A "NECESSARY END"*?

Watching Christopher Nolan's Odyssey prompts **JAN PARKER** to question Homer's own ending

**Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act 2, Scene 2*



"He's left out all the delicious bits," wailed my friend after watching Christopher Nolan's summer blockbuster. Responses from Homer lovers, ranging from the judicious to the thunderous, proceeded to take over the media and airwaves.

Regardless of the scenes and themes a filmmaker chooses to feature or exclude, it is significant to consider what such a modern version sees as a necessary closure. What is it that we're thought to *need* upon leaving the theatre or cinema? I ask because final scenes often highlight a seemingly disturbing lack of closure in the original texts.

As a case in point, I was fascinated to hear that, while playing Electra in Sophocles' tragedy, actress Kristin Scott Thomas found it impossible to leave the stage after her final lines but each night had to invent some ritual act, some final gesture. That intensified as it demonstrated the great hole, a felt absence, at the end of Sophocles' play. The final Chorus lines are, 'Today has brought culminating closure, *telos*, for the line of Atreus,' which seems almost mockingly hollow for an Electra who has had every action and role taken away from her in the course of the play.

This brings me back to Nolan's spectacular film. We end – spoilers ahead – with Telemachus crowned King of Ithaca, and the reunited Penelope and Odysseus sailing away into the sunset. Literally. To the West – to settle with the ghosts of all the men he lost in that adventure-packed return from Troy.

For Nolan's Odysseus, like Pasolini's in *The Return*, is a late-developing, traumatised veteran of Troy. Whereas in Homer he stayed seven years with Calypso reluctantly making love to her nightly, here, he is fed lotus in order to recover and to be resilient enough to deal with traumatic memory. His consciousness of his men's deaths is also late-developing. While in Virgil's epic, Aeneas grieves over his, and all, men's deaths – *sunt lacrimae rerum* – in Homer, Odysseus is more inclined to be irritated by their stupidity and cupidity (over the bag of winds, see *Odyssey* Book 10.45, over eating the Sun God's cattle, see 12.372; though he describes the deaths of six of his men caught up by Scylla as the most piteous thing he saw on all his adventures in 12.258–9).

It is late-developing also schematically: the film may start with the Trojan Horse emerging from quasi-archaeological layers, and follow Odysseus through his various adventures, but only with the extraordinary Calypso incident are we presented with a narrative of traumatic damage. And only at the end do we have a visualisation, hinted at in flashbacks but here dramatized, of the consequences of Odysseus' trick of the Trojan Horse: the bloody, sacrilegious sack, despoliation and razing of Troy.

So, whereas Pasolini's film *The Return* starts with an Odysseus traumatised by 'so much blood', Nolan's film finishes with sections of the lost epic, *Iliupersis* (The Sack of Troy), graphically reimagined by Virgil from the Trojan Aeneas' point of view in *Aeneid* Book 2.

In my 2021 book, *The Iliad and Odyssey: the Trojan War, Tragedy & Aftermath*, I wrote of Professor Jonathan Shay's pioneering work diagnosing PTSD in returning Vietnam veterans, reported in his *Odysseus in America*: *The Trials of Homecoming*. But… how can we call Odysseus such a veteran? It is a very long time since he was fighting at Troy; and we hear only the delightful stories that everywhere earn the bard – and visiting stranger (*xenos*) – welcome: fabulous tales of his travels.

The Odysseus that all lovers of Homer know is as far from Matt Damon's portrayal as from Ralph Fiennes's. He is strategic, 'an operator', always with an eye to a main chance. He dismisses the Cyclopes as mere pastoralists – too uncouth to build ships, hold assemblies, or exploit a perfectly viable natural harbour. His first thought on awakening on Ithaca is that the Phaeacians, who have brought him home at great personal cost, may have stolen his accrued spoil and guest gifts.

He is a great storyteller, always investing the fairly standard travellers' tales with vivid description and personal 'takes'. Consider, for example, his toddler-like delight at giving his name to the Cyclops as '*outis*', no one, so that the beast cries out, 'No one is hurting me', or his insistence on hearing the Sirens who do not, as elsewhere, simply hypnotise with their voices, but here promise him 'knowledge of all things on the fruitful earth,' including the all-powerful record of what happened at Troy. Odysseus cleverly uses the innocent, gracious young Phaeacian princess, Nausicaa, to gain a restorative welcome and return home, negotiating the shaping myth that she is bound to marry a stranger from the sea and the subsequent 'marriage games' by, instead, finally telling a tale, if not *the* tale, of who he is and how he came to be both that and there.

So where does Nolan's bloodguiltiness narrative come from? Why do we, Nolan and Pasolini need Odysseus to accept the guilt as well as the responsibility

Matt Damon's Odysseus in *The Odyssey* © *Universal Studios*



for the consequences of his cunning and strategic actions? Many reviewers have interpreted this as a cry for our world leaders to accept responsibility for the blood on their (or their drone pilots') hands; to pay the price for their breaking of international human rights – cf. Zeus' – law. But that is a question for film critics and social and political psychologists.

