

Menelaus in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*: the Anti-Hero of πένθος

BARBARA CASTIGLIONI

In Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, the comic servant Thersites yells:

[...] To be a
dog, a mule, a cat, a fitchew, a toad, a lizard, an
owl, a puttock, or a herring without a roe, I would
not care; but to be Menelaus, I would conspire
against destiny. Ask me not, what I would be, if I
were not Thersites; for I care not to be the louse
of a lazar, so I were not Menelaus!

Although Thersites is a particularly rude character who acts, in a lot of ways, as a classical Shakespearian fool, it is well known that the great secret of the Shakespearian fools is that they are not fool at all and that they often speak truth, as Isaac Asimov wrote¹.

Thersites' words, indeed, may be considered as a recapitulation of Menelaus' role in the Homeric epics, where he certainly does not hold an enviable position. While the *Iliad* belongs to Achilles and to his κλέος and the *Odyssey* belongs to Odysseus, who won both κλέος and νόστος, Menelaus appears to be out of the place in both poems: he lacks the martial virtues belonging to Achilles and to other warriors, but he also lacks Odysseus' wisdom and unlimited resources. Despite being the hero responsible for the Trojan effort, Menelaus seems to lack his own specific personality, and has therefore often been considered secondary and studied only in relation to the other characters. My concern here is to show that Menelaus presents an exceptional case within the broader spectrum of epic characterization and that his distinctive status is a deliberate choice in both poems. I aim to show how Menelaus emerges as a complex and exceptionally nuanced character – in some ways at odds with the ethos of Greek epic.

In the *Iliad*, a poem especially concerned with the theme of the ἀριστεία and to the title of ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν, Menelaus is all but the best of the Achaeans: he is the only individual whose reason for coming to Troy is specified

¹ Cf. Asimov 1978, 18.

by the poem (2,589-90 μάλιστα δὲ ἴετο θυμῷ τείσασθαι Ἑλένης ὀρμήματά τε στοναχάς τε, «he most of all wished to be avenged for the struggles and the groans of Helen»). He should therefore be the avenger, but he is portrayed in a paradoxical way, as Philippe Rousseau noticed². In the poem, Menelaus is first mentioned in book one, in the middle of Achilles' wrath (1,158-60):

But you, shameless one, we followed, so that you might rejoice, seeking to win recompense for Menelaus and for yourself, dog-face, from the Trojans.

Achilles' words immediately suggest the paradoxical nature of Menelaus' role, because, although it is for his sake that the Greeks are fighting in Troy, Achilles only mentions Menelaus' name to insult Agamemnon, thus implying his subordinate role. Although he is addressed together with Agamemnon as one of the two leaders of the host (1,15-16) and he is the only one in the Greek army who receives the title of ἀρχὸς Ἀχαιῶν, Menelaus is a follower rather than a leader in his relationship with Agamemnon³. He is always presented as waiting for his brother's lead, and this is perhaps the origin of one of his main features, that is the hesitancy. Menelaus' hesitancy can be found scattered throughout the poem, but is particularly significant in *Iliad* 10, when the Trojans are camped nearby. While Agamemnon, who is described first, decides to seek out Nestor's advice, Menelaus, on the other hand, goes to awaken his brother, whom he finds already up and arming himself. Even though it is Menelaus who immediately suggests to Agamemnon the plan that is set in motion in *Iliad* 10, namely sending a spy against the Trojans (10,37-38), the direction of dependency is clear, with Menelaus seeking out Agamemnon, and Agamemnon seeking out Nestor. When Agamemnon awakens Nestor, the King of Pylos finds fault with Menelaus for sleeping and letting his brother exert himself at this dangerous pass; Agamemnon's reply is extremely indicative, since he corrects Nestor's misconception, but says that he is right to blame Menelaus at other times, for he often gives way and does not want to exert himself, «not because he yields to fear or helplessness of mind, but because he looks to me and awaits my lead» (10,121-23). The verb μεθίημι used by Agamemnon is highly suggestive, because it will be applied to Menelaus also in *Iliad* 23,434-5, when he willingly gives way to Antilochus to avoid a crush, thus

² Cf. Rousseau 1990, 326.

