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A NOTE ON ROMANTIC LOVE IN HOMER

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The purpose of this brief article is to emphasise the importance of romantic love, especially the love that some male heroes have for their wives and lovers, as significant themes in the Homeric epics, both the Iliad *and the* Odyssey.

Introduction

It is an understatement to say that much has been written about Homer, his work, and his world. A very stimulating recent study is Jonathan Gottschall's *The Rape of Troy* (2008), in which the Homeric poems are examined from the perspective of evolutionary biology. In this book, Gottschall convincingly argues that the root of war and conflict in the Homeric world, as in many similar societies studied by anthropologists, can be found in the male urge to reproduce[1]. The aim of this article is to shed some light on the Homeric poems not as sources of historical or anthropological enquiry, but simply as literature[2], and to highlight one aspect in particular that I feel has so far received little to no attention. This aspect is love, or more correctly 'romantic' love, the attractive force between men and women. Specifically, I wish to emphasise the importance of love, especially in cases where the lovers are kept apart from each other, as the narrative force behind much of the action in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*[3].

Love as a narrative device appears to be peculiarly Homeric, certainly as far as other early Greek stories are concerned. Greek mythology is replete with tales about men rescuing women, seducing them or being seduced in turn. Furthermore, there are the many stories based on the sexual escapes of Zeus, and most of the male gods seem to have enjoyed their liaisons with mortal women in particular. But love, an emotional connection as much as a physical one, especially when used as a motivational force for heroes, is absent from all other Greek

[1] Stated most succinctly by him as "critical explanations of violence in the epics strongly downplay Homer's incessant point: women are a major source of conflict among men" (Gottschall 2008, 10).

[2] 'Homeric' is used here in its strictly literary sense, which Anthony Snodgrass, for one, would argue is the only correct way that this adjective may be used (Snodgrass 1998, 8)!

[3] For studies in Homeric *philia* in the sense of 'friendship', see Mitchell 2002, 3 n. 8.

myths. We have, for example, Perseus rescuing Andromeda from a monster and marrying her, and Medea helping out Jason on his quest for the Golden Fleece. But the relationships between these heroic men and women are important only for the purpose of getting the plot from point A to point B; the women themselves mere plot devices, narrative conveniences. Nowhere in Early Greek myth do we encounter love stories on the level of those presented in Homeric epics.

This is perhaps where we can most clearly discern the hand of an author, consciously shaping his stories and characters and layering the plot with themes of personal interest. Hesiod, who is traditionally regarded as a (near-)contemporary of Homer, has little to say about women apart from handing out some practical advice about them. In his *Works and Days*, he tells us what the ideal ages are for men and women to marry (*Il.* 695-698); interestingly, he emphasises that she must be a virgin (*Il.* 699), a point that will resurface later in this article. Hesiod adds that you are fortunate if you have a good wife, and cursed if you get saddled with a bad one (*Il*. 702-703). In short, there is no room for romanticism in the *Works and Days*: to paraphrase Anthony Edwards, Hesiod's interest in women is apparently limited to their capacity for doing work and producing children[4].

Some Archaic poets produced love poetry. Indeed, this formed the bulk of the output of Sappho, the famous poetess from Lesbos (*floruit* around 600 B.C.), whose famous remarks about the allure of women has led many to consider her bisexual, although later sources add that she was herself married and had a daughter[5]. Her contemporary Alcaeus also wrote love poetry, although virtually nothing of that has survived; he is today better known for the fragments of political and martial songs that have been preserved. Lust, rather than love, appears to have been the driving force behind much of the erotic poetry of Archilochus, the rough-and-ready warrior-poet of the mid-seventh century BC, who not only wrote relatively gentle expressions of love, but also boasted of his sexual exploits in lurid, possibly scandalous detail[6]. In none of the extant early poetry does love feature as an important theme in a narrative sense; Homer stands, as far as I can tell, quite alone in that respect. Perhaps, like Shakespeare, he was something of an old romantic.

