# BRINGER OF SORROW: THE CHARACTERIZATION OF PENTHESILEA IN QUINTUS' *POSTHOMERICA* 1[1]

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## Resumen

Drawing on the narratological concept of characterization, this paper addresses the portrayal of Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, in Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, Book 1 (ca. 3 AD). This late antique epic is a 14-Book iteration in dactylic hexameter of the events that take place between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, such as the death of Achilles, the Trojan horse, and the sack of Troy. After the death of Hector in the *Iliad*, a series of surrogates appear in the *Posthomerica* to substitute him as the bulwark of Priam's army, all of which eventually die. In Book 1, the Amazonomachy, Penthesilea fills this temporary role, assuming the position of a protagonist who arrives to lift the Trojan spirits and lead them back into the fight, but who is then killed by Achilles in combat towards the end of the chapter. I aim to assess the strategies of the Quintean narrator in presenting the first protagonist of his epic, balancing the characterization of her beauty and her martial prowess as a female warrior. I also address the importance of Penthesilea, whose telling name can be interpreted as "the one who brings sorrow (to the people?)", for the narrative structure of the poem in three levels: a) in Book 1, the Amazonomachy; b) in Books 1-5, the Achilleid; and c) in Books 1-14, the poem as a whole.

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Today, I'll be talking to you about Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, as she is represented in Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, an epic poem dated to around the 3rd Century AD. There has been a recent surge of studies on this poem, but I don't know if all of you are familiar with it, so I'll give you a summary of it. In a nutshell, it's an epic poem in 14 Books that portrays, in a somewhat Homeric fashion, the events that take place between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. So we have an epic rendition, in dactylic hexameters, of events such as the arrival of Penthesilea and her Amazons, the death of Achilles with an arrow to his ankle, the Trojan horse ploy, and the sack of Troy. I'm working on this poem in my thesis – I'm writing a narratological commentary and a Portuguese translation of Books 1-3, the segment that deals with the final moments of Achilles in the war, culminating in his death.

I begin this talk by quoting Calum Maciver's 2012 book *Quintus Smyrnaeus' Posthomerica: Engaging Homer in Late Antiquity*: "The Posthomerica is long and episodic, very Homeric and un-Homeric, post Alexandrian and Alexandrian, anti-Callimachean but also Callimachean, given to extremes but at times subtle with its vocabulary, and obvious in its intertextuality and demanding of its reader." (Maciver, 2012, p. 24). This quotation is a fine illustration of the puzzling nature of the poem. It is, indeed, a complex piece, full of contrasts and dichotomies, of conflicting opposites, of conforming to rules, but also of breaking them. Just earlier this week, last Monday, I presented a paper in which I showed how the contrast between light and darkness pervades Quintus' poem, discussing how the aesthetic of *chiaroscuro* plays a pivotal role in his iteration - to give credit where it's due, I've had this idea of light and shadow after reading Gotias' chapter in Professor Bär's 2007 book *Quintus Smyrnaeus' Posthomerica: Engaging Homer in Late Antiquity* (Gotia, 2007). Today, I wish to emphasize specifically how the characterization of Penthesilea in Book 1 contributes to the aesthetic of contrast in Quintus' poem. I also argue



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that she may be seen as a doublet of Achilles, and a character who foreshadows his death in Book 3. In working with characterization, I'm using Professor van Emde Boas' book *Characterization in Ancient Greek Literature* as a reference (de Temmerman, van Emde Boas, 2018).

To begin our closer inspection of Quintus' text, I will bring you a short passage just to illustrate the matter of contrast in the poem, of light and darkness, and then I will move to Penthesilea specifically. So to show this aesthetic of contrast, and of light and shadow, I bring you the opening of the *Posthomerica*, its very first lines:

> Εὖθ' ὑπὸ Πηλείωνι δάμη θεοείκελος Ἕκτωρ
> καί ἑ πυρὴ κατέδαψε καὶ ὀστέα γαῖα κεκεύθει,
> δὴ τότε Τρῶες ἔμιμνον ἀνὰ Πριάμοιο πόληα
> δειδιότες μένος ἠὺ θρασύφρονος Αἰακίδαο·
>
> When godlike Hector had been vanquished by the son of Peleus, and the pyre had consumed him and the earth had covered his bones, the Trojan forces stayed inside the city of Priam terrified of the noble might of bold-hearted Achilles, grandson of Aeacus. (*Posthomerica*, 1.1-4)[2]

This excerpt is a fine demonstration of the contrasting Homeric and anti-Homeric characteristics of the poem. Anyone minimally familiar with epic conventions has probably noticed that something is missing from this overture: the invocation to the Muse, the specification of the poem's subject, the first-person presence of the poet, and so on. There are many ways to read into these lines - about which see Bär's 2007 Book's first chapter (Bär, 2007) -, but I wish to emphasize how this passage is both Homeric and non-Homeric at the same time. On the one hand, Quintus picks up where Homer left off, the ending of the *Iliad*, the point where Hector has died. He does so in Homeric fashion: with dactylic hexameters and Homeric diction. So in this way, by doing so, he is Homeric: he is evoking the end of the *Iliad* in Homeric fashion. On the other

[2] All quotations are from Loeb's 2018 edition (Hopkinson, 2018).