³ Cf. Frame 2009, 416, where the author interestingly focuses on Menelaus' role as a follower, rather than a leader, in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

showing again his hesitancy, and in *Odyssey* 4, during the tale of his νόστος, as I will describe in more detail later.

Hesitancy, however, is not the only unusual feature to be observed in Menelaus' characterization. In *Iliad* 10, when the Achaeans are deliberating about who should accompany Diomedes against the Trojans and Menelaus offers himself as a volunteer, Agamemnon tells Diomedes to choose the best hero out of the group (ἄριστον, 10,236) and not to pick someone inferior for reasons of etiquette, not even if the inferior one should be βασιλεύτερος (literally, 'more kinglike', v. 239). Agamemnon's motive is made clear by the narration: «he feared for the blonde Menelaus». Menelaus, indeed, does not stand out for his skills as a fighter: his inadequacy as a warrior is more than once implied in the poem (e.g. 7,103 ff.), and is explicitly highlighted by Apollo, who describes him as a "faint-hearted fighter" (μαλθακὸς αἰχμητής; 17,588)⁴. In the poem where he should be the avenger, such a feature would be quite surprising in itself, but it is even more striking if we consider that Menelaus has among his epithets by far the most examples among all the heroes of the regular Greek words for 'warlike': ἀρήϊος and ἀρηϊφίλος (29 times in the *Iliad*, no other character having more than twice)⁵. Since 'warlike', or literally 'devoted to Ares', 'loved by Ares', is not really what Menelaus is in the poem, we might suppose that formulas such as Μενέλαος ἀρήϊος or ἀρηϊφίλος Μενέλαος must be stock epithets inherited from what was to be his portrayal in the oral tradition. In a number of cases the stock epithets of a character in the *Iliad* do not fit the character as he appears, because they are either irrelevant or actually contradictory, as was shown by Milman Parry's studies. In such cases, we have to assume that the narrator has changed the portrait for the purpose of his

⁴ The ancient critics did not appreciate Menelaus being called a «faint-hearted fighter», and explained it as the biased view of an enemy (Apollo appears in the guise of Phainops). Athenaeus too objects, writing that not everything that is said in Homer is the view of the poet himself, and criticizes a joke by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* 174b-c (where Socrates said: «Though indeed Homer may be said to have not merely corrupted the adage, but debauched it: for after setting forth Agamemnon as a man eminently good at warfare, and Menelaus as only "a faint-hearted fighter", he makes the latter come unbidden to the banquet of the former, who was offering sacrifice and holding a feast; so the worse man was the guest of the better»). Athenaeus argues that Plato is unfair, because Menelaus acted heroically on his own for the dead Patroclus.

⁵ Cf. Willcock 2004, 51-62.

own story⁶. This is strikingly true of Menelaus, who will not give proof of great martial prowess even in his ἀριστεία (book 17), where he does not do anything remotely comparable to the achievements of Diomedes in book 5, Agamemnon in 11 or Achilles in 20-21, that is the three great ἀριστεῖαι of the *Iliad*⁷. In Menelaus' ἀριστεία, the narration rather focuses on the character's emotions and sufferings: the book opens with his reaction to Patroclus' death, whom Menelaus is the first to notice. Menelaus is thus presented as eager to avenge his friend, but, instead of being compared to a lion or to a ferocious beast, as it would be expected, he is likened to a cow lowing for its calf while he roams around Patroclus' corpse (4-5)⁸: such a sensitive image implies that Menelaus does not hurry to the front line of the battle out of martial prowess or desire for glory, but that he is motivated by affection for the fallen man. Throughout his whole ἀριστεία, Menelaus keeps expressing his affection and his pain for Patroclus: he nourishes great grief in his breast (17,139 μέγα πένθος ἐνὶ στήθεσσιν ἄέξων, cf. 17,92 and 670-2), he says that the friend's death has deeply touched him in spirit (564), and he also articulates his sympathy for the dead when he brings the news to Antilochus, warning him that he will hear a «painful message» (686), because Patroclus has fallen and they are filled with great longing for him (690). Furthermore, as well as feeling pain for the loss of his friend, Menelaus is conscious that Patroclus, as well as the other warriors who have lost their lives, has died for his sake (92). This concern for the sufferings he is responsible for dominates his representation in the poem⁹: in book 3, for

