

From *The Odyssey* to *Itaca per sempre* to *Ithaca Forever*

Luigi Bonardi, (1927–2008), who wrote under the pseudonym of Luigi Malerba, was a significant late twentieth-century avant-garde Italian author and screenwriter. One of the co-founders of *Gruppo 63*, a literary movement which reacted against contemporary Italian aesthetics perceived to be based upon capitalism and consumerism, Malerba consciously challenged traditional points of view and literary tropes and sought innovative ways to talk about well-known topics. This is especially evident in *Itaca per sempre* (1997), one of his most popular novels in Italy. Malerba recasts the plot of Homer's *Odyssey*, with a twist, beginning with the hero's arrival on Ithaka. The novel centers on the tense and difficult reunion of Penelope and Ulysses (as Malerba refers to the hero) and ends with an unsatisfactory reunion with his father Laertes, dealings with the families of the suitors and reestablishment of a status quo on the island and in the ruling family.

*Itaca per sempre* is narrated in two rotating first-person voices. Both Penelope and Ulysses describe their feelings and perspectives on events as they evolve. Malerba's major innovation is the voice of Penelope whose feelings and internal motivations are a major focus of the novel. He challenges the traditional Homeric view of Ulysses' faithful and cunning wife by presenting a Penelope filled with bitter resentment caused by her husband's long absence, his failure to reveal to her his beggarly disguise (which she discerns), and his unwillingness to include her in his plans for revenge. Even after the deaths of the suitors, Penelope stubbornly refuses to accept Ulysses as her husband despite the pleas of Telemachus, the nurse Eurykleia and Ulysses himself. She even disparages his description of the marriage bed as convincing proof of identity.

Unlike Homer's confident returning hero, Malerba's Ulysses is filled with suspicion and

doubt concerning Penelope's loyalty, her attitude toward the suitors, and the motivation for her actions, such as her proposal for the contest of the bow. The tension between the two is the focus of the novel and nearly causes a disastrous break-up of the marriage. Ulysses' talent for deception and story-telling also lead Malerba to suggest that the hero, himself, authored the two Homeric poems in his retirement.

*Ithaka Forever*, Douglas Grant Heise's recent (2019) translation of Malerba's novel, promises to make this important adaptation of the *Odyssey* available to an English-language audience. In this English translation *Itaca per sempre* becomes a welcome addition to reception studies and to the Classics classroom.

This presentation has several goals (each of which to be addressed briefly): first, to use Heise's translation as an introduction to Malerba's novel; second, to illustrate from the original novel how Malerba weaves traditional Homeric language with innovative psychology and story-telling; third, to comment on Heise's efforts to capture in English the style and rhythm of Malerba's Italian; next, to place Malerba's Penelope in the context of recent scholarship, such as Richard Heitman's *Taking Her Seriously*, and recent retellings of her story, such as Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*; and, finally, to suggest ways to incorporate Malerba's work into an undergraduate Classics curriculum.

#### Bibliography

- Alessi, Serena. 2013. "La figura di Penelope in *Itaca per sempre* di Luigi Malerba" in *Aigne 3*: 32–42. Italian Special Edition, ed. by Alessia Risi
- Atwood, Margaret. 2005. *Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*. Edinburgh: Cannongate
- Capozzi, Rocco. 1997. "Itaca per sempre." *Rivista di studi italiani* XV (2): 216–22

Guardiani, F. 1997. "Itaca per sempre." *Rivista di studi italiani* XV (1): 288–91

Heitman, Richard. 2008. *Taking Her Seriously: Penelope and the Plot of Homer's Odyssey*. Ann

Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Malerba, Luigi. 1997. *Itaca per sempre*. Milan: Mondadori

\_\_\_\_\_. 2019. *Ithaca Forever*, trans. by Douglas Grant Heise. Berkeley: University of

California Press

Mesirca, Margherita. 2008. "Lo sguardo di Penelope. Anamorfosidel mito in *Itaca per sempre*"

*Quarderni del '900* 8:135–42.