

TELEMACHUS IN SPARTA

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The episode featuring Helen and Menelaus, Telemachus and Peisistratus in Sparta has received various interpretations. The obvious conflict in the speeches of Helen and Menelaus (*Od.* 4.235–89) has led to deletion or, less drastically, to defenses of Helen. One might have thought that the excellent articles by Maniet and Anderson would have settled the matter.¹ I shall try to show that this is only the last, though most important, situation of tension in the first part of *Od.* 4, preceded by three gaffes which help set the tone of the first evening in Sparta, a mood characterized by sorrowful remembrance of the past and strained personal relationships.

In his generally perceptive chapter on the *Telemachy* Howard Clarke says:

Here in Sparta there is prosperity, a security, and a family intimacy that Telemachus had never known in Ithaca and had only lately met in Pylos. Again we are aware how subtly and exactly Homer chooses details to contrast Menelaus and Sparta with Odysseus and Ithaca. The primary complication of the *Odyssey* is the disunion of a family, whereas here we have an immediate awareness of union (the double marriage) and reunion (Helen). And compare the joy and harmony of Menelaus' banquet with the pointless carousing of the suitors.²

Prosperity and security must be conceded, and there is no evidence of the gross disorder and disunion which prevail at Ithaca. One must distinguish between the crass, external disruption of Ithaca and the

¹ A. Maniet, "Pseudo-interpolations et scène de ménage dans l'*Odyssée*," *Ant. Cl.* 16 (1947) 37–46; W. S. Anderson, "Calypso and Elysium," *CJ* 54 (1954) 2–11, now available in Charles H. Taylor, Jr., *Essays on the Odyssey: Selected Modern Criticism* (Bloomington 1963) 73–86.

² Howard W. Clarke, *The Art of the Odyssey* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1967) 36, cf. 37 and 41.

less obvious, internal disharmony which, as I hope to show, prevails at Sparta. And between the latter and the complete harmony and good order, internal and external, at Pylos. The celebration of a double wedding at the arrival of Telemachus and Peisistratus could indeed have been expected to produce the effect Clarke mentions. But the son is not Helen's child (4.12) and his name is Megapenthes, "Great Grief" (4.11). Hermione will be leaving home to marry Neoptolemus, not an unusual occurrence to be sure, but an occasion for tears as well as joy. The six lines which Homer devotes to the celebration itself (4.3; 15-19), as opposed to the ten lines which describe the marriage partners in less happy terms (4.5-14), say only that the neighbors and kin of Menelaus were enjoying themselves, not that Menelaus was, and it is not even certain that Helen was present.³ In any case, for an understanding of the mood in Sparta one must look not at this brief reference to the wedding, but rather at the more fully developed scene which follows (4.20-295).

When Telemachus and Peisistratus arrive, Eteoneus leaves them standing outside while he asks Menelaus what to do (20 sq.) If the wedding celebration were an adequate explanation for this exceptional breach of hospitality, Menelaus would not give Eteoneus such a dressing down (31 sq.). Since the breach of hospitality is unusual, since it is placed at the beginning of this episode, and since it is not an isolated event, it cannot be dismissed as unimportant. However insignificant it might seem in itself, it is one of the external indications or foreshadowings of inner disharmony in Sparta.

After the usual ceremonies of reception, Telemachus, awed by the splendors of Sparta, compares the palace to Zeus' palace on Olympus (71 sq.) Menelaus knows the danger of comparing oneself with the gods, of even having one's palace compared to theirs, and immediately disclaims competition. This is a less obvious error than Eteoneus', if potentially more dangerous, but an error nonetheless. It creates a moment of uneasiness.

Menelaus is clearly in a reflective and recollective mood—that is only natural on such an occasion as the marriage of one's children with the resultant change in one's life—and he delivers a rather long and

³ W. K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* (Ithaca 1968) 42: "... the bastard Megapenthes is introduced rather apologetically as Menelaus' prospective heir . . ."

rambling speech. But the sequence of his thoughts is plain enough (78-112). The reference to his wealth reminds him of the travels which accounted for much of his wealth; his absence from home, occasioned by those travels, reminds him of Agamemnon's death. That tragedy and his failure to avenge his brother's death take the joy out of his affluent life (93). Agamemnon's death reminds him of the other dead in Troy; they remind him of Odysseus in particular; and Odysseus makes him think of Laertes, Penelope, and Telemachus. The speech reveals that Menelaus is an unhappy man who would gladly give most of his possessions which bring him no pleasure in exchange for the lives of his comrades—lost, as he could hardly forget, on account of his wife.