⁶ Such a consideration can also be implied by reading some fragments of the Epic Cycle, where Menelaus seems to be the impetuous hero he is neither in the *Iliad* nor in the *Odyssey* (e.g. Procl. Chr. p. 88,5, where he decided to kill Deiphobus after the Greeks have just conquered Troy. Cf. also Procl. Chr. p. 94,3 Bernabé, where Menelaus furiously quarrels with Agamemnon after the sack of Troy: he urges immediate departure, while Agamemnon urged the Achaeans to remain until they could placate the wrath of Athena. The fact that both the episodes are also briefly mentioned in the *Odyssey* (*Od.* 8,514-8 and *Od.* 3,148-50), where Menelaus is far from being an aggressive and determined man, make us suppose that he was a very different character in the non-Homeric tradition (cf. Sammons 2014, 7; cf. also Willcock 2002, 224: «how then Menelaus appear in poetry before the *Iliad*? It is very unlikely that he was a sensitive, amiable man»).

⁷ On Menelaus' role in book 17, see Barck 1971, 12-17; Willcock 1987, 189-191; Edwards 1991, 2; Loudon 2006, 109; Stelow 2009.

⁸ Cf. Stelow, 2009, 194.

⁹ Cf. Hainsworth on *Iliad* 10,234 ff.; see also Willcock 2002, 221-229.

example, when he accepts the duel with Paris which should have put an end to the war, he says to the other Greeks and Trojans that he sees «how much you have suffered for my quarrel with Alexander» (3,99-100 ἐπεὶ κακὰ πολλὰ πέπασθε εἶνεκ' ἐμῆς ἔριδος καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρου ἔνεκ' ἀρχῆς). In book 10 he is described as trembling (ἔχε τρόμος) from the fear that something should befall the Argives who for his sake had come to Troy over the wide waters of the sea (10,25-8). The awareness that the war has been fought for his sake also characterizes Menelaus' last appearance in the *Iliad*, during the funeral games narrated in book 23. When Antilochus, who has cheated him out of the second-place prize for the chariot race, offers to return the prize and pays tribute to his superior age and position, Menelaus responds in a way that seems to articulate the critical role he plays in the large framework of the *Iliad*: he accepts Antilochus' apology, because, he says, «you have suffered much for me, and undergone much toil, and your noble father too, and your brother, for my sake» (607-8 ἀλλὰ σὺ γὰρ δὴ πολλὰ πάθεις καὶ πολλὰ ἐμόγησας / σός τε πατήρ ἀγαθὸς καὶ ἀδελφεὸς εἶνεκ' ἐμεῖο). From all the examples mentioned above we have a subtle and surprising portrait of the Spartan king: not a strong character, not a great fighter, but a thoughtful, sensitive and suffering man, whose exceptional features are repeatedly stressed. Furthermore, the narrator addresses Menelaus seven times in the vocative (4,127, 4,146, 7,104, 13,603, 17,679, 17,702, 23,600), more than any other character with the exception of Patroclus, who is addressed eight times, all in book 16. While the addresses to Patroclus are much more justified by his prominent role in the poem, the seven apostrophes to Menelaus show the narrator's interest in keeping his character firmly in view and presenting a nuanced and layered portrait¹⁰.

The *Odyssey* similarly develops and, in some ways, increases such an unusual portrayal: together with Helen, Menelaus is the main character of book 4, where he and his wife host Telemachus and Peisistratus in Sparta; he also reappears in book 15. Just as in the *Iliad* he was a follower rather than a leader, and his role was subordinated to that of his brother Agamemnon, in the *Odyssey* Menelaus similarly follows Helen's lead and shows his characteristic hesitancy. For example, in book 4 he recognizes Telemachus, with whom he has been talking for 89 verses, only after Helen enters the room and identifies him as soon as she lays her eyes on him (4, 148 οὐτῶ νῦν καὶ ἐγὼ νοέω, γύναι, ὡς σὺ ἔσκεις). While Helen's brilliant and almost magical entrance emphasizes her well-known, uncanny power of recogni-

¹⁰ Cf. A. Parry 1989², 322-323.

tion, there is no doubt that her immediate intuition also underlines Menelaus' limits and his constant hesitation. The husband follows his wife's lead even in praising Odysseus: he tells his story about Odysseus only after Helen tells hers, during the famous episode of the φάρμακον. He also sharply displays his hesitancy in book 15, when a bird omen appears at the end of a speech of Telemachus; Peisistratus calls on Menelaus to interpret the omen, but he hesitates (169 μερμήριξε δ' ἀρηΐφιλος Μενέλαος), while Helen immediately interprets it.

