MENELAUS' 'UNNECESSARY BASENESS OF CHARACTER' IN EURIPIDES' ORESTES*

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The Orestes is one of Euripides' most controversial dramas. The character portrayal specifically has elicited negative responses from the earliest times. In the Second Hypothesis to the drama we find the view (probably that of Aristophanes of Byzantium\(^1\)) that with the exception of Pylades, all the characters in the drama are bad — a judgement oft repeated since.\(^2\) And, as regards Menelaus, Aristotle refers to him twice as a dramatic figure who is 'unnecessarily base' (Poet.15.54a28–29 and 25.61b19–21).

It is Aristotle's judgement that concerns us here. Menelaus is obviously villainous in the Orestes, but is Aristotle right in saying that he is 'unnecessarily base'? Aristotle implies that a certain measure of baseness is necessary to the plot, but where should one draw the line between necessary and unnecessary baseness, and on what grounds?

G.F. Else was the first scholar to make a penetrating study of Aristotle's criticism on Menelaus' 'unnecessary baseness'\(^3\) which previously had usually been dismissed as unjustified,\(^4\) at most with the comment that Menelaus' villainy is essential to his role in the play.\(^5\) Else's explanation of Aristotle's remark is based on the assumption that, as in the case of the other three dramatic figures mentioned in the Poetics 15.54a28–33, the criticism is directed at a specific speech or action by Menelaus and not at the portrayal of Menelaus' character \emph{en bloc}: 'Aristotle's objection, then, is not to the "character" of Menelaus in the play as a whole but to his craven decision not to help his nephew, as exposed in the crucial speech 682–715'.\(^6\) But what is 'unnecessarily base' in this speech? Else believes that Menelaus' refusal to help has no influence on Orestes' fortunes because 'the poet has chosen to decide Orestes' fate through an entirely different mechanism, the vote in the assembly, and has thereby nullified or neutralized the importance of Menelaus. The latter's poltroonery is "unnecessary" in view of the premise Euripides himself has laid down for his plot. It decides
nothing and a different characterization of him need not have altered matters essentially. Menelaus’ villainy is thus according to Else a fault in the construction of the drama, since this characterization does not contribute to further the action: Orestes would have been condemned to death even if Menelaus had energetically come to his assistance.

Else’s argument looks very convincing at first. This explanation is, however, only valid if one assumes, as Else did, that Aristotle’s criticism only refers to Menelaus’ role in the first half of the drama: ‘The action proper ends with Orestes’ condemnation in the assembly; what follows is melodramatic patch-work’. If this is the case, one could perhaps say that Menelaus was portrayed as too much of a villain, because his refusal to help is not an indispensable, integrated part of the action. But is this so? It is true that the first half still falls within the mythical framework, whereas the second is free invention. It is also true that the second half seems melodramatic because it contains the two intrigues of vengeance and rescue, yet that is still not reason enough to regard it as not part of the ‘action proper’. In brief, to disregard completely a certain part of a drama does not seem a very scientific approach in the analysis of character portrayal — even though a dramatic figure may play a minor role, it does not mean that he cannot be considered in his full complexity, and that the subsequent effects of his action in the previous part cannot be taken into account.

In contrast with Else’s assumption that Aristotle’s remark refers only to Menelaus’ role in the first half of the drama, his function in the drama as a whole will be examined here. The method to be followed is firstly to determine the dramatic function of Menelaus in relation to the other dramatis personae, and then to look at the way in which he is portrayed. If all the characteristics which he reveals, are found to be essential in supporting his function, then obviously Aristotle cannot be right. If, however, our inquiry leads us to believe that Menelaus has ‘extra’ characteristics over and above those necessary to make his actions convincing — characteristics superfluous to his function which were added to make him a ‘round’ character — then Aristotle could well be right.

