

The *Iliad* situates itself in a mythic chronology through genealogies that identify its heroes as the children of other heroes, many of whom its audiences would have already known. Presenting the heroic fathers via an epic medium draws them into the epic milieu such that even if they did not appear in other epics or were Iliadic inventions, they would still become part of the epic past that the *Iliad* constructs for itself. By having its heroes inherit from their fathers the ethical code by which they live, the *Iliad* inherits its genre and the *mores* of epic heroism from the poetic tradition to which it ascribes those fathers. In this way, the *Iliad* maps genealogical paternity onto “poetic” and “ethical” paternity to present itself as a descendent of and response to its own poetic tradition; its heroes become “readers” of epic as they seek to understand and aspire to equal their paternal legacies. The formula $\nu\tilde{\iota}\epsilon\varsigma \text{ } \Lambda\chi\alpha\iota\omega\nu$, “sons of the Achaeans,” underscores the centrality of this theme. All of its 51 Iliadic attestations mark situations in which the Achaeans face the military and political expectations that their traditional heroic ethos places upon them. When they “read” and act in response to the epic legacies of their fathers, the heroes model for their own audiences approaches to understanding epic, including the *Iliad* itself.

The various complications that arise when heroes enact their inherited ethos reveal that the poeticizing of the past renders attempts to emulate epic behavior problematic. Two opposing interpretive approaches, each espoused by a son of the Seven, conflict when Agamemnon relates the exploits of Tydeus in order to exhort Diomedes in the *Epipoleis*. Diomedes welcomes the exhortation to live up to his paternal legacy, but Sthenelos objects on the grounds that Agamemnon distorts the truth by telling only those events that suit his purposes: he ignores both the fatal *atasthalia* of the Seven (*Il.* 5.409) and their corresponding failure to sack Thebes. His story denies the *Epigonois* their due *timê* and presents an idealized, unreal heroic model. The subsequent *aristeia* of Diomedes plays out the debate. His efforts to rival the legacy of his father meet with equivocal success. Though he earns honor, Diomedes also reproduces the *atasthalia* that Agamemnon omits from his tale. The simplistic heroic ideal Agamemnon describes cannot be achieved in the reality of the *Iliad*. Understanding epic, including the *Iliad* itself, requires a subtler approach than the crude emulation that Diomedes adopts and Plato decries.

Heroic epic poetry and its pedagogical use as a source of behavioral models rest on the belief that the generation of the audience is inferior to the older generation whose exploits epic lauds. This notion of generational devolution pervades the *Iliad*, but, as Sthenelos indicates, it only exists due to the processes of glorifying, idealizing, and fictionalizing the past. It is Achilles, the hero destined to be greater than his father, the “exception that proves the rule” of generational devolution, who lies at the heart of the *Iliad*, giving it its poetic and ethical shape as an epic that raises questions about the veracity of its own mythic tradition and the viability of its heroic ethos when faced with the complexities of reality.