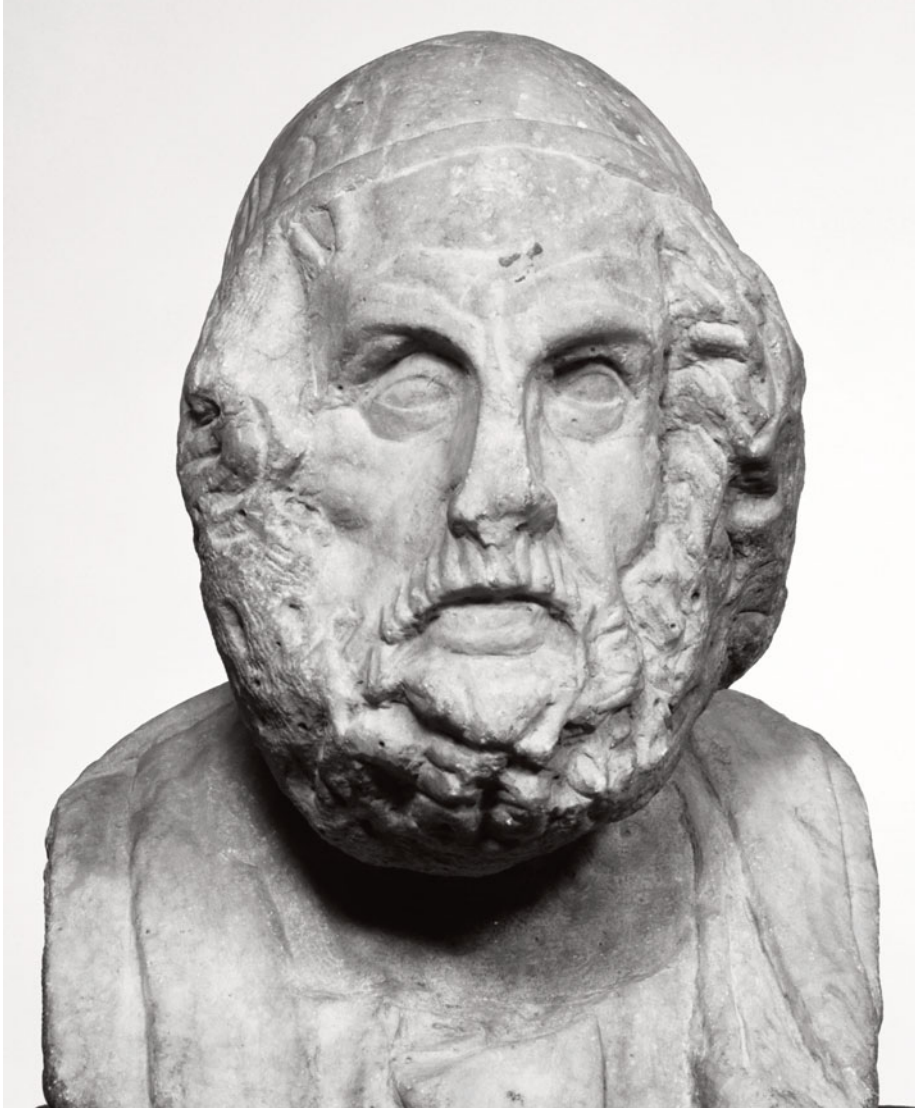


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*A herm portrait of Homer depicted blind and made in the 20th century.*

## ODYSSEUS: AUTHOR OF THE *ODYSSEY*

*Odysseus, argues **Thomas W. Hodgkinson**, was not only a hero but the poet behind the name 'Homer' too*

One hundred and eight men are competing for a woman. It's an archery contest. One by one, they fail: they aren't strong enough even to string the great bow of her husband, a man who is missing, presumed dead. In reality, of course, Odysseus is secretly among them, disguised as an old beggar. He asks if he can have a go, and, reluctantly, they agree.

*And Odysseus strung the bow easily,  
With as little effort as a poet strings his lyre,  
Looping the soft sheep's gut at either end.  
Then, with his right hand, he tested the string,  
And it sang out with the note of a swallow*

(*Odyssey* 21.406–11).

