

Anchoring πολύτλας Odysseus When *la diritta via era smarrita*: Husband, Father, War Veteran

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NOLAN’S and Homer’s *Odyssey* send a timelessly relevant message: Homer’s one of hope (in *varietate unitas* “united in diversity”) at the dawn of a panhellenic movement, and Nolan’s one of despair at the dusk of city-state particularism and its way of life. Nolan’s epic issues a stark warning that there are no winners in an all-out war (not even leaders, like Agamemnon or Odysseus), that those who play by the rules suffer heavily (Troy’s white knights dwindle), and that man is not an island (Ogygia will never be home), all part of Homer’s epic. The *Odyssey* is about the journey, not the destination—Nolan’s about a journey anchored in space and time, Homer’s about a timeless journey into the depth of the human psyche. Let us take a closer look at the man, his world, and our take.

Odysseus, “inventive” (ποικιλομήτης, πολύμητις, πολυμήχανος, πολύτροπος, πολύφρων), “enduring” (πολύτλας, ταλασίφρων, τλήμων), and “a sacker of cities” (πτολίπορθος) in the Homeric epic¹ is the same but different when portrayed by Matt Damon. Nolan’s Odysseus is fighting his own conscience—like a war veteran fighting PTSD—initially showing signs of repressed memory (aided by Calypso feeding him the lotus) and remaining restless to the very end (when Odysseus leaves Ithaca, hands the reins to Telemachus, and sails west to honour his fallen). Inspiration may have come from Shay’s well-known *Odysseus in America* (2002), a psychologist’s take on Homer’s Odysseus as a war veteran.

Nolan’s Odysseus is fair (he plucks his bow when hunting, even on Circe’s island), remorseful (especially when eventually relaying his feelings to Penelope and making peace with Athena), and responsible (he wants to save his companions, even if this means defying the gods). The shrewd, cunning, and often egoistic Homeric character glimpses through only occasionally, e.g. when he opts for uncharted waters instead of known supply routes home, makes his companions plug wax in their ears but leave him tied to the mast of the ship such that he can be the first to hear the Siren’s song and live to tell the tale, or shoots the cyclops in the eye after escaping the cave (yet Nolan immediately re-casts this one as revenge for his fallen).

Nolan’s Hollywood ending, of Odysseus and Penelope sailing into the sunset, forms a ring composition with their initial conversation when Penelope is pleading with Odysseus not to join Agamemnon and suggests taking his fastest ship and best crew to sail west into the sunset. Nolan’s Odysseus chooses exile to find peace of mind; the Odysseus of the *Posthomerica* is exiled for his socially disruptive actions (the slaughter of the suitors).² He may have been Nolan’s inspiration but he was not his mould. Homer’s cliffhanger ending, a *deus ex machina* by Athena disguised as Mentor (*Odyssey*, 24.548 Μέντορι εἰδομένη ἤμην δέμας ἥδ’ αὖδ’ ἦν “looking like Mentor both in appearance and in voice”), “invites us to think about closure and how stories end” and “about our own life as story”.³

¹Malcolm Willcock, “Traditional Epithets,” in *Antike Literatur in Neuer Deutung*, ed. Anton Bierl, Arbogast Schmitt, and Andreas Willi (Munich; Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2004), 52.

²Jonathan S. Burgess, “The Corpse of Odysseus,” *Yearbook of Ancient Greek Epic Online* 3, no. 1 (2019): 146 and 150, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24688487-00301006>; Egbert J. Bakker, “How to End the Odyssey,” *Trends in Classics* 12, no. 1 (2020): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1515/tc-2020-0004>.

³Joel Christensen, *The Many-Minded Man: The Odyssey, Psychology, and the Therapy of Epic* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2020), 275, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501752360>.