**Menelaus’ Dramatic Function**

In order to determine Menelaus’ function in relation to the other characters, a short survey of his role in the course of action is necessary. In the first episode Electra consoles her brother Orestes, ill for six days, with the news that their uncle, Menelaus, has arrived from Troy (lines 240–246). He is their nearest kinsman and under a great moral obligation to his brother Agamemnon for having raised an army, sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia and fought at Troy for nearly ten years on behalf of Menelaus and his wife Helen, so it is natural that the two young people should place their hopes
on Menelaus to rescue them in this crisis. Virtually no demand from them would be excessive.\textsuperscript{12}

But as saviour Menelaus does not come up to expectations. He shows little understanding of Orestes' qualms of conscience after his matricide (lines 380–447), and when Tyndareus arrives and an \textit{agon} ensues in which Orestes defends his action against Tyndareus' condemnation (lines 491–629), Menelaus, who as mute listener automatically becomes the arbiter,\textsuperscript{13} pronounces no verdict. In fact, after the \textit{agon} he does not utter a single word in favour of his nephew. Although he still retains the dramatic function of saviour by virtue of his promise to try and persuade Tyndareus and the people of Argos to be merciful in their judgement (lines 682–716), Orestes is now convinced that they have been betrayed and that nothing can be expected from this 'saviour' (lines 717–723). Menelaus' poltroonery is highlighted even more when Pylades arrives — by his sympathy and enthusiasm he initially seems to take over the role of saviour that Menelaus has shirked (lines 728–806); but it is soon clear that he is not in the same category as Aigeus in the \textit{Medea}, Demophon in the \textit{Heracidae} and Agamemnon in the \textit{Hecuba} (or, for that matter, Menelaus in the \textit{Orestes}) — as an exile from his father's kingdom he has neither the means nor the status to render active assistance. Pylades nevertheless serves as a foil to Menelaus' treacherous cowardice.\textsuperscript{14}

In the next episode the events at the assembly are reported by a messenger (lines 852–956). Menelaus has not spoken on behalf of Orestes and Electra. The two young people have been sentenced to take their own lives because Menelaus did not fulfil his role as saviour.

In this desperate situation their plan for revenge is born, which, together with a plan for rescuing themselves, dominates the second part of this drama (lines 1018–1693). Menelaus is the target of both: by murdering Helen the three young people aim to punish him (lines 1099 and 1171), and by holding Menelaus' daughter, Hermione, hostage, they hope to forestall his revenge (lines 1191–1202). The implication is that Menelaus once again has the role of saviour thrust on him against his will because in order to have his daughter released, he will almost certainly try to effect a free pardon for her captors.\textsuperscript{15} But even when Orestes in the final scene has his sword against Hermione's throat, Menelaus still does not consent to intercede with the people of Argos (line 1621ff.). The result is that Apollo, as the \textit{deus ex machina}, has to restore order in the chaos brought about by men. Whereas no human saviour, neither kinsman nor bosom friend, saves Orestes and Electra, Apollo becomes their saviour by taking the blame of Clytemnestra's death upon himself (lines 1625–1693).

The question may well be asked what the use of a \textit{dramatis persona} with the function of helper is if no help is given? From the point of view of the dramatic structure, Menelaus as saviour-who-does-not-rescue is essential to
the plot. In the first part of the play his spinelessness provides the stimulus to the young people’s decision to rescue themselves; his non-intercession leads to their plans for vengeance and rescue which dominate the second half. Menelaus’ function is thus a negative one: not to help when help is needed. This action-in-default leaves such disillusionment and hatred that, although he plays a very minor role in the second half (he only appears on the stage right at the end, from line 1554 onwards), the course of events is determined by his dramatic function.

It thus seems that Menelaus’ baseness is such that it can hardly be exaggerated. In other dramas where there is a crisis, the problem is solved quickly and energetically after the appearance of the saviour. Even when he only gives partial assistance as Aigeus does in the Medea and Agamemnon in the Hecuba, it is enough to solve the immediate problem. Nowhere else does the limited help leave any ill feelings. In the Orestes, however, the wholly justifiable expectation that Menelaus will render aid comes to nothing, and leaves intense resentment and bitterness.