It's one of the great similes in any literature. At this climactic moment of the *Odyssey*, the hero cocks, as it were, the gun that he will use to massacre his enemies, and the poet compares his action to the quintessential act of peace, the preparation of a musical instrument to amuse an audience. On one level, it's brilliantly descriptive of Odysseus' heroic ease. While his enemies couldn't

string the bow, he does so without effort. But at the same time, there's more going on here. The question is: how much more?

No one knows who wrote the *Odyssey*, and 'wrote' is in any case the wrong word for a work of oral poetry, which was developed over the centuries through a form of collective creativity: via recitation and elaboration by different poets in a society that had lost the skill of writing. There may have been an originator poet. There was most probably a finalizer poet, who was to the *Odysseus* poem as the Mesopotamian scholar Sîn-lēqi-unninni was to the older *Gilgamesh* poem, expanding it and honing it into something like the director's cut with which we're familiar.

What we know is that this is a poem steeped in, and in some sense about, poetry. It begins and ends in *Odysseus'* palace at Ithaca, which is presented as a place of music and dancing. The first thing of any significance said by a human character is *Odysseus'* son, Telemachus, observing that the so-called suitors – the Bullingdon louts who have invaded his house – are preoccupied with poetry. They are sitting around listening to Phemius, the palace poet, who is singing of the return of the Greeks from the Trojan War. Immediately, we wonder why Phemius picked this theme, which inevitably distresses *Odysseus'* wife, Penelope. Worse, it seems he often does so, since she says it 'always' saddens her to hear it.

Phemius' theme is also the theme of the *Odyssey*. The finalizer poet – let's call him Homer – uses the device to materialize like a ghost within the action (while singing of the return of the Greeks, Phemius *is* Homer). In the process, he turns us, his audience, into the unsuitable suitors. There's a joke there, as there is in the remark that he performs 'reluctantly'.

Phemius will return, but before he does, we meet another poet, Demodocus. At the court of the Phaeacians, where *Odysseus* lands up, the blind palace poet also sings

about Troy, but he goes even further. He happens to sing of a quarrel between Achilles and *Odysseus*, having no idea that *Odysseus* is in the audience, incognito. Hearing him, the hero weeps, covering his face with his cloak so that no one will see.

*Whenever the godlike poet paused,  
Odysseus wiped his tears and  
uncovered his head  
And made an offering to the gods  
from his two-handled cup.  
But when the poet began again, and  
the Phaeacian noblemen  
Urged him to continue with his  
entrancing story,  
Again Odysseus covered his head  
and wept*

(*Odyssey* 8.87–92).

According to this literary GIF of the paradoxical relationship between artist and audience, the emotion evoked by the artist simultaneously identifies you and strips you of your identity. The blind singer picks up his lyre and the silent listener covers his face and eyes, whose vision is already obscured by tears. When the first action is reversed, the second action is reversed. This intimate thread between creator and consumer is like that between a puppet and puppeteer.

*Odysseus* comments that Demodocus sings as if he had been at Troy – as if, that is, he were *Odysseus* himself. It's an instance of the typically Homeric device of paired similes that are loosely the inverse of each other. A warrior, comparing a poet to a warrior, reverses the simile we began with, when a poet compared a warrior to a poet.

The link continues, with *Odysseus* as puppeteer. After telling Demodocus he admires him more than any man, he asks him to sing of the Wooden Horse and how *Odysseus* used it to sack Troy. In effect, he says: 'let's talk about me'. Demodocus sings and *Odysseus* weeps. How does he weep? Like a woman cradling her husband, who has fought to defend his city and

been fatally wounded. That's to say, he weeps like a character in the story just told: a woman who has been widowed by *Odysseus* himself.

What Homer is presenting us with here is a corridor of mirrors, a *mise en abyme* in which the faces of poet and warrior alternate. Noticing the warrior weeping, the Phaeacian king calls a halt, instead asking *Odysseus* to tell them who he is, becoming the storyteller instead of Demodocus. *Odysseus* obliges, after a final tribute to the poet, in which he remarks that life doesn't get better than listening to such extraordinary poetry.