This natural string of reminiscences has led Menelaus into a *faux pas* quite unwittingly. But the effect is the same. Telemachus begins to weep at the mention of Odysseus, and Menelaus now recognizes Telemachus but is at a loss how to proceed (113 sq.) Here the uneasiness and tension is the more acute in that Homer does not provide the solution directly as before.

In this way Homer has also set up Helen's grand entrance. One wonders why Helen was apparently not present at the wedding celebration for her children. Perhaps one should simply enjoy the grand entrance and not ask embarrassing questions. Or perhaps this is another indication that all is not well at Sparta. Whatever the case, Helen extricates Menelaus from his dilemma very adroitly, to his evident relief (138-50). As Helen covered for Menelaus, so Peisistratus covers for Telemachus, saying that Telemachus is too modest to come barging into the conversation since "we enjoy hearing you speak" (160). Then he adroitly slips in the reason for Telemachus' visit with a discreet appeal for sympathy. Observe that the speeches of the five characters are in an ascending order from the most gauche to the most suave: Eteoneus makes a coarse blunder (20-36), Telemachus a lesser *faux pas* (71-80) which leads to Menelaus inadvertently making Telemachus cry (81-119). Helen's smooth extrication of Menelaus (138-46) is capped by the even more suave speech of Peisistratus (156-67). This is an object lesson in social behavior for Telemachus and perhaps also a symbol of Telemachus' educational progress during his trip.

There is no need to comment on Menelaus' warm welcome for Telemachus and his genuine expression of affection for Odysseus (168–82), the tears shed in memory of those lost, and Peisistratus' sensible words on expressing grief (183–202). Menelaus expresses his approval of Peisistratus' tact and eloquence: "Easily recognized is the line of that man for whom Kronos' son weaves good fortune in his marrying and begetting" (208).⁴

Line 208 presents a problem. Most commentators and earlier translators insist on "at marriage and at birth," and it must be conceded that the passages they cite tend to indicate that the verb has the active sense "to bear" in the aorist only. But none of the examples from Homer is a close parallel (the expression is not demonstrably a formula), and the scholiast explains *γεινομένῳ* as *τεκνοῦντι* for the very good reason that "Kronos' son gave felicity not to the offspring but to the begetter."⁵ One might adduce 12 f. as a parallel in that both passages contain *γόνος/γόνον* followed by the verb *γεινομένῳ/ἐγείνατο* as well as *ἐπικλώση/ἔφαινον*. The two passages are closely related in thought; the first passage sets up the second. Consider the situation. Menelaus is celebrating the weddings of his two children, the son not Helen's as Homer is careful to point out. Telemachus and Peisistratus arrive, admirable and legitimate sons of Menelaus' comrades. He could hardly fail to make the comparison. Nestor, he says, has enjoyed true felicity in marriage and at birth/in begetting. The implication is that Menelaus has not, and of course he has not, although he seems to have been most successful in that he married the most beautiful woman in the world. But Helen is like Sparta; outward beauty and splendor do not quite conceal inner trouble, dissatisfaction, unhappiness.

The sense of the passage will be the same, finally, regardless of how one interprets *γεινομένῳ* (although the suggested interpretation makes the connection clearer), for *γαμέοντί* anticipates what *γεινομένῳ* (as "beget") makes explicit. Nestor has obviously enjoyed true felicity in marriage—what is the proof? His son. It is Peisistratus' diplomatic speech that draws the approval of Menelaus, and he reinforces the point by referring in 211 to Nestor's having sons who

⁴ The translation is by Richmond Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York 1967); similarly Robert Fitzgerald, *The Odyssey* (New York 1961).

⁵ Wm. Dindorf, *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Odysseam* 1.193.

are clever and good with the spear. Granted that we know little about Megapenthes, and nothing about his prowess as a speaker or warrior, it is difficult to imagine that the son of a slave could have been the equal of Telemachus or Peisistratus. In any case, Homer implies by his remarks (11 f.) that the marriage has been less than successful in producing offspring. The two ideas, marriage and begetting, are inextricably interwoven in the context of this scene.⁶

Remembrance has been a major theme in this episode, and the memories have not been pleasant. Helen's drug is the proper antidote, for it brings forgetfulness of all evils (221), and is a necessary preliminary to her story. Since the stories told by Helen and Menelaus are crucial to an understanding of the whole episode, a careful examination is in order.