What most stands out in Menelaus' portrayal is his identity with the suffering. In the *Odyssey*, Menelaus appears as a sort of King of *Spleen*, a wealthy and elegant lord crushed with sorrow¹¹. Although he won the war and retrieved his wife, he is depicted as unable to refrain from looking backward to the traumatic disruption of his domestic peace and to the war that came in its wake. He is presented as totally incapable of living in the present or looking forward to the future, and as deriving a certain pleasure only in mourning and dwelling on the past: (100-2: «Still and again lamenting all these men and sorrowing / many time when I am sitting here in our palace / I will indulge my heart in sorrow»).

His grief is hinted at early on, at the very beginning of book 4 (11-12), with the mention of the name of his bastard son, Megapenthes (literally 'Great-Grief'). As it is well known, in the epic tradition the name of a hero's son is frequently related to a feature of his father: for example, Astyanax is so named because Hektor is lord of the city, and Peisistratus' name clearly mirrors Nestor's position among the Argive troops. Since there is no other character in Homeric epic whose name contains the πένθος element, the narrator's choice implies that πένθος is what most characterizes Menelaus¹².

Moreover, Menelaus' πένθος is even more remarkable in the direct representation of his character: his first speech in book 4, located at the beginning of the conversation with Telemachus and Peisistratus, may be indeed considered a description of the feelings of pain and regret. In his speech, Menelaus immediately mentions his suffering (81 ἦ γὰρ πολλὰ παθῶν) and intimates that all the splendour of his palace cannot assuage his painful memories of the past (93 οὐ τοι χαίρων τοῖσδε κτεάτεσσιν ἀνάσω); he then lists his pains one after the other, thus producing a proper catalogue

¹¹ Cf. De Jong 2001 on *Odyssey* 4, 20-43: «the characterization of Menelaus is implicit [...] he is very sensible».

¹² Cf. Clader 1976, 30. See also Suzuki 1989.

of griefs: the deaths of his comrades at Troy (98-9), the murder of his brother Agamemnon (91-2), Helen's elopement, to which he refers only obliquely (94-6), and finally the principal blight upon his happiness, that is the pain he feels for Odysseus (104-110). The words Menelaus uses to define his grief for Odysseus are extremely interesting, since he says he feels an ἄχος ἄλαστον, the only occurrence of such a formulaic expression in the Homeric epics. Usually Homeric characters are described as feeling πένθος ἄλαστον when they have lost someone close to them: Penelope, for example, has a πένθος ἄλαστον because she has lost Odysseus (Od. 1,342), while in the *Iliad* (24,105) Thetis has a πένθος ἄλαστον after the death of Hektor, because she knows that with his death she has lost Achilles. Menelaus, however, has not lost a kinsman and does not feel a πένθος ἄλαστον, but nevertheless has an ἄχος ἄλαστον for his comrade Odysseus. Although the thematic evidence points to the idea that his ἄχος was really for Helen, to which he has referred only in an indirect way, as I have already observed, and which had been transferred to Odysseus in the immediate context of the poem, his ἄχος ἄλαστον describes, once more, his damaged spirit and his sensibility. Menelaus' grief is infectious («so he spoke, and in them all aroused the desire of lament») and produces a scene where everyone from Helen to Telemachus to Peisistratus simultaneously cries, thus explaining the need, later on, for Helen's φάρμακον, which should be νηπενθές and ἄχολον and make people temporarily forget their sorrows. As it is well known, the φάρμακον does not seem to be too completely successful, at least for Menelaus: in his tale¹³ in praise of Odysseus, which follows Helen's decision to slip the drug in the wine, he remembers her imitating the voices of the heroes' wives hidden in the Wooden horse, thus showing his inability to accept his past and reinforcing his constant grieving¹⁴. Helen's φάρμακον and the two tales, moreover, relate to the most important scene of book 4, that is the 'after-dawn' conversation between Menelaus and Telemachus, in which Menelaus tells Telemachus what Proteus, the 'Old Man of the Sea', said about Odysseus. Menelaus' long tale narrates his νόστος, which, of all Greek νόστοι, comes closest to that of Odysseus: he too wandered many years, was driven off by a storm, and was advised by a supernatural woman to consult a prophet who tells him about his journey home and the end of

¹³ On the tales as a veiled dialogue between Helen and Menelaus, see Schmiel 1972, 463-472. Cf. also Bergren 2008.