Which brings us to the salient moment when *Odysseus* literally becomes the author of his own story. The 24 books of the *Odyssey* are not autobiography, or not straightforwardly. 'Tell me, Muse, about the man', the poem begins (ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, *Odyssey* 1.1), drawing an instant distinction between the poet (me) and his subject (man). Yet the fact is, most of the *Odyssey's* best-known episodes – Cyclops, Circe, Scylla, etc – are narrated by *Odysseus* himself.

He isn't telling his story in verse. Yet he is, because he speaks in the metre of the poem. He's not accompanying his story with a lyre. Yet equally he is, because in books 9, 10 and 11, he's being portrayed by whoever is performing the poem. The *Odyssey* is not a book, or it didn't develop as one. It's a verse drama, an improvisatory one-man show.

It is Homer improvising *Odysseus*, who is improvising his memoirs. And when the hero pauses, as Demodocus did and Homer would have done, the Phaeacian king observes that he has told his story as skilfully as a poet, narrating 'both the sufferings of the Greeks in general, and his own in particular'. That latter phrase (πάντων τ' Ἀργείων σέο τ' αὐτοῦ κήδεα λυγρὰ, *Odyssey* 11.369) serves as a thumbnail diptych of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves. As a storyteller, *Odysseus* displays the talent of Homer.

*‘So I’m a crank,  
but a crank with a degree  
of self-awareness.  
I know I won’t persuade  
many of my theory,  
or not in full.’*

At this point, though, I need to pause, too. I must wipe my tears and uncover my head. I’ve written a novel and a screenplay, both based on the idea that the *Odyssey’s* originator poet was Odysseus himself. So I’m a crank, but a crank with a degree of self-awareness. I know I won’t persuade many of my theory, or not in full.

So I won’t make reference to the ancient tradition that the *Odyssey* was composed, if not by Odysseus, then by one of his descendants: an intriguing idea that would explain the poem’s consistently propagandist tone, which seems designed to defend its protagonist against the charge of responsibility for any of the many misfortunes that befall him and his men.

I won’t note that the first words of the poem are ‘man’ and ‘me’, and that, notwithstanding the misaligned cases, that proximity creates an association between poet and protagonist from the get-go. I won’t observe that the *Gilgamesh* poem, whose influence on the *Odyssey* has been documented, provides a precedent by naming Gilgamesh as its author. I won’t draw attention to the scene in book 9 of the *Iliad* when Odysseus reaches the tent of Achilles to find the murderous truant passing his time playing a lyre and singing of the deeds of great men – a fine paradigm, delivered casually, of a warrior-king with the skill and inclination to perform self-referential poetry.

I know it’s tantamount to an admission of pure derangement to speak of messages concealed within the text. So I won’t mention that, at what is structurally the hinge-point of

the story, when the returning hero sets foot on his native Ithaca after 20 years away, the word ‘Homer’ (Ὅμηρος) is embedded in the syllables. Athena shrouds the landscape in mist, so he can’t recognize where he is, and in his despair, he groans and strikes his thigh (πεπλήγετο μηρῶ, *Odyssey* 13.198).

I won’t say any of these things – only that the *Odyssey* is a story of concealment, studded with moments of self-revelation that link hero and poet. More tentatively, I will speculate that these amplified, ambiguous moments bear traces of an earlier version of the *Odyssey*, which may have identified Odysseus as the originator poet.

One was the arrival on the beach. Another comes when, with the swineherd, he reaches the palace, and recognizes it not by sight but from the sounds of Phemius performing in the hall. Or again, when he enters, the overbearing Antinous asks why the swineherd has dragged in a beggar off the street. The swineherd replies indignantly:

*Who goes out of his way  
To invite a stranger into his house  
Unless he happens to have a special  
skill,  
Like a prophet, say, or a doctor or  
carpenter,  
Or a poet who enchants with his  
song?*

(*Odyssey* 17.382–85)



*This bronze statuette of a lyre player with a companion is thought to have been made on Crete in the seventh century BC.*



In an exchange that drips with irony, we're conscious that Odysseus, who alone knows what the future holds, is a kind of prophet. The man who has come to cure the house of its plague of suitors is also like a doctor (the Greek phrase is ἱπτήρα κακῶν, which could as well refer to an exorcist as a physician). He is a carpenter, too, who conceived the Wooden Horse, whittled a stake to blind the Cyclops, made a raft to escape Calypso and even rebuilt his bed and bedroom during an extensive palace refurbishment.