Homer's narrative of Odysseus having landed on Ithaca has two shaping myths in play – that of the return, the *nostos*, of the long-lost hero, being tested and made to prove his identity before a joyful reunion. And, complementarily, that of the absent judge who comes back in disguise to reward and punish the actions of those he has secretly observed.

Both motifs contain their closure – the *nostos* in the final recognition, acknowledgment and reunion in the special marriage bed; the returning judge, however uncomfortably, in the bloody, gore-filled aftermath of the trial of the bow; the killing of the Suitors, the cleansing of the house with fire and brimstone and, most unacceptably, pathetically, horrifyingly: the stringing up of those slave women who had 'consorted' with the suitors.

Pasolini/Ralph Fiennes' Odysseus lands on Ithaca already haunted by the past; the film ends powerfully with his demanding Penelope to take responsibility for the killing of the Suitors. "Is this what you wanted?" he asks after stringing the bow. This provides a coherent and troubling – if not very Homeric – closure to the film's themes of bloodguilt and re-bonding. Though it does curtail Homer's thought-provoking account of Penelope's gradual recognition of Odysseus in the battered wanderer that he presents as and, in some sense, now is.

Nolan's canvas is vast and his visit to *Odyssey* Books 16–24 brief. Homer's evocation of the recognition of Odysseus by his hunting dog Argus, by his old nurse, and finally Penelope – one of the world's great stories – is cut to the bone. Homer is concerned with the recognition of Odysseus in the deepest sense: only for Argus and his nurse is he 'the same' as the young man who went away. Recognition in all senses is a more complex process for the abandoned wife. (A wife with so much more character than Nolan allowed Anne Hathaway: see, as well as *Odyssey* Books 17–20, Margaret Atwood's rendition of Penelope's dream – where Odysseus in the form of an eagle kills her 'pet geese' – in *The Penelopiad*.)

Nolan is largely uninterested in those two shaping, closure-generating subjects, which are so beautifully crafted by Homer in the final books. It is worth remembering, however, that Homer also denies us total satisfaction in Odysseus' reunion with Penelope. First, Odysseus tells Penelope of a further journey he must make to make peace with Poseidon, and then there is Book 24, which is so peculiar that it has often been suspected of being a later interpolation.

Closure must involve Odysseus' character as well as his story. One facet necessarily cut by Pasolini and Nolan is that of Odysseus' being cunning, multifaceted and – a word used of him by Athena – *poikilomētis* (a mind shimmering variously). When, on landing on Ithaca, he checks his joy and answers the disguised goddess with a long 'Cretan tale', Athena is delighted by his tricksiness, his subtlety, his likeness to her: his 'flexible presentation' (*poikilomētis*) or 'conman' mentality:

Even if a god encountered you he
would need to be wily and devious
to outdo you in cunning. What a man
you are, never tiring of intrigue, even
in your own country.

***Odyssey* 13.292–5**

Athena continues with words that resonate with readers in the long, drawn-out narratives of Books 16–24: that any other man returning home assured that his wife was still faithful would run to her arms.

It is on reaching book 24, full of Nolan's idea of bloodguilt, that I suddenly ask myself whether he does, in fact, have a point. After Odysseus has, in some fabled way, fulfilled The Return and The Absent Judge, he finally goes to the hut in which his father, Laertes, is living on the edge of exposure, starvation and neglect. Yet Odysseus tests the old man to near destruction by telling him a false tale of his, his son's, death. For the first time, this reader cries, "What is wrong with this man?!" Testing Penelope, even when reassured, may be one thing. But testing his frail old father?

By the end of book 23, we have a good ending to Odysseus' story: the house is cleansed, the family reunited, and the Suitors' outrages avenged. But in book 24, we escape from seeing things from Odysseus' point of view:

News spread of the Suitors' dreadful
fate. Wailing and grieving the people
gathered in front of Odysseus'
palace, as soon as they heard. They
brought out their dead, and carried
them away for burial, then they
made their way to the meeting-
place. When all had gathered,
the father of the most prominent
Suitor rose, and spoke, his heart
heavy with inconsolable sorrow for
his son, Antinous, the first to die at
Odysseus' hands. With tears in his
eyes he addressed the assembly:
'Friends, this man has done terrible
things to us. He took many brave
men with him aboard his ships, and
lost every vessel and their men. Now
he has killed more, among them the
best of the local princedoms. Come,
let us act, or we will be ashamed
forever.'

***Odyssey* 24.420–33 (English adapted from www.poetryintranslation.com)**

Unlike in Nolan's film, Odysseus does not feel guilt. But…he did take many brave men with him aboard his ships, and lost every vessel and their men. And now 'he has killed more, among them the best of the local princedoms.' Men have been strung along by Penelope, bringing her dowry offers, and marriage gifts. Wooing her, as is customary.

He doesn't feel guilt. But maybe, suddenly, outside the spell of his storytelling, we feel that he should. **A**

I want to express my thanks for a lifetime of rigorous inspiration, to Prof. Pat Easterling. If Classics research metrics counted 'impossible without' dedications, she would and will continue to be at the top. RIP, Pat.



OPPOSITE Ralph Fiennes' Odysseus in *The Return* © *Bleecker Street*
ABOVE Odysseus and his men prepare to confront the Laestrygonians in Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* © *Universal Studios*