¹⁴ On the scene as a whole, cf. Barck 1971, 23-26; Fenik 1974, 21-28; Bergren 1981, 201-214; Olson 1989, 387-394; Doyle 2010, 1-18.

his life. These similarities, however, serve to emphasize the differences between the two, because Menelaus' νόστος fully confirms the observed features of his characters, that are in some ways opposed to those of Odysseus, as I will underline later. Moreover, since his tale is a first-person narrative whose style comes close to that of an omniscient narrator, Menelaus is shown portraying himself. His narrative starts from the island of Pharos, where he moves the heart of the daughter of Proteus, Eidothea, who apostrophizes him in a way that seems to encapsulate Menelaus' personality (371-4):

Are you so exceedingly foolish and loose-witted, stranger,
or do you instead willingly give way and enjoy suffering woes?
For you are detained a long time on this island, but you cannot find
sign of deliverance, and the heart of your comrades grows faint.

Eidothea's intervention notices Menelaus' hesitancy and his inability to act on his own, and interestingly, to describe Menelaus' passive attitude she uses the same verb, μεθίημι, used in two passages of the *Iliad* to refer to the same features, as I stated above. Furthermore, Eidothea also refers to Menelaus' observed pleasure in mourning (373 τέρπεται ἄλγεα πάσχων), thus anticipating the subsequent encounter with Proteus, where, once again, his inclination both to suffering and to lingering on his *penthos* will be highlighted. While hearing Proteus' words, indeed, Menelaus' heart first grows faint (467 μινύθει δέ μοι ἔνδοθεν ἦτορ), then, for two times, is broken (481 = 538 αὐτὰρ ἐμοί γε κατεκλάσθη φίλον ἦτορ), and does not have any desire to live and to behold the light of the sun (539-40 οὐδέ νύ μοι κῆρ / ἦθελ' ἔτι ζῶειν καὶ ὄρᾶν φάος ἠελίοιο).

However, what most stands out in Menelaus' tale and seems to be more significant for understanding his character is the part related to the promised immortality in the Elysium. According to the prophecy of Proteus, Menelaus will escape the death in Sparta and will be transported to the Elysium. While it is true, as it has often been observed, that the Elysium in book 4 anticipates the features of Ogygia in book 5 and stresses the different choice of Odysseus who, in contrast to Menelaus, forgoes the opportunity to live forever offered by Calypso and returns to his mortal wife, it is also true that Menelaus' condition is in itself exceptional, since the other Homeric heroes lie in Hades¹⁵. Furthermore, Menelaus' immortality is

¹⁵ On the differences between Odysseus and Menelaus, cf. especially Anderson 1958, 9-10. See also Blondell 2013, 73-95.

remarkable for at least two other reasons: first, because, as Proteus underlines, he will escape death only «because he has Helen and he is son-in law to Zeus», therefore confirming his subordinate role, and second, because he does not make any comment about such a special gift. Menelaus' silence, along with his undeniable unhappiness despite the promised immortality, leads us to suppose that Elysium offers him no compensation for earthly trials, but rather continues indefinitely his melancholic present existence and makes his grief eternal¹⁶.

Although in some of his tragedies he represented him as a sophist or as a debauched villain, also Euripides, who portrayed him in a number of his plays (*Andromache*¹⁷, *Trojan Women*¹⁸, *Helen*, *Orestes*¹⁹ and *Iphigenia in*

¹⁶ Cf. Anderson 1958, 6: «<Elysium> continues the same sensuous tenor of his present existence, continues it indefinitely».