Characteristics Supporting Menelaus’ Dramatic Function

Now that Menelaus’ dramatic function in relation to the other dramatis personae has been established, it remains to look into the question whether the characteristics that he reveals are all essential to his function, or whether he has additional traits or too much of any one trait. He is regarded as a potential saviour by Orestes and Electra, and he himself realizes the obligation laid upon him only too well (cf. lines 482, 484, 486, 684–6 and 709). He therefore has to have at least some characteristics supporting this function. The most obvious one is sympathy. Although Menelaus is not unsympathetic towards Orestes (cf. lines 682–3) it is clearly not deeply felt, as it does not lead to action. Then there is the moral obligation which Menelaus has towards his brother’s children, which, one would expect, should support his saviour role. This too remains confined to words. Ingratitude and insufficient awareness of a debt of honour to the children of Agamemnon are thus the characteristics which are revealed by his inaction.

The characteristics supporting Menelaus’ dramatic function of saviour, then, are sparse and superficial, so it is not surprising when he does not come up to expectations in the crisis.

Far more numerous and elaborately worked out are the characteristics supporting Menelaus’ function as unwilling saviour. His reply to Orestes’ appeal for help is a masterpiece in character portrayal. His efforts not to become involved are revealed fairly soon when he says that he cannot intervene by force of arms because he would not be able to overcome Pelasgian Argos with his single spear (lines 688–692 and 711–713). However, it appears twice very explicitly that Menelaus’ fleet is ‘thronging the haven of Nauplia’ (lines 53–55 and 241–242). It thus seems quite obvious that
it was the dramatist’s intention that Menelaus’ excuse for not intervening actively should be regarded as a falsehood by both Orestes and the audience.

The way in which Menelaus justifies his unwillingness to help is revealing.\textsuperscript{19} He argues that because both gods and men hate over-vehemence, force should not be used (lines 708–709); in soft words lie their only hope (lines 692–693) and in waiting for the right time (line 699). Menelaus thus undertakes to render aid by means of \textit{sophia} (line 710), i.e. by suiting his actions to changing circumstances. From his behaviour up to this point (and also beyond it) it is clear that Menelaus resembles the Sophists in many respects. Like them, 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. It is thus quite possible that Euripides, in giving Menelaus these characteristics, wished to show his audience a typical late 5th century Sophist in action.\textsuperscript{20} A case in point is the fact that he did not speak up at the assembly on behalf of his brother’s children, but, as a typical opportunist, decided to keep silent when he saw that the majority of the people were against Orestes and Electra. Several scholars have indicated the masterly way in which Euripides has sketched Menelaus here: \textsuperscript{21} in his description of the events at the assembly the messenger recounts the speeches of Talthybius, Diomedes, the demagogue and the farmer, and then simply says: ‘And nobody spoke thereafter’ (line 931) — a remark which speaks volumes about Menelaus’ character. His opportunism borders on cowardice here — in fact, it is conspicuous that both Orestes and Electra regard him as a coward (lines 718–719 and 1201–1202).\textsuperscript{22}

In view of the pressing need for time — the assembly is to decide on Orestes’ and Electra’s fate that same day — Menelaus’ time-serving attitude amounts to a refusal. It later appears that one reason for his cautiousness is his ambition to ascend the throne of Argos\textsuperscript{23} (lines 1058–1059 and 1660–1661); another is his fear of forfeiting the throne in Sparta: Tyndareus’ repeated threat that if he were to render aid to Orestes he would never be allowed to set foot on Spartan soil again (lines 625–626)\textsuperscript{24} is sufficient for the opportunist Menelaus to be concerned (lines 632–633), to reconsider any idea of aid\textsuperscript{25} and then diplomatically to withdraw from the situation. Menelaus’ lust for power is also evident in the blatant way in which, shortly after his arrival, he questions Orestes about the feelings of the citizens of Argos in connection with the matricide — he asks Orestes outright whether the people would let him keep his father’s sceptre (lines 427–438). In the final scene Menelaus’ sustained refusal to help, even when Orestes has his sword against Hermione’s throat (line 1697), shows that his reputation amongst the citizens of Argos weighs more than even his daughter’s life.

The characteristics which have been identified above support Menelaus’
dramatic function as unwilling saviour. He is, however, not only characterised by what he does or fails to do, but also indirectly by subtle comparisons with the other characters, for instance Tyndareus and Pylades. Tyndareus (Orestes' and Electra's grandfather), the antagonist or persecutor in this drama, condemns the matricide from the beginning in the strongest possible way and eventually even threatens to urge the people of Argos to stone the youngsters. In contrast to Tyndareus, Menelaus is much more moderate: he is at least not ill-disposed to Orestes and Electra and does not wish to harm them — the worst that he intends to do, is to do nothing to help them. This comparison suggests that Menelaus is not portrayed as an absolute villain.