A formal comparison of the two speeches reveals considerable structural similarity and even verbal reminiscences, but also significant

	Helen		Menelaus
<i>Exordium</i>	235-37 Reference to M's troubles	
	238-39 "Sit down and enjoy yourself. I'll tell a suitable story."	266	"You told a proper story."
	240-43 "I could not tell all of O's. struggles, but what a deed he did. . . ."	267-73	"I have seen much, but never the likes of O. What a deed he did. . . ."

<i>Narratio</i>	244-49 O. enters Troy as a beggar.	274-79	H. comes to horse, mimics voices of Greeks' wives.
	250-58 H. bathes him, keeps quiet.	280-89	O. keeps Greeks quiet.

<i>Peroratio</i>	259-64 H's. <i>apologia</i>	[276?	M's. <i>accusatio</i> ?]

⁶ He does not cite this passage, but Anderson also emphasizes Menelaus' dissatisfaction (*op. cit.*, 75: "Menelaus has not completely accounted for his discontent, however. If his conscience bothers him over the price paid for the recovery of Helen and the amassment of his wealth, we may legitimately infer that the object of all this effort has not proved so conclusively satisfying as he anticipated, that Helen fails to meet his romantic expectations. Until Helen appears before us, all we know is that Menelaus is dissatisfied, although Homer has shrewdly inserted that detail about the ruined home and allowed Menelaus to express a wish for the days before the Trojan War (97). Now Helen enters, and the poet concentrates on the conditions of their conjugal bliss, with inevitable references to Olyseus again.")

differences. Helen's speech is in three parts: *exordium* 235-43 (9), *narratio* 244-58 (15), and *peroratio* 259-64. Menelaus' speech is in two parts: *exordium* 266-73 (8), and *narratio* 274-89 (16). The *peroratio* is lacking for reasons which should be obvious. If the *peroratio* is left out, the two speeches are of equal length, and the sections are nearly equal in length. (See tabular matter on previous page.)

The *exordium* of Helen's speech begins with a transition (Zeus gives good and evil now to this person, now to that) which seems to be a comment on Menelaus' long speech (78-112), a reminder that his troubles were not *her* fault. Menelaus' speech does not require a transition since it follows Helen's directly. Then Helen promises a suitable story (239); Menelaus acknowledges that it was appropriate (266).⁷ Both Helen and Menelaus then use a sort of *praeteritio* to introduce the stories about Odysseus (240-43, 267-73); there are several verbal similarities.

Both of the stories ostensibly feature Odysseus—for Telemachus' benefit obviously—and both are in two parts. But the differences, the contradictions, are more significant. To put it bluntly, Helen's story excuses herself, Menelaus' story accuses her, indirectly to be sure. It is idle to deny the explicit contradiction or to imagine that it was accidental; it is unwarranted desperation to mutilate the text when it is not only intelligible but in fact gives a brilliant description of domestic strife suppressed to preserve propriety.

Helen presents Odysseus as the active character and herself as essentially passive; her role, in brief, is to keep her mouth shut. Yet she dominates the scene. Her actions, bathing and clothing Odysseus, are those of a properly domestic Greek woman, and presumably took place in private. Helen is recalling the image of domesticity which she affected so vividly at her appearance (121 sq.).⁸

Menelaus exactly reverses the roles. His story begins with a Helen who acts; now the role of the Greeks is to be silent, granted that

⁷ W. B. Stanford (*The Odyssey of Homer*² [London 1964] vol. 1, *ad loc.*) takes this as complacent acceptance of Helen's high praise (263-4). Well might he be unimpressed by Helen's praise! I prefer the argument from structure, seeing how closely parallel the two speeches are. Menelaus is dismissing Helen's effort rather curtly with faint praise, and perhaps a hint of sarcasm.

⁸ Anderson argues that Helen enjoyed the memory of her days of glory in Troy (*op. cit.*, 76.)

