

## A Born Hero, A Hero Born

In *The Iliad*, Homer gives kleos to many minor characters. Most of these characters are briefly described, and then are typically killed in battle within a few lines of the poem. Although they are usually only mentioned once in the poem, Homer illustrates that they have an important role in the war and thus, earn a moment of fame. Homer uses the description of these characters and the manner in which they were killed to portray their kleos. One example of these minor characters is Periphetes. He is an Achaean warrior, son of Copeus, who is killed by Hector in Book 15. Sarpedon, a son of Zeus, is a character fighting for the Trojans. He is killed in Book 16 by Patroclus. There are similarities and differences in how Homer generates kleos for these two characters and how their presences affect the poem.

One major difference in these two characters' descriptions is their lineage. It is common for characters in *The Iliad* to be given merit based on who their fathers were. Sarpedon is the son of Zeus, the greatest of all the gods. It is clear that from this he is already well revered by his fellow Trojans. This is demonstrated when Glaucus says "our bravest man is dead, Sarpedon, Zeus' son" (16.614). By expressing how Sarpedon is the bravest man and Zeus' son in the same sentence, Homer shows that the two are correlated. Thus, Sarpedon receives some of his bravery from being a descendent of Zeus. Periphetes is the son of Copeus. Unlike Sarpedon, Periphetes is not a descendent from a god. He is not even a descendent of a well-respected warrior. Homer describes his Copeus as "that worthless father who sired a better son" (15.745). Therefore, Periphetes must gain his kleos solely from his courage in battle. He is described as "primed for speed and war and his wits outstripped the best in all Mycenae" (15.746-7). He possesses all the

right skills that enable him to be a war hero. It is clear that without his participation in the battle, he would not have earned any fame. Periphetes, however, has some fame already simply from being a son of Zeus.

Another difference between these two characters is how they are regarded after they are killed. When Sarpedon dies, the Achaeans and the Trojans launch into a fierce battle over his body that lasts for several lines of the poem. Glaucus cries: “Quick, my friends, stand by him! Cringe with shame at the thought they’ll strip his gear and maim his corpse” (16.638-9). Homer uses this line to show the desperation the Trojans have to save the body of Zeus’s son. The Achaeans also feel a strong desire to strip Sarpedon of his armor because of the valor he has as Zeus’ son. Homer shows how both sides refuse to back down when he writes “massing packs of them swarming round the corpse but Achaean forces never slacked their drive” (16.700-1). This again affirms how respected and honorable Sarpedon is to both the Trojans and Achaeans. In contrast, when Periphetes dies no one fights over his corpse. He is not the son of a god, so there is no urgency to save his body. When Periphetes is killed in front of his comrades Homer states: “Sick for their friend but what could they do? Nothing—”(15.756). Although the Achaeans are devastated over this death, they know that they must put the sake of the war before their comrade’s dignity. At this point in the war all the Achaeans “shake with dread in the face of mighty Hector” (15.757). They are being overcome by Hector and the Trojan forces. It may seem that Periphetes does not have as much honor as Sarpedon because his body is not saved. However, he sacrifices his entire self, body and soul, to the cause of the war. In this way, he can earn great respect from his fellow warriors.

The deaths of both Periphetes and Sarpedon both occur at a critical point in the war. It is

a time when their respective sides are being conquered by the other side. This gives them kleos because they are continuing to fight during a time of turmoil. This proves that they did not give up when times were difficult. Periphetes' death occurs when the Achaeans are fleeing from Hector, as Homer describes: "the Achaeans stampeded now, unearthly terror" (15.739). The Trojans are closing in on their ships and at this point there seems to be no hope for the Greeks. Right before the description of Periphetes' death Homer writes "the Achaeans courage quaked" (15.729). Periphetes gains respect because he is the only one to be killed during this rampage of Hector. Homer states "though Hector killed just one" (15.740). This makes him stand out because he is the one to suffer death from this catastrophe that the Achaeans face in the war. Sarpedon's death occurs during a time of trouble for the Trojans. When Patroclus enters the war, he kills many Trojan warriors and creates a major disturbance for them. Homer describes Sarpedon "watching his comrades drop and die, war-shirts billowing free as Patroclus killed them" (16.498-9). Sarpedon demonstrates his courage by shouting "I'll take him on myself" (16.503). He takes on the responsibility of fighting the warrior who is to be feared the most at this point in the war, and continues to fight and spur on the Trojans until the moment he dies. Homer states that Sarpedon "died at Patroclus' hands and died raging still" (16.579). He earns honor by fighting for his army and encouraging them until he no longer can.

Sarpedon and Periphetes earn their own kleos from their gallantry in battle and their dignified deaths. However, their deaths both offer kleos to other characters in Homer's *Iliad*. Periphetes' death gives kleos to Hector. Homer writes "but all of it went now to build Prince Hector's glory" (15.748). This passage is referring to Periphetes' skill in battle. Hector gains fame from this by killing a talented warrior. The Achaeans "dread in the face of mighty Hector"

(15.757) after Periphetes is killed. From this murder, Hector earns more recognition as a great warrior to be feared. Sarpedon's death allows Patroclus to gain kleos. Sarpedon is the son of Zeus, so he cannot be killed easily. Patroclus must have great honor if Zeus allowed him to kill his son. After Sarpedon's death Glaucus cries "did Zeus stand by him? Not even his own son" (16.615). Since Zeus is the mastermind behind the war, no one ever expected that he would allow his own son to be killed. Patroclus gains fame and respect from this death because Sarpedon was seen as an invincible warrior that could never be killed.