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hand, though, the narrator breaks the epic, and therefore, Homeric, conventions by going straight to the point and dispensing with the traditional opening. So, in this way, leaving the Muse out, as well as the subject of his song, and his own first-person presence, Quintus is breaking the Homeric model, and being anti-Homeric. This is, I argue, a fine representation of the conflicting opposites in his poetics, of being Homeric and un-Homeric at the same time.

Another point that I wish to emphasize in this opening is the contrasting imagery of light and shadow, which is not only present in this overture, but also permeates the *Posthomerica* as a whole: a contrast is established in line 2 between the fire (πυρὴ), with its burning luminescence, and the earth (γαῖα) that covers and darkens things, extinguishing light. So, in the same line, concomitantly, the poet presents us the contrasting imagery of light, represented by the fire, followed by the shadows, by the earth that darkens and covers Hector's body.

So the Quintean narrator begins by evoking the ending of the *Iliad* with a gloomy tone, as he takes us through the focalization of the Trojan side, showing how scared the Trojans are of Achilles because of his exploits in the war, and mainly because he has killed their champion, Hector. We are presented, thus, a somber picture, with the Trojan people cowering in fear behind the walls of Troy, scared of what will become of them. Amid this darkness, however, a new hope dawns, and a new champion emerges to substitute Hector as the savior of the Trojans: there comes Penthesilea. From the darkness, a new light shines forth and lifts their spirits, boosting their morale. The Trojans, once again, believe they can win this war, and their will to fight has been rekindled. In fact, the first simile that describes Penthesilea compares her to the brightness of the moon:

> Σὺν δέ οἱ ἄλλαι ἕποντο δυώδεκα, πᾶσαι ἀγαυαί,
> πᾶσαι ἐελδόμεναι πόλεμον καὶ ἀεικέα χάρμην,



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> αἵ οἱ δμωίδες ἔσκον ἀγακλειταί περ ἐοῦσαι·
> ἀλλ' ἄρα πασάων μέγ' ὑπείρεχε Πενθεσίλεια.
> Ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἀν' οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἐν ἄστρασι δῖα σελήνη
> ἐκπρέπει ἐν πάντεσσιν ἀριζήλη γεγαυῖα,
> αἰθέρος ἀμφιραγέντος ὑπὸ νεφέων ἐριδούπων,
> εὖτ' ἀνέμων εὕδῃσι μένος μέγα λάβρον ἀέντων·
> ὣς ἥ γ' ἐν πάσῃσι μετέπρεπεν ἐσσυμένῃσιν.
>
> She was attended by twelve maidens, all of them noble, all longing for the fight and for grim battle. Though highborn, they were her maidservants; but Penthesileia easily stood out among them. Just as when up in the broad heavens the moon goddess shines bright and clear when the sky breaks out from the thunder clouds and the great gusting winds die down: no less resplendent was Penthesileia among all those marching maidens. (*Posthomerica*, 1.33-41)

Penthesilea is thus compared to the moon which appears after heavy clouds have lifted. Just like the moon, she shines brighter than the stars, her companions, and illuminates the night sky, dissipating the shadows. Her presence fills the Trojan hearts with hope and joy, so they retrieve their pride and believe, once again, that they can fend off the Achaean advances against their city.

Penthesilea's arrival, however, is not devoid of a foreboding tone: as in all things Quintean, there's another side to the story, there needs to be contrast. Even within such a positive simile, filled with imageries of hope and light amidst the shadows, an element of uneasiness is still present. A pinch of negativity is added to this scene, and that is because of the name of the heroine itself: Penthesilea.

The exact scientific etymology of her name is debatable,[3] but two elements are unmistakably striking: the root *pénthes*, allomorph of *pénthos*, which means grief, sorrow, suffering; and the feminine agent suffix "-eia", the one who causes, the one who does, or brings. Consequently, we can translate

[3] I could find no solid historical linguistic discussions of Penthesilea's name, but investigations of the scientific etymology of Achilles also apply to the case of the Amazon leader, as their names are very similar in construction. See, for example, Nagy (1994).



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the name of Penthesilea as "the one who causes sorrow", or "the bringer of sorrow". So can you see the irony? The shining light that will save the Trojans is called "the bringer of sorrow"? Something doesn't feel quite right, does it? As I argue, this contrast is intentional on the Quintean narrator's part, and this contrast is part of the beauty of the *Posthomerica*.