If, on the other hand, we compare Menelaus with Pylades, whose loyalty, unselfishness and self-sacrificing attitude is manifested by his heroic attempt to help his friends, the former's cowardly, time-serving, self-interested behaviour in the crisis shows up very unfavourably. Not even the knowledge that his brother's children will probably be condemned to death can move him to intervene.

Characteristics Merely Descriptive of Menelaus' Character

Now that the characteristics necessary to make Menelaus' function as unwilling saviour convincing have been identified, it remains to determine whether his baseness was exaggerated. Although it is impossible to divide the characteristics necessary to support his function of unwilling saviour and those purely descriptive of character into watertight compartments, one can discern certain subtle touches added by Euripides to make Menelaus a 'round' character, without which his behaviour would still have been convincing. These do not consist of wholly new traits: they are related to those characteristics supporting his dramatic function, but revealed in a different context — in fact, these two kinds of characteristics have to be closely related in order not to disrupt the unity of the character.

It has already been established that Menelaus is sophistic by disposition, which is necessary to make his reply to Orestes' appeal for help (lines 682-716, discussed on pp. 24-25) convincing. But earlier, during Menelaus' first conversation with Orestes (lines 385 ff.), certain indications of his sophism which do not directly support Menelaus' essential function, but prepare us for his 'sophistic' answer later, already come to the fore. In this conversation it is clear that Menelaus is in a coolly calculated way only interested in facts. When Orestes, in reaction to his question as to the nature of the problem, replies that his conscience plagues him, Menelaus shows little understanding: "What do you mean? Wisdom is clear, not obscure" (line 397). Furthermore, he exploits the youngster's confusion to display his own ingenuousness by pointing to a contradiction in one of
Orestes' remarks (line 423). Orestes' reply that he is not wise, but a loyal friend to a friend (line 424), is clearly lost on Menelaus.

Another subtle touch not directly supporting Menelaus' dramatic function, but related to his sophistic disposition, is Menelaus' superficiality. On his arrival he says that he wished 'to clasp dead Agamemnon's son, and his mother, in loving arms' (lines 371–372), but then heard about Clytemnestra's death. This is indeed a strange remark for one who has just said that he has shed many tears on hearing of his brother's death (lines 368–369). The fact that he now wishes to embrace his brother's murderer clearly indicates that he does not even think about vengeance, and definitely does not view the murder in a serious light. The action required in terms of the moral obligation laid on him by family ties thus remains limited to lip-service and a few superficial tears. This prepares us to some extent for the fact that Menelaus will not help his brother's children.

His callous superficiality is corroborated in many ways. When he sees Orestes for the first time, he is more dismayed by Orestes' unkempt appearance than about the reason for it (lines 385–393). It is also clear that he avoids discussion of the murder (line 393); rather than give the distressed youngster an opportunity to state his case, he relentlessly interrogates him like a travelling clinical psychologist about the exact time and place when his madness began and about the nature of the phantom-shapes which plagued him (lines 401–407). His callous conclusion is that it is not strange that Orestes should endure such dreadful suffering after such dreadful deeds (line 413). And then, as the utter limit of tactlessness, Menelaus asks the deranged, conscience-stricken youngster whether he has derived any benefit from his revenge (line 425). In short, the whole conversation shows him to be an incredibly superficial and insensitive person.

Summary of Both Kinds of Characteristics

Although as stated (p.26) it is not possible to absolutely separate Menelaus' function-supporting characteristics from those merely descriptive of character, the foregoing discussion has brought to light some traits which do no more than 'round out' his character. In summary, the characteristics supporting his function as reluctant saviour are his superficial feelings of sympathy and the equally superficial recognition of his moral obligation toward Orestes and Electra. His expression of these feelings remains confined to words, which is necessary to expose him as a saviour that does not rescue. In support of all this is his opportunistic attitude to life which causes him to put his aspirations to the throne of Sparta above the moral obligation he owes his brother's children. Also supporting his dramatic function is his sophistic attitude which is revealed by the eloquent way in which he talks himself out of the obligation to help Orestes and Electra; he does not
even hesitate to lie to wriggle out of doing his duty, thus confirming that moral values do not count with him.