Romantic Love in Homer

It should be pointed out that romantic love in the Homeric poems always takes the form of a relationship between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, there have been many attempts at interpreting the bond between Achilles and Patroclus as essentially homosexual[7]. To later ancient authors[8], theirs was a pseudo-pederastic

[4] Edwards 2004, 75; also note comments on p. 84.

[5] The *Suda* claims that she was married; her daughter may have been Cleïs (fr. 132 Voigt).

[6] On a particularly scandalous fragment, see Gerber 1997, 66-69; includes a concise overview, with references, of ancient Greek views on supposed female sexual urges.

[7] A good example would be Clarke 1978.

[8] On the ancient views on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, see Laguna-Mariscal/Sanz Morales 2005 (with references, esp. 120 n. 2).

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relationship; for example, an Attic red-figure plate from about 510-500 BC. depicts a youthful, smooth-faced Achilles removing an arrow from the arm of a bearded Patroclus[9]. Jonathan Shay has argued, on the basis of experiences of modern combat veterans, that the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus must be interpreted simply as the strong bond between war buddies[10]. Evidence for the existence of homosexual love between men in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* is tenuous to nonexistent[11].

Romantic love – rather than mere lust or sexual desire – is a recurring theme in the plot of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In many cases, it is the prime motivation behind the actions of some of the poems' lead characters. In fact, the love between a man and a woman, especially when they are kept apart from each other by some outside force, seems to be the thread that runs through the plots of both poems. In the *Odyssey*, the desire to return home, to see his beloved wife and son, is the force that gives Odysseus the strength to carry on despite the obstacles that the gods throw in his path. During his long absence, Penelope stays faithful while Odysseus lingers for a while with Circe and Calypso. Considering the supernatural aspect of these two women, one might argue that Odysseus was temporarily bewitched. In any event, the thought of returning home is never far from Odysseus' mind. Meanwhile in Ithaca, Penelope's reticence in picking a new husband, and the tricks she comes up with to postpone what seems only inevitable (e.g. *Od*. 2.93-109), demonstrate that she loves but one man. Homer reinforces this notion by having Nestor tell Telemachus the story of Clytemnestra's seduction by Aegisthus, which led to the murder of Agamemnon upon his return home (*Od*. 3.262-275 and 301-310). Penelope and Clytemnestra each offer a different solution to the same problem, namely whether or not to stay true to an absentee husband[12].

There has been some debate on the 'real' ending of the *Odyssey*, with parts of book 23 and the whole of book 24 sometimes considered later additions. Modern debate on the matter may be due to a misinterpretation of the statement by some Alexandrian scholars that line 296 in book 23 marked the *telos* of the story, where *telos* refers to the narrative end, rather than the actual end of the story[13]. The story reaches its climax when our protagonist reveals himself to Penelope. When she finally recognises, acknowledges, and then embraces Odysseus, he weeps (*Od*. 23.232). This is important: Odysseus never cries in the *Iliad*, reserving it instead for his own story[14]. His tears here are the culmination of his longing to return

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[9] Berlin F2278: Beazley 1963, 21 (no. 1); Boardman 1975, 53, fig. 50.1; Carpenter 1991, 217, fig. 301.

[10] Shay 1994, 40-44.

[11] The abduction of Ganymede (*Il*. 20.232-235) is often interpreted as clear proof that Homer knew of pederasty; however, note the discussion in Provencal 2006, esp. 105-107; Percy 1998, 38.

[12] The comparison is also made by Agamemnon's ghost (*Od*. 24.191-202).

[13] Steinrück 2008, 47-49.

[14] A point made by Pache 2000, esp. 17-18.

home; that is, the emotional high-point of his journey and therefore also the story itself. They then enter the marital chamber (*Od*. 23.289-296), after which the poem's seemingly incongruous coda kicks in.