¹⁷ In *Andromache* (427-25 b.C. ca), Menelaus is portrayed as an arrogant tyrant and a physical coward. The odious character which Euripides attributes to him has been seen as according to the feeling again Sparta that prevailed at the time at Athens. In any case, however, as Sammons 2014, 24 noticed, «no doubt some creative refashioning of Menelaus' character took place for this very reason. Yet insofar [...] it is possible that his sinister profile in tragedy already had its roots in much older traditions» (i.e. the non-Homeric tradition).

¹⁸ In *The Trojan Women* (415 b.C.), Menelaus is a debauched character reduced «alla convenzionalità di una funzione drammatica, secondaria ai fini dell'azione e minima nella semantica, una caricatura manieristica del re», as Beltrametti 2007, 221 observed.

¹⁹ In the *Orestes*, 408 b. C., Euripides portrays «a callous insensitive person only interested in facts and not in anyone's feelings», as Cilliers wrote (Cilliers 1991, 28). This Menelaus, indeed, resembles a typical late 5th century Sophist in action: like the Sophists, he is an opportunist who has no absolute values in life; like them, he knows how to adapt to circumstances and how, by his eloquence, to stay out of trouble. When Orestes asks for his help, Menelaus justifies his unwillingness to help in a revealing way: he argues that, since both gods and men hate over-vehemence, force should not be used (708-9) and that their only hope lies in soft words (692-3 «if we should prevail by soothing speeches, we will come to some hope there», 709-10 «I must save you, I don't deny it, by cleverness <σοφία>, not by violence against those who are stronger»). Loyal to his opportunism, which borders on cowardice (as both Orestes and Electra will notice, cf. 718-9, 1201-2), Menelaus decides to keep silent when he sees that majority of the people in the assembly are against his brother's sons. Later, we will know that he has another reason for such a cautiousness: the ambition to ascend the throne of Argos (1058-9, 1660-1), which is coupled with his fear of forfeiting the power in Sparta. Besides being a shallow opportunist, Menelaus is also excessive concerned with appearance: when he sees Orestes for the

*Aulis*²⁰), explored the anti-heroic features of the Homeric Menelaus. In the *Helen*, (412 b.C.), Menelaus is almost unrecognizable as Helen: his portrayal as a comically ineffectual figure²¹ underscores the sharp discrepancy between his κλέος and what we see on stage²². Menelaus is presented as expecting that his famous name will help him gain access to Theoclymenus' palace and be accorded proper hospitality («The fire of Troy is famous, and I, Menelaus, who lighted it, am well known in every land»), but a lowly portress disabuses him of this notion and brusquely dismisses him (454: «Perhaps you were a great man elsewhere. Here, you are not»)²³. Despite these comical features, this Menelaus, like the one portrayed in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, suffers: when the real Helen tries to convince him to be Helen – and not the phantom he fought for in Troy – he answers (593): «I trust my memory of great hardships more than you»; and when the Messenger is about to tell him the phantom's disappearance and tells him that

first time, he is more dismayed by his nephew's untidy appearance than about the reason for it (39-42), while his beautiful cloak (349-51) and his «golden locks whose pride about his shoulders fall» (1532) make him look more like a «languishing and effete prince who has spent too long in softening Eastern climates» (Pippin Burnett 1971, 185) than a Greek king. As we can see, this character has nothing to do with the one portrayed in Euripides' *Helen*, and he is also very different from Menelaus in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*.

²⁰ *Iphigenia in Aulis*' representation is particularly interesting because it includes a quarrel between Menelaus and Agamemnon which alludes to the famous quarrel briefly sketched in *Od.* 3,148-50 (and in the *Nostoi*, cf. note 6 above). The two situations have strong similarities: in both, the brothers disagree in a matter affecting the fate of the Achaean host; in both, Agamemnon has heard about some divine wrath, and in both cases Menelaus does not accept his brother's decision. In Euripides, however, the two brothers dispute in a typical *agon*, with Menelaus strongly declaring his autonomy (cf. 330 σὸς δὲ δοῦλος οὐκ ἔφυν) and thus proving to be that determined (and also loathsome) man he never proves to be in the Homeric epics.

²¹ Cf. Seidensticker 1982, 175, who considers him a «Karikatur eines tragischen Helden». Cf. also Meltzer 2006, 205-206.

²² Cf. Foley 2001, 141, who describes his reliance on his former greatness as «at some point some ludicrous».