Without the above-mentioned characteristics Menelaus’ role as unwilling saviour would hardly have been convincing. But over and above these characteristics a few have been distinguished which are merely descriptive of character. Menelaus is revealed as a callous, insensitive person only interested in facts and not in anyone’s feelings. In addition to this there is his excessive concern with appearances which can be seen as a reflection of his superficiality. These traits are perfectly in harmony with those supporting his dramatic function, thus contributing to firm unity of character.

These two kinds of characteristics complement each other in a very functional way. It is as if Euripides wishes to prepare us for Menelaus’ actions later by giving us glimpses of subtle traits, and then, when the time comes, confirms our initial impression by revealing those characteristics which are truly necessary to make his fulfilment of his dramatic function convincing. This makes his behaviour predictably in character and thus more convincing. The cumulative effect of complementary characteristics, both necessary and supra-necessary, serves to strengthen and emphasize them, making them very conspicuous. This may be the explanation of the highly critical views of Menelaus expressed since the time of Aristotle.

Conclusion

The foregoing inquiry has revealed that Menelaus’ function in the Orestes cannot be limited to the first half of the drama. If one accepts that Menelaus is ‘unnecessarily base’ because his refusal to help is irrelevant to the course of the action — the view which Else believes Aristotle had — what then is the purpose of his appearance in the drama? It is precisely his ponéra, his villainy, because that is the impulse that sets the second part of the drama going 31 (cf. pp. 23–24). If, on the other hand, Aristotle’s remark refers to Menelaus’ action in the whole drama, then the foregoing distinction between characteristics supporting Menelaus’ dramatic function and those merely descriptive of character may point the way to a solution. The latter traits may be regarded as ‘unnecessary’ in so far as they do not directly support his dramatic function. Obviously neither Euripides nor Aristotle made this distinction, but Aristotle probably intuitively sensed, as many scholars since, that Euripides over-motivated Menelaus’ role as villain in this drama. From the foregoing discussion it is clear that Aristotle’s intuition was soundly based, and that his criticism was justified, but for reasons other than those indicated by Else.
NOTES

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1. Thus argued by R. Pfeiffer, History of classical scholarship. From the beginnings to the end of the Hellenistic age, Oxford 1968,196.


6. Else (above, n.3)466.

7. Else (above, n.3)466-467.

8. Else (above, n.3)467 n.39.


10. The importance of family ties in the ancient world is emphasized by A.W.H. Adkins, Merit and responsibility. A study in Greek values, Oxford 1960,230: 'The agathos politeis is expected to help his friends and harm his enemies: thus his primary loyalties are overtly to a group smaller than the state, in the last resort to his own family'.

11. The moral obligation laid on Menelaus is emphasized repeated in the drama, cf. lines 244, 453, 642-3, 649-655, 720-1, 738 and 1057.


13. Menelaus is also regarded as an arbiter by H. Strohm, Euripides. Interpretationen zur dramatische Form, Munich 1957,40: 'Agamemmons Bruder sieht sich in die
Stellung eines Schiedsrichters hineingedrängt'. Lesky (above, n.12)461–462 has the same view, but puts the word 'judge' in inverted commas.

14. According to Burnett (above, n.4), 213 who regards the Orestes as 'a thoroughly disenchanted play', Pylades plays a detestable role by suggesting vengeance, thus turning 'one who knows how to love into one who knows how to hate'. Yet one must remember that Pylades stands to gain nothing from this plan, and runs the risk of perishing with his friends. This is also the view of M.L. West, Euripides. Orestes, Wiltshire 1987,33. Cf. too Willink (above, n.4), xlviii who points out that the fact that Aristophanes of Byzantium excepted Pylades from his negative judgement of the characters in the play 'may serve to remind us that even a highly educated Greek could admire without qualification a viciously vengeful "noble friend"'.

