

## Characters in Homer

# NESTOR (rational)

**Overview** In the back and forth of battle, which consumes the narrative of Homer's *Iliad*, the old man Nestor regularly recurs to our attention. He is part of the fight, although he tends to remain on the margins of it, giving advice and proposing strategy, rather than actually competing—though he does some of that. Homer takes full advantage of this age rich character to open through him perspectives onto the past, for Nestor is constantly putting contemporary events in historical setting, and drawing (more or less) effective conclusions from them.

**Character** On the surface, Nestor is the classical garrulous old man, who has seen it all, loves to recount his past exploits, and is feeling a lot of arthritis in his knees. Sometimes he expatiates at length, on great battles in which he has turned the tide—he can still participate in a chariot clash-up—but sometimes he makes shrewd moral observations, and subsequently small scale practical suggestions that are useful to the commanders. While we retire our elderly generals, the Homeric Greeks kept what wisdom they could close to the battlefield, to make use of it.

**Participant** Agamemnon approaches Nestor, to regret that his limbs no longer obey him as they used to; 'the common lot of age is heavy upon thee.' To which Nestor replies (Book IV) that 'I too would wish to be as on the day when I slew noble Ereuthalion. But the gods in no wise grant men all things at once...Yet even so I will abide among the horsemen and urge them by counsel and words, for that is the right of elders.' By and large Nestor displays reason and good sense in his situation, and serves the Greeks as a useful reminder of their relative value and importance.

**Facilitator** Nestor often plays a role as trigger for 'administrative action,' his seniority and manner qualifying him as a priceless go-between. In Book IX his services are badly needed in the effort to get the sulking Achilles back into the battle—in which the Trojans are starting to get the upper hand. On the occasion in question, Nestor evaluates and praises the many gifts Agamemnon has assembled, to send to Achilles. He then takes command of the delegation to Achilles. 'Come therefore, let us speed forth picked men to go with all haste to the hut of Peleus' son Achilles... whomsoever I appoint, let them consent.'

**Strategist** In Book X the need for Achilles has become urgent, and Nestor picks up the call for all the Greek heroes to throw themselves into the convincing of Achilles. He also casts a useful politically savvy light on the Greeks' position: he predicts that with Achilles back in the battle Hector will begin to lose ground quickly: 'assuredly not all his designs will wise-counselling Zeus fulfil for Hector... nay methinks he (Hector) will contend with even more troubles if but Achilles turn back his heart from grievous anger.' The prediction gives a fresh motivation to the beleaguered Greeks, and of course proves true in the end.

**Expatiates** In Book XI Nestor meets Patroklos, dear friend and aide to Achilles, who rebuts the visit with the reminder that Achilles is a fearful man, and likely enough to blame even the blameless. Nestor replies that he too was once a dreadful warrior—in other words he knows what it's all about—and from there he goes on to explain how, in the midst of a cattle raid between 'the Eleians and ourselves... I slew Ilymoneus, the brave son of Hyperochos, a dweller in Elis, when I was driving the spoil.' Out of a long drawn out tale, which at times seems lost in its own meshes, Nestor extracts the point that taking the opposite side to him can be highly dangerous.

**Parallels** The blend of (former) true warrior, with senior citizen militarily participant, is not easy to match, though literature batters on the old man. Lear comes first to mind, with a blend of power and rage, with an increasingly focus-less mind; the power to love and hate boiling inside him. Hemingway's Santiago (in *The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952) shares with Nestor indomitability, long trained strength, lots of survival savvy; though where Nestor is chatty and reminiscent, Santiago is terse. Cortazar's *The Old Gringo* (1985) is an old dog ready to conclude his life around the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, in

which he believes, but he is open to new experience in a fashion different from Nestor's delight in the 'grand old times.'

### **Discussion questions**

Humor in Homer is a tricky issue, and scholars have fought over whether Homer has a sense of humor. Do you see anything about Nestor, the garrulous old warrior, that we might think funny?

Why is Nestor so useful as an intermediary in the war against Troy, and to win Achilles back to the battle? What relevant traits has Nestor, for doing this kind of work?

What is the attitude toward old age in Homer? Is it a universally lamented condition? Or does it contain silver linings?