We know, of course, that Quintus did not come up with Penthesilea's name, that it stems from a centuries-old tradition, and that it was always a part of the oral myth of the Trojan War. The way in which he plays with her name, however, is full of meaning, it is remarkable, and, I argue, very conscious. He is constantly, all throughout her appearance, associating the heroine with terms of suffering via wordplay, with nouns such as *pénthos*, and *ákhos*, as well as their verbal equivalents like *stenákho* and *ákhnumai*, among others. Let me bring you a quick example to illustrate this from her first appearance in the poem. This is Quintus' first mention of her:

> Τῶν οἵ γε μνησθέντες ἀνὰ πτολίεθρον ἔμιμνον·
> ἀμφὶ δ' ἄρά σφισι *πένθος* ἀνιηρὸν πεπότητο
> ὡς ἤδη στονόεντι καταιθομένης πυρὶ Τροίης.
> Καὶ τότε Θερμώδοντος ἀπ' εὐρυπόροιο ῥεέθρων
> ἦλυθε *Πενθεσίλεια* θεῶν ἐπιειμένη εἶδος,
> ἄμφω καὶ στονόεντος ἐελδομένη πολέμοιο
>
> Such were the memories that kept them inside the city; and bitter grief fluttered all around them, as if Troy were already being burned with grievous fire.
> And then from the streams of broad Thermodon, there arrived *Penthesileia*, clothed in godlike beauty. (*Posthomerica*, 1.15-20, emphasis added)

Again, we have the focalization of the Trojans, who are taken by "grief" (*pénthos*), as if their city were already burning (as we know it will, by the way). However, they believe, now they will be saved by Penthesilea, literally, the bringer of sorrow (*penthes-*). Isn't that such an ironic foreshadowing? Poor



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Trojans... They believe they will get salvation, that they will get light, but they will get nothing but sorrow, nothing but darkness.

And not only them, but so will Achilles, since, as we all know, he will also die in the war. In fact, Penthesilea can be seen as a doublet of Achilles, as a female version of him (Dowden, 1997, p. 99). Their names are a quasi-perfect mirror image of one another: "*Akhilleús*" is the one who brings or causes *ákhos*, "pain", "suffering". *Ákhos*, the central element in Achilles' name is a synonym for *pénthos*, the central element in Penthesileia's name, and –eus is the male version of –eia. So the names of both heroes are really closely connected. Achilles is a male synonym for Penthesilea and vice versa. And this connection is not limited to their names, of course.

Let me bring you the rest of the passage wherein the Quintean narrator introduces Penthesilea:

> Καὶ τότε Θερμώδοντος ἀπ' εὐρυπόροιο ῥεέθρων
> ἦλυθε Πενθεσίλεια θεῶν ἐπιειμένη εἶδος,
> ἄμφω καὶ στονόεντος ἐελδομένη πολέμοιο
> καὶ μέγ' ἀλευομένη στυγερὴν καὶ ἀεικέα φήμην
> μή τις ἐὸν κατὰ δῆμον ἐλεγχείῃσι χαλέψῃ
> ἀμφὶ κασιγνήτης, ἧς εἵνεκα πένθος ἄεξεν,
> Ἱππολύτης· τὴν γάρ ῥα κατέκτανε δουρὶ κραταιῷ,
> οὐ μὲν δή τι ἑκοῦσα, τιτυσκομένη δ' ἐλάφοιο·
> τοὔνεκ' ἄρα Τροίης ἐρικυδέος ἵκετο γαῖαν.
> πρὸς δ' ἔτι οἱ τόδε θυμὸς ἀρήιος ὁρμαίνεσκεν,
> ὄφρα καθηραμένη πέρι λύματα λυγρὰ φόνοιο
> σμερδαλέας θυέεσσιν Ἐριννύας ἱλάσσηται,
> αἵ οἱ ἀδελφειῆς κεχολωμέναι αὐτίχ' ἕποντο
> ἄφραστοι· κεῖναι γὰρ ἀεὶ περὶ ποσσὶν ἀλιτρῶν
> στρωφῶντ', οὐδέ πῃ ἔστι θεὰς ἀλιτόνθ' ὑπαλύξαι.
>
> And then from the streams of broad Thermodon there arrived Penthesileia, clothed in godlike beauty. She longed for grievous battle, but she wished also to flee a hateful slur on her reputation: her own people kept reproaching her for the death of her lamented sister Hippolyta, whom with her spear's force she had mistakenly killed as she took aim at a deer. That is why she came to the glorious land of Troy. More than this,