15. This is also the view of Arnott (above, n.9)24.


17. Menelaus' energetic reply to Tyndareus' indignant reaction because he spoke to Orestes (lines 481–490) should be seen as a justification of his own action rather than as an effort to defend Orestes. This is also the opinion of D.G. Harbsmeier, Die alten Menschen bei Euripides. Mit einem Anhang über Menelaus und Helena bei Euripides, Göttingen 1968,157. The view that Menelaus does not really exert himself for Orestes can be traced back to a scholiast, who describes Menelaus' words here as 'fallacious' (Scholia ap. line 371 in E.A. Schwartz, Scholia in Euripidem, Berlin 1887).

18. Tyndareus' warning that Menelaus should not try to help Orestes also implies that Menelaus must have been in a position to help somehow (lines 534–535, 622–628). The chorus also thought that Menelaus was able to help (cf. lines 680–681). In fact, the whole episode makes sense only if Menelaus was able to render help. This is also the view of Steidle (above, n.5)103–104. The assertion of C. Wolff ('Orestes', in: Euripides. A collection of critical essays, New Jersey 1968,136) that 'Menelaus seems to be as powerless as he claims (688ff.)' does therefore not seem to be in keeping with facts.

19. Willink (above, n.4)192 compares Menelaus' disingenuousness and associated 'hollow' tone in this speech with Euripides' characterization of Jason in the Medea, and remarks: 'Euripides knew how to make a character "false" without making him tell lies.'


22. Else (above, n.3)465 believes that Menelaus' pronēra consists chiefly of cowardice. Cf. too West (above, n.14)34: '... he lacks nerve, and when those about one expect blind unhesitating loyalty, lack of nerve is equated with lack of virtue.'

23. A scholiast sees a lust for power in the mere fact that Menelaus, on his return from Troy, does not go to his own kingdom in Sparta, but first comes to Argos, his deceased brother's kingdom (Schwartz [above, n.17]136).

24. Lines 536–537 are a duplication of lines 625–626, and are thus deleted by Brunck. Cf. Willink (above, n.4)172 for a justification of Brunck's deletion.
25. Steidle (above, n.5)104, Strohm (above, n.13)122 and Erbse (above, n.2)442 are of the opinion that it was due to Tyndareus that Menelaus changed his mind. Cf. too West (above, n.14)34: ‘Evidently he has taken account in his calculations of Tyndareos’ threat to exclude him from his Spartan kingdom if he supports Orestes...’. 


27. Willink (above, n.4)149 is of the opinion that Menelaus’ attitude here is ‘apparently sympathetic’ and that he displays ‘tolerant moderation’. Yet he has to admit: ‘Only perhaps in retrospect are we aware of the subtly “negative” touches (423/4, 425) in line with Menelaus’ later conduct.’

28. Cf. too line 1577 where Menelaus makes an ingenuous remark when his daughter’s life is at stake. It must, however, be admitted that these remarks appear in stichomythia where the speakers often aim to ‘score a point’ with their line of dialogue. Cf. E.R. Schwinge’s fundamental work in this regard, Die Verwendung der Stichomythie in den Dramen des Euripides, Heidelberg 1968.

29. Menelaus’ reaction would have been more acceptable if Euripides had followed the Homeric tradition according to which Aigisthus was mainly responsible for the murder (Od. 3.265–266, 303; 4.93–94). In the Orestes, however, Euripides follows Aeschylus according to whom Clytemnestra is to blame.

30. That Menelaus was excessively concerned with appearance — his own and other people’s — is evident from the start. The contrast between Orestes, who has been lying sick and unwashed on his couch for six days (lines 39–42), and Menelaus, with his beautiful cloak (lines 349–351) and his ‘golden locks whose pride about his shoulders fall’ (line 1532), must have been conspicuous. Cf. too Burnett (above, n.4)185 who describes Menelaus’ entry as follows: ‘A slight shock occurs at once, for the champion, when he enters, does not stride on like a competent Theseus, but minces forward, branded by costume and wig as a languishing and effete prince who has spent too long in softening Eastern climates.’

31. This is also the view of Willink (above, n.4)xlvii–xlviii, xxxii and 191, who sees the betrayal by Menelaus as one of the necessary premises for the later vengeance action.