Odysseus must also take steps to insure that silence. In her own story Helen acts behind the scenes, discreetly, in private; in Menelaus' story she steps front and center—and parades around the horse three times—with Deiphobus in tow.⁹ In both stories Helen is clever. She alone recognized Odysseus in her story, in Menelaus' story she cleverly mimicked the voices of the Greeks' wives: that was patriotic, this is traitorous. (It will not do to conceive of a Menelaus so dull as not to realize that fact. 274 f. serve a double purpose: to soften the accusation for the benefit of Telemachus and Peisistratus; as a touch of sarcasm for Helen.)¹⁰ Helen concludes with a most disingenuous *apologia pro vita sua*: she was delighted that Odysseus killed so many Trojans because she was sorry Aphrodite had made her leave her country, child, bed, and flawless husband—that last the crowning indignity of this outrageously self-serving speech in the face of her cuckold husband.

There is no precise parallel in Menelaus' speech—how could he reply directly without letting the undercurrent of bitterness rise to the surface, to his own disgrace and the acute discomfort of all? But he does not let Helen's words pass in total silence. The apparently gratuitous addition of 276, the mention of Deiphobus, to his story is a direct answer to 260 sq. in that it gives the lie to Helen's belated discovery of his own mental and physical perfection.¹¹ Lines 274 f., which ostensibly excuse Helen from blame and so preserve the semblance of civility, are really in sarcastic agreement with lines 261 f. of Helen's defense: "No doubt, my dear" Menelaus is saying, "on this occasion as before some god was responsible for your actions." As Maniet observed (*op. cit.*, 40), the use of *ἐμείλλε* gives "un certain air de persiflage." And that is putting it mildly.

Kakrides has staked out a middle ground between interpreting the text as it stands and resorting to wholesale excision with his theory of

⁹ *περιστείχω* occurs only here in Homer (4.277), but *στείχω* and its derivatives connote measured and formal movement.

¹⁰ Beye, *op. cit.*, 174: "[Menelaus] is sarcastic: 'Some god must have bade you do it,' and then a little vicious: 'Godlike Deiphobos followed along with you.' This subtle, tense interplay shows in perfect clarity the weakness of Menelaus, the isolation and helplessness of Helen, their animosity and the reconciliatory attempts which they quietly employ to ease it." Beye begins well but runs off the track. Menelaus' weakness and Helen's helplessness are by no means clear; sarcasm and viciousness are curious means of attempting a reconciliation.

¹¹ Maniet shows on different grounds why 276 should not be excised (*op. cit.*, 40 sq.)

four Helens.¹² He accounts for the contradictions in the two stories by assuming that Helen went through four stages in early epic: (1) the lifeless object, (2) the abducted wife who longs for home and husband, (3) the adultress, seduced not abducted, (4) the misled wife who is sorry for what happened (*op cit.*, 30 f.) Homer took one story from this source, the other from that. Since the stories presented Helen at different stages contradiction results. Kakrides would persuade us that a scene of brilliant and subtle characterization is really an unfortunate muddling of stories foisted upon the poet by tradition, and upon which he in turn has, not very successfully, attempted to impose an uneasy cohabitation.

Kakrides has arrived at this conclusion under the influence of analytical criticism evidently, and as a result of his accepting every word in Homer at face value: if Helen blames Aphrodite, Aphrodite is to blame. But Kakrides is so intent upon saving Helen that he blames her actions in the story told by Menelaus on Deiphobus (*op. cit.*, 32). This is no longer interpretation but ghostwriting. But then, in attempting to explain another difficulty (the wives of the Greeks could not have been in Troy and therefore Helen's trick and the response of the Greeks were equally foolish), Kakrides abruptly eschews logic and dismisses the objection. For the poet, says Kakrides, improbability is meaningless (*op. cit.*, 34 ff.) The Four-Helen theory will not stand up to Occam's razor. It unnecessarily complicates the process of understanding the episode by resorting to an unprovable theory.

What, then, is the mood in Sparta? It is one of melancholy remembrance (81-119, 183 sq.) and of domestic strife beneath the surface. The various breaches of hospitality or social propriety (20 sq., 71 sq., 107 sq.) set the mood at the beginning and give a hint of what is to come. The arrival of the two princes, admirable sons of close comrades, precisely when Menelaus is celebrating the marriage of his son by a slave, not Helen, sets thoughts in motion which lead Menelaus to make an oblique reference to his own misfortune in marrying Helen (207 f.) Furthermore, Menelaus himself says that he

¹² J. T. Kakrides, "Helena und Odysseus," *Serta Philologica Aenipontana* (Innsbruck 1961) 29.

is not happy (93, 100 sq.) The stories of Helen and Menelaus, finally, are either the happy accidents of an unbelievably creative *Tyche*, or Homer is showing the conflict between Helen and Menelaus.