²³ In Euripides' *Helen*, Menelaus arrives in Egypt after surviving shipwreck and asks for help, just like Odysseus when he arrived at the island of the Phaeacians. The woman Menelaus encounters, however, is not Nausicaä, nor does he get what he seeks: he assumes the role of beggar out of need and with shame, while Odysseus did so willingly and with a plan. Therefore, the comparison with Odysseus only highlights Menelaus' flaws, thus heightening the comic colouring of the character.

the Trojan war was fought in vain, he answers: «You mourn old sorrows: what is your news?». Moreover, also this Menelaus is incapable of living the present and is focused only on the sufferings of his past: when he is finally convinced of Helen's true identity, he will say (766 ff.) «Why should I tell you about our losses in the Aegean, and Nauplius' beacons on Euboea, and my visits to Crete and the cities of Libya, and the mountain-peaks of Perseus? For I would not satisfy you with the tale, and by telling you these evils I would suffer still, as I did when I experienced them; and so my grief would be doubled²⁴ (λέγων τ' ἄν σοι κάκ' ἀλγοίην ἔτι, / πάσχων τ' ἔκαμνον: δις δὲ λυπηθεῖμεν ἄν)». These lines could have been uttered by the Menelaus of the *Odyssey*.

Conclusion

In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as I hope I have demonstrated, Menelaus emerges as a remarkable and unusual character, in many ways at odds with the ethos of Greek epic. By emphasizing Menelaus' exceptional features, both poems appear to deconstruct the heroic values and to portray an anti-hero rather than a hero. Whereas we might expect to see Menelaus presented as dominant and, ultimately, triumphant in his victory at Troy and his successful νόστος, the two epics instead emphasize his hesitancy, his passivity, his inadequacy as a fighter, and, most of all, his sense of regret, his sensibility and his grief.

Menelaus' damaged character, rather than being an epic one, seems closer to a modern one, as Hugo Von Hofmannsthal fully realized in *Die ägyptische Helena*. In his libretto, written for one of the lesser-known operas by Richard Strauss, Hofmannsthal builds a lifeless and suffering character, who continually shifts between remembrance and forgetfulness. Even though at the end of the opera his Menelaus will drink the so-called 'potion of remembrance', through which he is compelled to remember and to accept Helen and her good characteristics, while dismissing his anger and frustration, remembrance defeats forgetfulness only in a limited sense: Menelaus, indeed, is urged to move forward with his life by remembering the good and simultaneously disregarding the bad, in a way that displays, once more, his inability to process his pain. Such a feature, however, was

²⁴ Diggle 1994 (OCT) deletes 771 (πάσχων τ' ἔκαμνον: δις δὲ λυπηθεῖμεν ἄν), but the line aptly reinforces the prospect of Menelaus' sufferings.

already perceptible in the first act, when he asked Helen a desperate question that may be considered the apotheosis of his character:

I was not the first of the heroes,
nor the second.
Why did you choose me for such suffering?

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to reconsider the representation of Menelaus in light of the overall narrative of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Despite being the hero responsible for the Trojan effort, Menelaus' role and his function in the Homeric epics have often been considered secondary and studied only in relation to the other characters: he is the betrayed husband of Helen, the weak brother of Agamemnon, the antimodel for Odysseus, but seems to lack his own specific personality. One of the causes lies in Menelaus' problematic characterization: he lacks the martial virtues belonging to Achilles and to other warriors, but he also lacks Odysseus' wisdom, thus appearing to be out of the place in both poems. I argue that Menelaus presents an exceptional case within the broader spectrum of epic characterization and that his distinctive status is a deliberate choice in both poems. In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Menelaus is portrayed as warlike, yet, whereas we might expect to see him presented as dominant and triumphant in his victory at Troy and his successful νόστος, the two epics instead emphasize his awareness of the suffering he has caused, his grief, and his sense of regret. I intend to show how Menelaus emerges as a complex and nuanced character—in some ways at odds with

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the ethos of Greek epic. My aim is to show that both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* prove to focus on Menelaus' emotions and sensibility and to depict the portrayal of a remarkably different grieving character, who might be considered the anti-hero of πένθος.

BARBARA CASTIGLIONI
barbara.castiglioni87@gmail.com