Commentary, Iliad 4.127-147

This passage is notable for several reasons: its use of apostrophe, its two extended similes, and the instance of divine intervention. Each of these features have attracted much scholarly comment and debate, as outlined below. Moreover, these 21 lines reflect a crucial turning point in the storyline: the abortive end to an attempt to end the war, via Menelaus’ and Paris’ duel, and the definitive resolution of battle after the confused stasis following Aphrodite’s rescue of Paris. The conflict resumes as a direct result of the events narrated here, continuing unabated through the rest of the epic and straight until Troy’s destruction.

127: σέθεν: genitive of σύ —— λελάθοντο: reduplicated aorist middle of λανθάνω. ——
σέθεν Μενέλαε: Second person pronoun with Menelaus’ name in vocative case—among the few instances of apostrophe in the Iliad, in which the narrator directly addresses a character. The only other character addressed in such a way more than twice is Patroclus—eight times, all in Book 16. Menelaus is similarly addressed six other times in the epic, once near the end of this passage (4.146, τοῖοί τοι Μενέλαε) and at 7.104, 13.603, 17.679, and 17.702.

128: πρώτη: adverbial, “first (of all),” “foremost,” with a sense of “with greatest consequence/import” or perhaps simply temporal —— ἀγελείη: epithet of Athena, derived from ἀγω and either ληή, “booty,” or λαός, “troops” (Kirk 343-4); thus the alternate translations of
“spoiler” / “driver of spoil” and “war-leader.” Appears six times in the *Iliad* and three times in the *Odyssey*.

129: τοι > σύ, dative of advantage —— πρόσθε: adverbial, “before” or “in front of” —— βέλος: ultima scanned long, in what Kirk calls “an unusually violent… lengthening” (58) —— ἐχεπεῦκες: “pointed,” “sharp,” as is likely here, but can also mean “bitter.”

130-1: This simile is frequently interpreted through the lens of the mother-child aspect: Moulton lists 5.555, 8.271, 12.170, 12.435, and 16.265 as other “[m]ention[s] of the protection of the young” (101), while Kirk adds 16.7 as an example of a “tender mother-child” metaphor (344). Considering that Athena is defending Menelaus against an arrow she herself urged to be shot at him, however, this interpretation is somewhat problematic (Jones 98). More likely, the simile is intended to illustrate “the ease of the goddess’s movement” in redirecting the arrow (Kirk 344), or the poet simply did not intend the mother-child aspect to be extended beyond the simile’s very immediate circumstances.

130: τόσον: “just so much” —— ἐέργεν: an inherently vague verb, but here likely “moves” —— ὡς ὅτε: “as when.”

132-7: The exact meanings of the words used for Menelaus’ battle garments remain disputed, but would probably not mean much to a modern student anyway, given general ignorance about hand-to-hand warfare. Indeed, the poet himself may have been a little confused about the particulars: “The combination of corselet, war belt, and skin guard… is unusual, and may owe more to poetic elaboration (or even misunderstanding) than actual defense wear” (Martin 530). Understanding that Pandarus’s arrow is piercing successive layers of armor should be sufficient for the typical reader.
132: αὖτ': “next” — ἵθυνεν: Ionic/Epic form of ἑὐθύνω, “to straighten,” “to guide in a straight line,” and thus simply “to guide or direct.”

134: ἀρηρότι: perfect active participle of ἀραρίσκω — πικρὸς: like ἐχεπευκές, means both “sharp, pointed,” and “bitter”; hence “picric.”

135: διὰ: penult scanned long — ἐλήλατο: pluperfect passive of ἐλαύνω

136: ἰρήρειστο: pluperfect of ἐρείδω, likely middle (“it planted itself firmly”) though a passive translation (“it was planted firmly”) means more or less the same thing.

137: ἐφόρει ἔρυμα ... ἕρκος ἀκόντων: difficult and somewhat redundant to render in English. “... he wore [as] a safeguard, a wall against javelins” — ἀκόντων: objective genitive.


139: ἀκρότατον: not “high point,” but “extremity” (i.e., the outermost part, or surface); modifies χρῶα — ἐπέγραψε: from ἐπιγράφω, “mark the surface of,” hence the verb’s dual meanings of “graze” (as it is here) and “write upon.”

140: κελαινεφῆς: from κελαινός, “black, dark, murky” and νέφος, “cloud”; a word that, like most Greek color words, gives a great deal of latitude to translators. — ὀτειλῆς: Aristarchus believed this word to refer only to “a wound made by a thrust and not by a missile” and athetized the line on the basis of the resultant inconsistency, but most other scholars disagree (Kirk 345). With εἶξε, creates a rare spondaic line, in which the fifth foot is a spondee rather than a dactyl.

141-5: The significance of this simile is much debated. According to Moulton, “[t]he association with women and children in [both] similes”—referring both to the mother-and-child imagery in 4.130-1 and to the craftswomen here—“begins to complicate our conception of Menelaus: the connotations are usually incompatible in Homer with martial heroism […] leading us] to suspect
that Menelaus… will not be an effectual fighter of front-rank importance as the battle unfolds” (93). Kirk, however, disagrees completely, calling Moulton’s interpretation “surely wrong” and proposing instead that the simile is merely meant to reinforce “the unique value of Menelaos to the Achaians” by emphasizing “the desirability of the finished royal possession” (346). Jones suggests a similar interpretation (99). Moulton’s theory does seem like quite a stretch, although that advanced by Kirk and Jones—while quite interesting and also better reasoned—remains purely interpretive.

141: ἐλέφαντα: ivory, generally from Syria in this time period. Ivory is only mentioned in the Iliad on one other occasion, at 5.583, where it decorates a horse’s reins. —— φοίνικι: a reddish-purple dye made by the Phoenicians, harvested from shellfish in a highly labor-intensive process. Such exotic goods would have been very expensive and, often, legally reserved for royalty. Greek color sense differed greatly from our own, so φοίνικι can describe a multitude of different shades; Gladstone provides a list, as well as an interpretation of the present use of the word (465-6). —— µιήνη: gnomic aorist of µιαίνω, “stain,” typically with a sense of “defile” but here in a more literal sense. Kirk suggests that this “virtually unparalleled” use of the word is justified by the scenario the simile refers to, in which Menelaus’ thighs are bloodied and thus contaminated with an impure substance (Kirk 346).

142: Μηονις ή Κάιερα: modifying γυνῆ in previous line. Maeonia and Caria lie to the south of Troy, and their “eastern-ness” exoticizes the ornament even more. Leaf called this passage “the clearest evidence in Homer of a very early intercourse and commerce in works of art between Achaian Greece and Asia Minor” (105). —— παρήιον: here, “cheek-ornament” —— ἔμεναι: Epic infinitive of εἶμι.
143-4: πολέες... φορέειν: ἰππῆς agrees with πολέες and φορέειν modifies ἡρῆσαντο. As is typical in such enjambments, the content of the first line provides the framework that the content of the second line clarifies.

143: ἡρῆσαντο: from ἀράομαι. First and second syllables form a rare fifth-foot spondee.

144: ἄγαλμα: only occurrence in the Iliad.

146: τοῖοι τοῦ Μενέλαος: apostrophe; see note on 4.127. —— τοι > σύ —— μιάνθην: see note on 4.141.

147: εὐφυέες κνήμαι... σφυρά κάλ’: “His well-formed shins and beautiful ankles reinforce the high valuation of Menelaos and the outrage of defiling him” (Kirk 347). —— ὑπενερθε: adverbial, “underneath, beneath.”
Works Cited


