

“The newest song is always praised the most” (*Od.* 1, 351–352). But should it be?

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NOLAN’S *The Odyssey* is a marvellous achievement of filmmaking, and a moving one. This is a subjective and impressionistic judgement, yet one that can be analysed and argued for in a methodological discussion.

Much of the debate concerning the movie has revolved around divergences from the poem and the search for a criterion to distinguish depth from superficiality, art from marketing. The criterion most commonly advocated is to distinguish between changes that add layers of interpretation and changes that simply flatten the original complexity. I’d like to add another one: to distinguish between differences that stem from ignorance of the source and those that result from original reflections arising from the study of that source.

The premise is that it is impossible to remain faithful both to the text of the *Odyssey* and to the archaeological evidence from the end of the Mycenaean world. This is because the Homeric poems are inherently anachronistic in their aesthetics, combat techniques, and institutions. Moreover, anachronism characterises the ancients’ use of myth as a whole: for example, Athenian tragedy continuously overlaps the time of myth with the institutions and debates of fifth-century BC Athens. Of course, today we possess historical and archaeological tools unavailable to the Greeks, but an unfiltered reading of an ancient text is only the abstract ideal of even the most strenuous scholarly endeavour: it has never been the engine of art and literature.

Nolan pursues a dark portrayal of the West at its twilight, of war crimes, international law, and human ingenuity as both a triumph and a cause of self-destruction: the parallel with Nolan’s previous movie about Oppenheimer and the atomic bomb is evident. First criterion: is Nolan’s thesis banal? If so, I wouldn’t expect much disagreement over our contemporary conflicts. And, in fact, one should resist the temptation to consider any modernising divergence as inherently flattening or psychologically reassuring. Is it compatible with existing scholarship? More than it appears.

The Sea Peoples are the key to Nolan’s interpretation. The Sea Peoples, in the movie, are a constant, imminent threat that culminates in Penelope’s realisation, addressed to Odysseus himself: “You are the Sea Peoples.” Such identification conveys the Greeks’ responsibility in a more general turmoil that is threatening the Mediterranean and the Greeks themselves.

As the movie does not portray the fall of the Mycenaean kingdoms, it does not necessarily support the outdated historiographic thesis that the Sea Peoples destroyed the Mycenaean kingdoms: it only presupposes that the Achaeans themselves may at some point have been regarded as Sea Peoples (the Ahhiyawa in the Hittite archives).

Once Nolan establishes this thesis, everything else begins to shift. The complexity of Odysseus’s character is reduced along certain lines; Odysseus is driven by guilt rather than being both mischievous and proud, and he is definitely no longer unfaithful to Penelope with Circe and Calypso while simultaneously longing for home. But complexity is redirected along other lines: toward the responsibility of his *metis*.

As a consequence, Circe and Calypso are also redefined: the former becomes a far from attractive witch who uses magic to defend herself against the atrocities of war; the latter becomes a therapist who clouds Odysseus's memories until he is ready to overcome his trauma. There is also a cosmetic correction in this, but an understandable one: Odysseus's infidelity wouldn't have elicited much sympathy from a modern audience.

These criteria also apply to the aesthetics of the movie. Historiographical research is present and continuously bent to visual storytelling. Nolan explained that he drew inspiration for Agamemnon's black armour from the process of alloying bronze with gold and sulphur. Does a blackened bronze dagger provide archaeological justification for the black armour? No. But a Darth Vader-inspired appearance perfectly conveys a sense of inner hollowness based on hierarchy and appearance (the external spine on the back of the helmet). This is a modern creative choice directly inspired by research.

The most controversial casting choice, Lupita Nyong'o as Helen of Troy, is particularly interesting as an example of semantic casting. Since the most beautiful woman in the world is technically uncastable, Nolan's choice is not colour-blind and takes on multiple functions: Helen's beauty becomes an alien, incomparable beauty: a scarred beauty, with a scar that immediately conveys objectification, abuse, and enslavement. In the movie, Menelaus says "the face that launched a thousand ships" (from Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*), but in reality he is telling the audience: "this is also a face to launch a thousand ships for."

Nolan's Menelaus proceeds with cruel irony: he points to Helen's half-scarred face and says, "Maybe now just five hundred," which may elaborate on Marlowe's ambiguity: does Faust encounter the image of Helen in astonishment or disappointment?

Polyphemus, a paradigmatic character in the Greek discourse on the nature of civilisation, does not speak to humans this time: this reduces Odysseus's showcase of cleverness, but draws on the modern awareness that humans are not the highest form of intelligence possible. "Do you talk to ants?" is a common analogy used to explain the Fermi paradox: if the universe is immense, why have aliens not made contact? Because we may be the ants.

Not all of Nolan's divergences are equally convincing. The quite conventional brooch that replaces the bed-test is one of them: Penelope's wit in asking Odysseus about the secret of their marriage bed displays her *metis* as a parallel to that of Odysseus, while its omission represents a lost opportunity for Nolan's signature play with timelines.

If this change makes Odysseus less rooted in Ithaca, the gain seems less compelling. Following this line, the further journeys of Odysseus after his return, a traditional element already hinted at in *Od.* 11, 119–137, now involve Penelope leaving Ithaca with Odysseus, which is not prompted by the necessities of adaptation (the *Odyssey* ends with Ithaca) but by a necessity circularly created by Nolan himself (Odysseus's guilt plus his new marital fidelity). However, Nolan admirably declared that he felt free with the ending, as the last book of the *Odyssey* was regarded even by ancient scholars as a later addition.

Unlike Homer's massacre of the suitors and the unfaithful maids, Nolan's partial pardon seems more a concession to modern sensibilities than an interpretative gain.

And here we can return to the word 'moving' with which I began. I am not referring to Penelope, the Argo, or the Sirens. What is moving is that today we can invest \$250 million, the most advanced technology at our disposal, the most prestigious cast of the moment, a soundtrack composed by a three-time Oscar winner featuring the lyre and the aulos, and, above all, so much intellectual energy, in what continues to prove itself an endless engine of inspiration, ultimately one of the greatest stories ever told. Those who notice deviations should be glad to have access to the text, and to have other levels of interpretation at their disposal. Thanks to *The Odyssey*, many will also read the original. And so the circle is complete.

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