Nolan's Odysseus is a good leader, Homer's a troubled genius intent on his own power. When Nolan's Odysseus eventually makes peace with Athena, admitting his faults and his role in bringing down a way of life, the message hits at the heart of modern-day discourse—in war, there are only losers. Nolan's *Odyssey* does not celebrate the Trojan War. Rather, the Greeks, dressed in all black, are depicted as brutal baddies that break the honour code, deface the gods, are cold economists, shrewd strategists, and inhumane even in death (masterfully visualised by the army of the dead chasing Odysseus and his companions). Agamemnon—bearing a striking resemblance to *Star Wars*' evil Darth Vader—and his men, all in black, defeat the noble Trojans, who remain faceless behind their helmets, dressed in white on white horses. The colour contrast is an old cinematographic topos, think of classics like the skiing chase in *A View to Kill* (James Bond) or the knights in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. In the end, Odysseus' peace with Athena and voluntary exile to honour his fallen may not be a show of panhellenism,⁴ but the message that humanity and decency are more important than power and status echoes the unifying effect of Homer's epics—designed to capture his modern audience.⁵

Nolan's *Odyssey* is anchored in space and time (a nod to the archaeological layers of Troy VI and VIIa at Hisarliktepe)⁶ with direct reference to Bronze-Age city-state particularism (and Zeus's law of *xenia*, frequently repeated throughout), trade routes connecting city-states (Odysseus immediately debunks the Trojan expedition as Agamemnon's pretext to secure trade routes), and the “people from the sea” threatening their way of life (Penelope passionately tells Telemachus that “that world is gone”, referring to Bronze-Age socio-politics).⁷

Piracy and raiding, feared from the “people from the sea”, are not considered a normal part of life (Nolan's Odysseus apologises to Circe when she implies she acted out of fear of raping and raiding bands of men), perhaps not anymore. The nomadic lifestyle of pirates (*Odyssey*, 9.254 μαφιδίως ἀλλάγησθε οἶά τε ληιστῆρες ὑπεῖρ ἄλλα, “do you roam like pirates across the sea, senselessly”) had largely been replaced with settled life in the city-states (e.g. Thucydides, *Histories*, 1.5.1–2). Yet, Odysseus and his companions seem to slip, involuntarily, into that pirate lifestyle on their journey.⁸ Perhaps to highlight the involuntariness, Nolan removes the second Cretan Lie, i.e. when on his return to Ithaca Odysseus makes Eumaeus believe that he is the son of a wealthy Cretan and has become rich through looting (*Odyssey*, 17.424–441).⁹ The “people from the sea” remain faceless, elusive but the sole named threat—the era-ending crisis is manmade, according to Nolan.¹⁰

The earliest audience design is that which Nagy's¹¹ re-composition-in-performance model attributes to the Homeric bards.¹² In millennia of “unruly, uncanonical, and unpredictable series of encounters

⁴Joel Christensen, “Panhellenism,” in *The Cambridge Guide to Homer*, ed. Corinne Ondine Pache (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 190–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139225649>.

⁵Cf. Fernanda Ferreira, *Psycholinguistics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2025), 51, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrade/9780192886774.001.0001>.

⁶Joachim Latacz, *Troy and Homer: Towards a Solution of an Old Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199263080.001.0001>; Manfred Korfmann, “Von den Ruinen zur Landschaft Homers,” in *Antike Literatur in Neuer Deutung*, ed. Anton Bierl, Arbogast Schmitt, and Andreas Willi (Munich; Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2004), 3–32.

⁷E.g. Flemming Kaul, “Middle Bronze Age Long-Distance Exchange: Amber, Early Glass and Guest Friendship, *Xenia*,” in *Trade before Civilization: Long Distance Exchange and the Rise of Social Complexity*, ed. Johan Ling, Kristian Kristiansen, and Richard J. Chacon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 109–41, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009086547.008>.

⁸James Martin, “Bringing Evil to Others: A Reexamination of Piracy Through Homeric Relationships” (MA thesis, Brandeis University, 2017), 44.

