a wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, and her motherhood finds fulfilment in the web of family relationships within the *oikos*. For confirmation, let us now look at other mothers in Homer.

Hekabe in the *Iliad* is above all else the mother of Hektor¹⁹. Her relationship with her beloved son is the theme of book 6, when she welcomes him on his coming to the city and fusses over his health, offering him a cup of wine as a restorative. Her motherhood is brought into sharp focus with extraordinary dramatic effect in the first scene in book 22, when Hektor is alone on the plain awaiting Akhilleus and his parents beseech him from the city walls to come inside to safety. After Priam's unheeded appeal Hekabe in turn tries to move her son's heart: weeping she holds out her arms and shows him the breast with which she suckled him²⁰. She thus stresses the physical aspect of motherhood, which gives her, and her alone, the right to say to the child she has borne what others may not²¹. Moreover, in that awesome moment, in which there seems to be room only for private and exclusive sentiments, she also reminds him of his "wife wooed with many gifts". She thinks of him as the child of her womb, but she cannot ignore his role as a husband and champion of Troy.

¹⁸ REBORDA MORILLO 2009, 64.

¹⁹ CASTELLANETA 2013, 14 defines Hekabe as "the paradigm of motherhood"; cf. CANAVERO 2004, 182: "The definition of Hekabe as a mother is already present in Homer: in the *Iliad*, too, μήτηρ is the noun that identifies her best, both in the objective and external narrative, and in the direct and internal discourse."

²⁰ The scene is discussed in detail, especially in its symbolic importance, by CASTELLANETA 2013, 13-47; cf. also RICHARDSON 1993, 115.

²¹ Hekabe twice uses the term τέκνον (τέκνον ἐμόν at v. 82 and φίλε τέκνον at v. 84), which etymologically means "offspring, fruit of the birth", and at v. 87 she alludes even more explicitly to herself as the "procreator" of her son's body (φίλον θάλος ὄν τέκον αὐτή).

Iliad 22.79-89

And for her part his mother in turn wailed and shed tears,
loosening the folds of her robe, while with the other hand she held out her breast,
and shedding tears she spoke to him winged words:

“Hektor, my child, respect this and pity me,

if ever I gave you the breast to lull your pain.

Think on these things, dear child, and ward off that foeman
from inside the wall, and do not stand to face him.

Hard is he; for if he slays you, never will I

lay you on a bier and weep for you, dear plant whom I myself bore,
nor will the wife you wooed with many gifts; but far away from us
by the ships of the Argives will swift dogs devour you.”

This is confirmed by the words she uses when, after witnessing the mangling of her son’s body, she begins the funeral lament. First she bewails her lot, asking how she can carry on living after such a grievous loss, but then she recalls Hektor’s importance to the whole city and the admiration that men and women had for him. Thus, even in this scene of mourning, a mother’s private feelings are intertwined with her son’s public image.

There is another scene in Homer parallel to this, where a mother and her son interact in a dramatic and “extreme” situation which requires them to show their feelings with the utmost sincerity. It is the scene in the Nekyia of the *Odyssey* where Odysseus meets his mother’s shade in the underworld. They are both surprised to see each other: Odysseus did not know that Antikleia was dead, and she cannot understand how her son can come to the land of the dead while still alive. Their conversation starts with their explanations, but then gives way to their affection and personal feelings. Odysseus asks his mother for news of his home and family, and she replies at great length, assuring him above all of Penelope’s fidelity. When she comes to speak of herself, she tells him that it was her longing for her far-off son that caused her death²².

Odyssey 11.198-203

“Neither did the keen-sighted archer goddess assail me in my halls
with her gentle shafts, and slay me,
nor did any disease come upon me, such as oftenest
with loathsome wasting takes the spirit from the limbs;

²² On the significance of πόθος in this passage cf. ZAMBARBIERI 2002, 829.

no, it was longing for you, and for your counsels, glorious Odysseus, and for your gentle-heartedness, that robbed me of honey-sweet life.”

Thus, her motherhood is brought into focus and is manifest when she addresses her son (the formula τέκνον ἐμόν is frequent). Odysseus’ filial piety inspires the whole episode and is clearly shown when he thrice attempts to embrace his mother’s shade. His failure is the most pathetic and harrowing moment of the entire scene. Furthermore, in her last words to her son Antikleia does not forbear to mention Penelope and remind Odysseus of what awaits him in the land of the living, of the family responsibilities that weigh heavily upon him²³. Thus, the mother, even in the livid land of the dead, is “the voice of home”, witness and guarantor of relationships within the *oikos*.

Odyssey 11.210-224

“My mother, why do you not stay for me when I wish to clasp you, so that even in the house of Hades we two may throw our arms about each other and take our fill of chill lamenting?

Is this some phantom that august Persephoneia has sent me so that I may lament and groan still more?”

So I spoke, and my honoured mother at once answered:

“Ah me, my child, ill-fated above all men,

it is not that Persephoneia, daughter of Zeus, is deceiving you, but this is the appointed way with mortals, when one dies.

For the sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together, but the strong force of the blazing fire destroys these,

as soon as the spirit leaves the white bones,

and the ghost, like a dream, flutters off and is gone.

But hurry to the light as fast as you can, and bear all these things in mind, so that hereafter you may tell them to your wife.”

²³ COMBELLACK 1974, 123.

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