

Why the Hate? Thoughts on Nolan's *Odyssey*

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AT the time of writing this article, Nolan's *Odyssey* has grossed 1.475 billion US dollars worldwide. Judging by the amount of press coverage and the level of popular interest, the *Odyssey* is now a global phenomenon. I organized a viewing for my whole department in a local cinema and a lecture on the film by the prominent writer, critic, and *Odyssey* translator, Daniel Mendelsohn.¹ My department will be participating in the "Odyssey Day" inaugurated by Felson and Mendelsohn.² Our enrolments for Intro Greek have jumped from 12 (last year) to 20. This movie is the best thing that has happened to Classics in decades. The critical reception has been almost unanimously favourable.³ Sales of various translations of Homer's *Odyssey* are booming, especially Emily Wilson's, which is currently the second bestselling book in the US.⁴ So why do prominent Classicists hate the film so much?⁵ Wilson in particular authored a review so scathing, news outlets across the world reported on it.⁶ She rightly points out that Nolan's film is an adaptation and lists famous instances of radical transformations of Homer's *Odyssey*, but then proceeds to point out all the ways in which Nolan's 3-hour movie departs from the 12.110 line epic poem. I wish I had come up with the comment "now she knows how we feel about her translation", but at least I can quote it here. Those who read Homer in the original know that Wilson's translation simplifies and truncates, omitting roughly one-third of Homer's text.⁷

Reviews such as Wilson's, brimming with passages carefully calibrated for virality, accomplish two goals effectively: increase of one's own *kleos* and gatekeeping. Other, more measured, reviews by prominent Classicists likewise dwell on all the ways Nolan departed from the source material. Maybe we love Homer's poem too much to bear anyone omitting an episode that is particularly dear to us. Nevertheless, I cannot escape the impression that a question underlying all this protesting boils down to "who owns Homer"? Who has the right to adapt and transform the *Odyssey*? When a Classicist like Madeline Miller does it in the form of a novel, accolades follow, but when a Hollywood screenwriter and director does it to the tune of a \$250,000,000 budget, we roast him.

So let me answer my own questions. Homer belongs to all his readers. Whoever engages with the text of the *Odyssey*, either in the original or in translation, thinks deeply about it, and is inspired by it to respond with their own creative work is entitled to do it. Going into the cinema, I was curious to see what Nolan did with the characters and how he understood the epic. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Euripides' *Helen*, and Vergil's *Aeneid* all take a cue from Homer, but what makes these texts rich and fascinating are their departures from the source material. Their creative adaptations tackle issues central to their own cultures and times. So does Nolan's. We should ask this question of any adaptation: Why now? On that measure,

¹In my opinion, the best translation of the *Odyssey* into English to date: Daniel Mendelsohn, Homer, *The Odyssey*, Translated, with an Introduction and Notes, The University of Chicago Press 2025.

²<https://classicalstudies.org/outreach/letter-community-odyssey-day>

³https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_odyssey_2026: 94% is the aggregate of critical reviews, 97% the aggregate of audience reviews, a rare instance of strong positive alignment.

⁴<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/newsbrief/index.html?record=5971>

⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2026/aug/03/the-odyssey-book-sales>

⁶<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v48/n14/emily-wilson/an-uncomplicated-man>. I have not read her follow-up in the Atlantic and assume that it offers yet more "sick burns".

⁷See <https://kirkcenter.org/reviews/a-coat-of-varnish/> and Daniel Mendelsohn, Homer, *The Odyssey*, Translated, with an Introduction and Notes, The University of Chicago Press 2025, 45–48.

Nolan's devastatingly timely reading of the *Odyssey* is a triumph. "Songs will be all they have to remember those of us who could write" applies equally well to the present AI threat to human creativity as to the Dark Ages. Don't we all grapple with the notion that we are experiencing an end of an era, and that the world is becoming a darker, more hostile place? How are we treating our own unhoused, or the refugees from war-torn countries? With no Phaeacians left in our world, why do we expect Nolan to depict them in his adaptation?

Yes, Nolan's Odysseus resembles his other male protagonists insofar as he is tortured by the memory of some personal failing, but Nolan was not a translator of Homer. His work is one of creative reception, so rather than provide a laundry list of all the ways he departs from the source text, a more rewarding approach to his film is to ask who it was that Nolan saw in the protagonist of the *Odyssey*. Can we glimpse vestiges of Nolan's Odysseus in Homer's text? Where does the regret come from?

At the court of the civilized and hospitable Phaeacians, Odysseus listens to the local bard, Demodocus, who sings about an obscure episode from the Trojan War, a song about the affair of Ares and Aphrodite, and, finally, at Odysseus' own request, the song about the Trojan Horse. No one knows Odysseus' identity yet, and the hero probably wants to create the best possible circumstances for the dramatic reveal of his name. And yet, every time he hears Demodocus singing about Troy, he cries. Perhaps he was surprised and reminded of his past glory days when he heard the song about his own quarrel with Achilles. That might explain his tears. But why is he crying at the song he requested himself, the one about his own greatest trick? Even though Homer does not tell us why, he does offer a striking simile depicting Odysseus' reaction to the story (8.521–531, Tr. Daniel Mendelsohn):

But Odysseus

*Dissolved into tears that drenched the cheeks beneath his lids.
Just as a woman would weep while embracing a beloved husband
Who, there before his city and his people, has fallen
Defending his town and his children from the day that will show no pity –
When she sees him dying there, grasping his final breath,
She collapses on top of him, shrieking loudly, while behind her
The enemy thrashes her back and her shoulders with their spears,
Leading her into bondage to endure hard labor and grief,
And a heart-wrenching anguish causes her cheeks to waste away –
That's how those wrenching tears streamed from under Odysseus's brows.*

Odysseus listens to the story about the brutal sack of Troy, where he "faced his most awful battle" (tr. Mendelsohn) or "he won at last, through dreadful violence" (tr. Wilson). It has long been noted that this elaborate simile suggests that the hero, rather than exult in his own *kleos*, cries in despair because he feels compassion for his victims. To be able to put oneself into the role of one's victim means to experience empathy and even regret for one's own actions. Odysseus' reaction to the tale about the Trojan Horse, combined with the many references to the wrath of the gods and their punishments of Greek leaders in the stories Nestor and Menelaus tell Telemachus, are suggestive of a narrative of (war)crime and punishment, like the one Aeschylus presents in his *Agamemnon*. As another friend pointed out, Nolan clearly read the *Agamemnon*, for it is Clytemnestra, not Aegisthus, who kills Agamemnon in his film. In that play, Clytemnestra suspects and the messenger confirms that the sack of Troy involved brutal acts of carnage and sacrilege. We call such actions war crimes. "Obliterated are their altars and the sacred places of the gods, destroyed the entire race of their land." (*Agamemnon* 528–529).

Nolan has given us an Odysseus and an *Odyssey* "for our modern times" (Wilson's *Odyssey*, line 10), one without humour, refinement, hospitality, and manners. What makes Nolan's Odysseus a hero for the present moment is that he ultimately stopped eating the lotus flower. We, people of the Plastic Age, are still feasting on it.