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> her warlike heart was anxious to be cleansed of the miserable pollution of murder and to appease with sacrifices the ghastly Furies, who were enraged at what she did to her sister and began to follow her, unmarked, from that moment. They are always to be found at the heels of the guilty; and for the guilty there is no escaping these goddesses. (Posthomerica, 1.18-32)

Through an external analepsis, we find out that poor Penthesilea is clearly not the happiest person on earth: she has brought sorrow upon all those around her, including herself. She has accidentally caused the death of a loved one, her sister, bringing sorrow to her family, who must mourn their daughter killed by their other daughter. Moreover, she has also brought sorrow for herself by becoming the killer of a relative, and is now consequently tormented by the Erynies. The parallel with the story of Achilles, who, as I argue, is the male version of Penthesilea, is irresistible: in the *Iliad*, Achilles also brings about the death of a loved one, Patroclus, because he decided to withdraw from the fighting. Because of his decision not to fight, Achilles ends up inadvertently causing the death of Patroclus. After Patroclus' death, the *Iliad*'s protagonist is overcome by sorrow, by *ákhos*, by *pénthos*. This is what leads him to get back into the fight in a killing frenzy that ultimately leads to the demise of Hector. In the same way, Penthesilea, after unintentionally killing a loved one, her sister, tormented by her death, decides to join in the fight to appease her sorrow, and to placate the Erynies, goddesses that symbolize her torment. Just like Achilles is fueled to fight by his sorrow after causing the death of Patroclus, Penthesilea moves on to fight fueled by the sorrow of killing her sister. After the death of Patroclus, Achilles will also bring much suffering to the Trojans, slaying many of them on the battlefield, and ultimately killing Hector. In the same manner, Penthesileia will also bring death and suffering to the Achaeans from the opposite side – she advances against the Argives in a killing frenzy in a bloody *aristeia*. The only difference is that her impulse shall be short-lived: Achilles will end up killing her quickly, putting an end to her carnage. And because of that,



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the Trojans will get what the name of their would-be savior promised: sorrow. The hope Penthesilea had brought them, thus, quickly turns into suffering.

But they are not the only ones who will be overtaken by sorrow as Penthesilea dies. Achilles will also pity her death. I am sure I am running out of time, so I will keep it short: Achilles falls in love with the (dead) maiden fair. As soon as her face is revealed, and her beauty shines forth (the imagery of her shining beauty is emphasized in the text), Achilles falls in love. This is a very important point for the Post-homeric Achilles: if you remember well the words of Thetis in the *Iliad*, she reprimands him for his mourning of Patroclus. She says "Go eat, go lay down with a woman". Well, now, in the *Posthomerica*, we are shown that Achilles has surmounted his sorrow for the loss of Patroclus – he has moved on, and he is capable of, once again, falling in love with a lady. Too bad, though, that she is now dead. Such a shame, huh? But, in any case, we are now presented not to the Homeric Achilles, but to the Post-Homeric Achilles, to the Quintean Achilles, the one that has moved past the *Iliad*, and can begin the new – and final – step of his heroic journey. In fact, the death of Penthesilea also foreshadows his own death in Book 3. Just like his female counterpart, Achilles' exploits will not last too long, as he will die soon in the poem.

So to wrap this up, I believe that we can understand Penthesilea as a figure that has many repercussions for the *Posthomericai* on a micro-, meso- and macro-levels. For the micro-level, she is introduced in order for the Trojans to resume the fighting – the Achaeans need worthy opponents for the fight to go on. She is introduced as a female martial hero, which is also an interesting and contrasting characteristic, and which is also a divergence from the Homeric standards, where women are usually presented in household activities. Penthesilea, however, will rise as the martial protagonist of Book 1, will have her aristeia, and will die.



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In a meso-level, she works as a doublet of Achilles, and foreshadows his death. Achilles is the protagonist of the first segment of the *Posthomerica*, which we can call the Achilleid, from Books 1-5 (he dies in 3, we have his funeral games in 4, and the judgment of the arms in 5). So Penthesilea is an important figure in order to deepen the characterization of this new, Post-homeric Achilles, who is now capable of falling in love once again.

On a macro-level, Penthesilea presents the narratees what they will get all around the poem: *pénthos* and *ákhos*, suffering and death, funerals, and a lot of mourning. No matter who we root for, we can rest assured they will die: Penthesileia will die, Memnon will die, Achilles will die, Eurypilos will die, Priam will die, and Troy will burn. The *Posthomerica* is a poem of mourning and a poem of suffering, so it is very becoming that its first protagonist is called "the bringer of sorrow": Quintus lets us know this from the start (Bouvier, 2005). To conclude, Penthesilea embodies the aesthetic of *chiaroscuro* that permeates the *Posthomerica* as a whole, as a poem of light and darkness, a poem of hope and suffering, a poem of life and death.

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