The importance of romantic love in the story of the *Iliad* is perhaps not as clear-cut as in the *Odyssey*. Let us begin with the cause of the Trojan War. The spark that ignited the war is the abduction of Helen, wife of Menelaus of Sparta, by the Trojan upstart Paris. Homer hints at the circumstances surrounding the abduction and why this causes all of Greece to descend upon Priam's city; later mythology and fragments of other poems furnish the particulars[15]. One thing is clear: Menelaus loves her dearly. The *Catalogue of Ships* furnishes us with a description of Menelaus longing to avenge the wrongs inflicted upon Helen (*Il*. 2.288-290), and he engages in a duel over Helen with Paris in the *Iliad*'s third book. In turn, the goddess Iris fills Helen with a sense of longing for Menelaus (*Il*. 3.139). Years after the sack of Troy, Menelaus is visited by Telemachus in Sparta; the first thing we read is that he just got out of bed with Helen (*Od*. 15.57-58), and she later makes an appearance as a devoted wife and hostess (*Od*. 15.99-181).

The story of the *Iliad* begins with what is essentially an abduction that seems to recall or echo, no doubt intentionally, the abduction of Helen by Paris. The cause of Achilles' famous wrath is Agamemnon's seizing of the hero's slave-girl, Briseis. She had been the wife of none other than Mynes, the ruler (*anax*) of Lyrnessus. The city (*polis*) had been captured by Achilles and his men, leaving Briseis' husband, as well as her brothers, dead (*Il*. 2.690-693; 19.291-296). Following the battle, Briseis was awarded to Achilles as his *geras*, 'prize of honour'[16]. But in time, Briseis became more than just another prize added to Achilles' collection. When friends visit him in an attempt to appease him, the hero launches into a speech about why the Greeks fight at Troy, pointing out that they came to these shores for the sake of Menelaus' wife[17].

" […] Yet why must the Argives fight with the Trojans?
And why was it the son of Atreus assembled and led here
these people? Was it not for the sake of lovely haired Helen?" (*Il*. 9.337-339).

As Achilles continues, he draws a comparison between Menelaus and Helen on the one hand, and Briseis and himself on the other. It becomes clear that he has fallen in love with her, even if he had won her in combat and she started out as his prize of honour:

"Are the sons of Atreus alone among mortal men the ones
who love (phileousin) *their wives? Since any who is a good man, and careful,*
loves her who is his own and cares for her, even as I now

[15] On the epic cycle, see especially Burgess 2001.
[16] For further detail, with references aplenty, see Ready 2007, 4-13.
[17] Here and elsewhere, I have used the translations by Richmond Lattimore.

loved this one from my heart, though it was my spear that won her" (*Il*. 9.340-343).

Achilles makes a special point out of equating his feelings for her with those that married men have for their wives and pointedly asks whether these feelings only belong to the sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus. When Agamemnon finally does return Briseis to Achilles, he swears an oath that he never slept with her (*Il*. 20.258-265). This oath is important, because it underscores the fact that Briseis was kept pure, rather than raped as presumably other, less fortunate slave-girls were[18]. Indeed, raping Briseis would have been a powerful way for Agamemnon to show who was in control. However, Agamemnon was already on rather shaky moral grounds after taking the girl in the first place, so it comes as no surprise that he balked at violating her. This would have dishonoured Achilles even further and may have incurred the wrath of some of the other Greek leaders as well, further weakening his position.