⁹Jeffrey Emanuel, *Black Ships and Sea Raiders: The Late Bronze and Early Iron Age Context of Odysseus' Second Cretan Lie* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), chap. 3.

¹⁰Unlike A. Bernard Knapp and Sturt W. Manning, “Crisis in Context: The End of the Late Bronze Age in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 120, no. 1 (2016): 109, <https://doi.org/10.3764/aja.120.1.0099>.

¹¹Gregory Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Gregory Nagy, “Ellipsis in Homer,” in *Written Voices, Spoken Signs*, ed. Egbert Bakker and Ahuvia Kahane (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1997), 142–58.

¹²Chiara Bozzone, *Homer's Living Language: Formularity, Dialect, and Creativity in Oral-Traditional Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 161, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009067157.004>.

and responses” across “cultures and contexts”,¹³ the epics were retold, rewritten, and reused. Can we “get back to any originary meaning wholly free of subsequent accretions”?¹⁴ Nolan’s *Odyssey* follows the likes of Dante’s *Inferno: Canto I* (1321), Pound’s *Canto I* (1922), Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), and Petersen’s *Troy* (2004). Nolan’s recast of Sinon as an innocent young Ithacan, not a “deceitful trickster” (ἄπατήλιος, πολυμήχανος, ἡπεροπεύς), who plays on Odysseus’ conscience and his search for closure, aligns Nolan with Vergil’s *Aeneid* (2.57–144, 195; first century BCE),¹⁵ Triphiodorus’ *Sack of Troy* (220, 291; third/fourth century CE), and Quintus Smyrnaeus’ *Posthomerica* (fourth century CE).¹⁶

Yet what captivates Nolan’s audience? The oversized battle-of-Hastings knights (apparently the Laestrygonians) reflect his personal brand, the cyclops as the naïve, largely silent savage reflects Hollywood tropes, and the linearisation of storytelling, along with limiting the number of key characters, suits the medium—“skilled” Nestor (ἱππότης), “gracious” Alcinoos (μεγαλήτορος), and “aged” Laertes (γέρων), all deep thinkers, do not fit. However, subtly, the repetition of Troy’s night of demise visualises Odysseus’ mental spiralling; Penelope’s passionate “what about my experience, twenty years as queen”, Calypso’s healer approach, and Helen’s insistence on Telemachus’ knowing of Clytaemnestra’s actions push back against Hollywood’s image of women.

The Nolanesque effects attract attention.¹⁷ The plot holes, incongruities, and full use of his poetic licence challenge audiences to think¹⁸ back to Homer’s text,¹⁹ and invite them to co-construct, or re-compose, *their* epic, weaving together age-old inspiration, personal experience, and creative innovation. Nolan’s product placement is Homer’s *Odyssey*!

¹³Emily Greenwood, “Reception Studies: The Cultural Mobility of Classics,” *Daedalus* 145, no. 2 (2016): 42–43, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00374.

¹⁴Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.

¹⁵John P. Lynch, “Laocoön and Sinon: Virgil Aeneid 2.40–198,” *Greece & Rome* 27, no. 2 (1980): 177, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383500025857>.

¹⁶Emma Greensmith, *The Resurrection of Homer in Imperial Greek Epic: Quintus Smyrnaeus’ Posthomerica and the Poetics of Impersonation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 123, 322, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108907200>.

¹⁷Armand D’Angour, “Expert Comment: Is Christopher Nolan’s *Odyssey* Faithful to Homer?” *University of Oxford – News*, 20 July 2026, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2026-07-20-expert-comment-is-christopher-nolans-odyssey-faithful-to-homer>.

¹⁸James Uden, “Reception,” in *The Cambridge Critical Guide to Latin Literature*, ed. Christopher Whitton and Roy Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 439, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108363303.009>.

¹⁹Emily Wilson, “An Uncomplicated Man,” *London Review of Books*, 27 July 2026, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v48/n14/emily-wilson/an-uncomplicated-man>.

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