The significance of the *Oresteia*-story has become a staple of *Odyssey* criticism; I propose to consider briefly the relevance of Sparta and Pylos to the larger story. It is clear that, while Orestes is a positive example for Telemachus, the *Oresteia*-story is essentially a negative example, for Odysseus primarily. Both Pylos and Sparta, however, have been taken as ideals to be emulated.¹³ They are not in fact similar. Economically Pylos is comfortable, Sparta luxurious; Nestor seems fully satisfied and happy, Menelaus, in his own words, is not. Nestor's wife Eurydice fulfills the Periclean ideal of woman so well that one can read *Odyssey* 3 without being aware of her name: she knows her role and could hardly be imagined to have caused Nestor the trouble Helen caused Menelaus; and Pylos, of course, knows no suitors, no Paris, no Aegisthus. Peisistratus is the paragon of late-Helladic youth: there is no suggestion that Megapenthes was comparable. Closer examination argues that Homer was rather making a deliberate contrast between Pylos and Sparta, and it is nowhere more marked than at the initial receptions. In both cases Telemachus intrudes into festivities. At Sparta there is an extraordinary breach of hospitality; Telemachus' arrival at Pylos is accommodated with the utmost grace and hospitality, and by common consent: as one man the Pylians, at sight of Telemachus, arise to greet him and offer him a seat (3.34 f.). Athena/Mentor and Telemachus are brought into the ceremony with an effortless ease and considerate good manners which please the goddess. The stay at Sparta not only begins badly but, as I have shown, is characterized by social errors which lead to tension and tears and sorrowful memories. In contrast, although Telemachus' request for information causes Nestor too to remember unpleasant events, even the death of his son (3.103 sq.), there is not the surge of uncontrolled grief which overwhelms all in Sparta, which leads Helen to resort to the drug, and which prompts Peisistratus' indirect request to have done with tears—a request in terms which

¹³ Clarke, *op. cit.*, 36 and 41; Beye, *op. cit.*, 172. Beye seems to contradict himself on the next page, however.

indicate that he finds such indulgence in grief excessive or inappropriate, and for which Menelaus compliments him on his good sense.¹⁴

The Ithaca-story differs from the other three in that it is still in progress, the outcome uncertain. Which of the three will Ithaca finally resemble—the disaster of Mycenae, the tranquility and personal satisfaction of Pylos, the ambivalent mix of success and failure, resigned accommodation and gnawing discontent of Sparta? It is clear that Pylos represents the nearest parallel; compare, for example, Nestor's situation and that foretold to Odysseus by Teiresias (11.136 f.).

Sparta is not an ideal but a warning, more subtle than Mycenae, too subtle, perhaps, for Telemachus to understand. Beyond the mere physical return, beyond even disposing of the suitors (or regaining one's wife), more difficult and less directly manageable problems await the man, and wife, who would resume a life too long disrupted. And mere recognition is the least of the problem later in the *Odyssey* as in Euripides' *Helen*—a point which I can only assert here. Sparta is better taken as a foil to Ithaca. Only in these two cases in the *Odyssey* can we observe a husband and wife together. Just as the story of Menelaus' return was a kind of satyr-play to Odysseus' more tragic *Nostos*, so also there is contrast here. In the later books of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and Penelope speak to one another in words whose meaning is mostly ambiguous and concealed.¹⁵ So Helen and Menelaus here. But the deception and ambiguity of Penelope and Odysseus achieve their purpose, a true spiritual reunion of husband and wife; Helen and Menelaus show that theirs is a physical reunion only. The ideal that Odysseus expressed to Nausicaa (6.183 f.: ὅθ' ὁμοφρονέοντε νοήμασιν οἶκον ἔχητον / ἀνὴρ ἡδὲ γυνή) will not be realized by them.

¹⁴ Compare Stanford, *ad. loc.*

¹⁵ See Anne Amory, "The Reunion of Odysseus and Penelope" in Charles H. Taylor, Jr., *op. cit.*, 100–21, 130–36 with the references in the notes.