Like Odysseus, however, Achilles' feelings for Briseis did not preclude him from bedding other women. After the unsuccessful embassy to Achilles, old Phoenix is invited to spend the night in the hero's hut. When they go to bed, Achilles is specifically mentioned as sleeping with a woman he brought from the island of Lesbos, one Diomede, while Patroclus sleeps in another corner of the hut with a girl called Iphis, who had been captured by Achilles after conquering Scyros (*Il*. 9.658-668). Clearly, Homeric men employed a double-standard: their female loved ones were supposed to stay true to them alone, even in the face of obnoxious suitors (Penelope) or a new owner (Briseis), while the men themselves were apparently free to sleep around (Odysseus with Circe, Calypso; Achilles and Diomede). The importance of female purity in this regard recalls Hesiod's advice, mentioned earlier, to marry a young girl who is still a virgin. At least on the female side of the equation, true love equates to monogamy in the strictest sense. A brief statement in the *Odyssey* makes clear that this double-standard appears to be the norm in the Homeric world especially in those cases where the men's wives weren't nearby: the poet specifically points out that Odysseus' father, Laërtes, never slept with his beautiful slave Euryclea for fear of angering his wife (*Od*. 1.428-433).

It is unclear whether Briseis and Achilles had ever slept together before she was taken from him; quite possibly they had not. When Briseis re-enters Achilles' hut after having been returned to him, she sees the dead body of Patroclus, and weeps:

"And yet you would not let me, when swift Achilleus had cut down
my husband, and sacked the city of godlike Mynes, you would not

[18] Jonathan Gottschall emphasises that in this case the political and sexual threads are interlinked: "the political dispute escalates dangerously precisely because it hinges on rights to a desirable woman that one of them loves" (2008, 60).

let me sorrow, but said you would make me godlike Achilleus'
wedded lawful wife, that you would take me back in the ships
to Phthia, and formalize my marriage among the Myrmidons" (Il. 19.295-299).

No doubt Achilles was aware and approved of Patroclus' plans. If Achilles had survived the Trojan War, he probably would have married Briseis. Nevertheless, the two may have behaved as husband and wife from at least this point onwards despite the lack of a formal marriage. The very last thing we read in the *Iliad* about the Greeks is a description of Achilles and Briseis together, lying side by side in a corner of the hero's hut (*Il*. 24.675-676), like husband and wife.
Of course, love in the *Iliad* is not the sole prerogative of the Greeks. While Menelaus fights to retrieve Helen and Achilles sulks for the loss of Briseis, Hector fights to defend his town and, most importantly, his family. His sense of duty will ultimately lead to his death[19]. There is one passage in the *Iliad* that informs us of Hector's character, and it culminates in a brief and tender moment shared between him, his wife Andromache, and their infant son Astyanax. Andromache expresses concern over Hector's fate and he does not deny it, but duty calls (*Il*. 6.440-446). But both know that if Hector dies, Troy's downfall is assured. Hector tells his wife that her fate weighs the most heavily on his mind, as she will be borne away by the conquering Greeks (*Il*. 6.447-465). The contrast between family and duty is revealed starkly when Hector, in full battle-dress, tries to kiss his son goodbye, only to have the innocent child shrink away in fear of the gleaming bronze and the nodding helmet plume (*Il*. 6.466-470).
This passage in the sixth book reveals to the audience what is at stake for Hector; it depicts him as a loving family man with a strong sense of duty that overrides his personal concerns. This, like similar exchanges, heightens the drama and make the story as a whole, and the imminent deaths that lurk further along, far more poignant. The fate of Hector's family allows the audience to empathise with the Trojans. By focusing on the characters and their relationships, Homer turns the story of the Trojan War, which could so easily have been about bloody battles alone, into a tangled web of individual tragedies, with love as its major unifying theme: the love between Menelaus and Helen, between Achilles and Briseis, between Hector and Andromache.

Conclusion

To conclude, I hope to have shown in the foregoing how love is an integral theme in the Homeric epic poems and a subject worthy of further study. I hope to have demonstrated how the deeply felt love between a man and a woman, especially when they are kept apart, like Achilles and Briseis or Odysseus and Penelope, serves as the narrative driving force behind much of the plot in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. To regard Homeric men as driven mostly by a desire for honour,

[19] On patriotism in Homer, see Greenhalgh 1972, esp. 535.

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glory, or revenge is to underestimate the unique characteristics that make Homer not just a supremely gifted storyteller, but an *auteur* in every sense of the word.

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