If the first three elements of our ascending tetracolon have formed inadvertently fitting descriptions of Odysseus, what should we expect from the fourth? Is Odysseus, then, a 'poet who enchants with his song'? By now we have our answer ready. He is, in a way that is more than metaphorical. He is a poet, maybe *the* poet.

This insinuation never radiates more seductively than at the most crucial moment of self-revelation. We've arrived back at the stringing of the bow. The suitors have tried and failed. The swineherd has placed the bow in the hands of the beggar, with the same ceremony as, elsewhere, a lyre is placed in the hands of Phemius. With a now familiar irony, the beggar tests if the bow has contracted woodworm, and one of the suitors observes that he handles it as confidently as a man who has a similar bow at home.

This scene isn't only being recited. It's being performed. When the beggar tests the bow, the performer may have made an equivalent gesture with his lyre. While comparing the stringing of the bow with the stringing of a lyre, he may have mimicked that movement, looping invisible sheep's gut around a tuning key. When he describes the hero plucking the string, which sings out with the note of a swallow, he would surely have done likewise, selecting the tightest string, and making it sing. I like to imagine that, when the hero aims an arrow at his most arrogant antagonist, the suitor Antinous, the performer might have adjusted his

grip on his instrument, and aimed it at his audience like a bow.

And so on, through the scene of slaughter. In a flourish that feels post-modernist three millennia too soon, the finale of the *Odyssey* is set in the kind of room in which the poem would have been performed. So the effect would have been the same as if, at the cinema, you saw a film that ended with the massacre of a cinema audience.

I'm aware of some of the objections to my argument. Among them is the conviction that the Mycenaean Greeks didn't quite have our modern concept of authorship, seeing poetry less as an achievement than as a gift from god. Maybe. But the attribution, even if later, of the *Odyssey* to a poet by the name of Homer seems like counter-evidence. And if we sift the bloodbath in the hall, there's more. Phemius begs Odysseus for mercy on the grounds that he is 'self-taught'. The Greek word is αὐτοδίδακτος, a Homeric hapax whose exact meaning in the context is obscure. But what seems clear is that the poet is taking some credit for the quality of his work, maybe staking a claim for its originality.

Ultimately, Odysseus spares him. Not only that, he then deploys him as a means of controlling the story about what has happened in the palace. He tells him to strike up music. The survivors dance, celebrating the defeat of the suitors. As Odysseus intended, passers-by hearing the sound assume this is the wedding feast for Penelope, who has agreed to remarry. In a sense, they're right.

After some resistance, Penelope tearfully accepts that Odysseus is her husband. Two decades apart end in emotional reunion.

*And dawn would have found them still weeping*

*If grey-eyed Athena hadn't had other ideas.*

*She held back the night at the world's edges*

*And restrained the golden sun in the sea.*

(*Odyssey* 23.241–44)

More magic. What follows occurs within a strange supernatural time pocket: while Athena holds back the sun, Odysseus and Penelope go to bed and make the most of an infinite night, after which, fittingly for the end of a poem about storytelling, they swap stories. Like an oral poet, Odysseus retells tales he has told before. A story whose multiple authorship exists out of time, and which at its climactic moment compares its hero to a poetic storyteller, ends with him telling stories while folded into a temporal nowhere that sees the normal laws of physics suspended.

There's no consensus about a historical Odysseus. Even if there were, we couldn't link him to the poem we have. Yet the *Odyssey* is a work haunted by ghosts – not only the literal ghosts of the Underworld, but also the ghosts of past and future versions of the hero, and of past and future versions of the text he lives in. Among these I detect a draft that may, even if only as a literary conceit, have named him as its author.

Perhaps if we imagine Odysseus as the originator poet, it makes sense to imagine Homer, the finalizer poet, suppressing the attribution. He was happy to sing Odysseus' praises, but not to give him credit for his masterpiece.

***'A story whose multiple authorship exists out of time, and which at its climactic moment compares its hero to a poetic storyteller, ends with him telling stories while folded into a temporal nowhere that sees the normal laws of physics suspended.'***