The Poet Who Sings Through Us:
Homer’s Influence in Contemporary
Western Culture

Scott A. Belsky

Scott A. Belsky teaches English at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey. He has a Master of Letters degree from Drew University (2004) and is presently pursuing a Master’s in English from The College of New Jersey.

For roughly 2500 years people have studied, debated, heralded, and denounced the poet known as Homer and the works Western civilization attributes to him. Through academia’s ever-evolving manifestations Homer stands as the center of authority and stability for any student of literature. It is no wonder then that Homer survives and indeed flourishes in the current post-structural, postmodern, ideological-ridden world of the academy. Therefore the true testament does not reside in the particular dogmatic light that one shines upon “Homer” and other such works, but the ability of these works to absorb and refract so many lights from so many regions of the scholarly world. Nevertheless, there are those who fear that Ancient Greece and particularly Homer are losing their influence on contemporary cultural thought due to the increased push for diversity in literary studies. Such fears seem
premature because even the opponents of the canon still return to Homer for parting shots. Regardless of the attacks from various camps, Homer pervades culture both within and outside of the university; and despite the dirges for the old bard, his clarion song continues to resonate and reverberate at the center of the Western world.

In their article entitled "Who Killed Homer?" professors John Heath and Victor Davis Hanson paint a bleak and unflattering picture of Homer's place in our contemporary society. The two men lament, "the Greeks who started it all are so little known in modern America" (Heath and Hanson 1998). The "it" refers to everything from government to philosophy to science. Heath and Hanson place blame for this condition squarely on the shoulders of the classicists. "Our present generation of classicists helped to destroy classical education . . . our generation of classicists, faced with the rise of Western culture beyond the borders of the West, was challenged to explain the importance of Greek thought and values in an age of electronic information, mass entertainment and crass materialism. Here they failed utterly." In response most classicists would argue quite the contrary, claiming they have reinvented themselves and their departments as a way of staying current while still providing the essential exposure to "Greek thought and values." In fact, by broadening their horizons many Classics departments, both in North America and in Britain, are seeing increases in enrollment according to the Council of University Classical Department of Great Britain. Furthermore, the American Philological Association's own survey results reveal that the job market for classicists is stronger than it was a decade ago and has seen a general trend of increases in open positions in recent years. If these organizations' findings are any indication, the Greeks are still very much alive and in demand at the academy.

However, what really seems to aggrieve Heath and Hanson is not so much that the classics are supposedly disappearing from Western education, but the way in which classicists approach these revered volumes. "Classicists now, along with the best social constructionists, moral relativists and literary theorists in the social sciences and comparative literature departments, 'privilege,' 'uncover,' 'construct,' 'cruise,' 'queer,' 'subvert' and 'deconstruct' the 'text'" (Heath and Hanson 1998). This criticism seems shortsighted especially if these expanded scopes make the study of Classics relevant to the current student population. Perhaps one can argue that such scrutiny further demonstrates Homer's versatility—in other words, what makes him so modern for every age. Therefore what Matthew Arnold sees in Homer and Michel Foucault sees may vary greatly, but Homer can absorb both the praise and criticism. It is believed that every generation gets the Homer it deserves. It seems one can also say that every generation gets the criticism of Homer it
deserves, and the one constant remains – Homer survives and only deepens his pervasiveness within the psyche of Western civilization.

Michael Clark, professor of Classics at the University of Cincinnati, demonstrates this point precisely in his paper “Adorno, Derrida, and the Odyssey: A Critique of Center and Periphery.” He does not look to the shining testimonies of democracy and other enlightened ideals that bear the influence of Ancient Greece in our society to prove its influence. On the contrary, he sees naked capitalism and colonialism as the more telling evidence of Homer’s long-stretching shadow. Clark’s work draws on the critical philosophies of Freud and Marx along with arguments of other prominent cultural theorists to make the point that the fundamental Odyssean man, “whose realization as subject is inversely related to the diminution of subjects elsewhere and whose mode of subjectivity is a . . . prototype of bourgeois imperialism” (1989, 110), stands as the blueprint for the Western man. Using Clark’s definition of the Odyssean man to examine Odysseus himself, one begins to see less and less of the noble stalwart of the greater good and more of the capitalist. Odysseus’s shrewd machinations to preserve and promote the self often come at the expense of those around him.

One example of such behavior in particular concerns Odysseus’s encounter with Polyphemus. Firstly, Odysseus is not content with simply pil laging cheeses and lambs from the Cyclops’ homestead as his crewmen urge. Rather, he waits in the cave in order to meet its inhabitant, fully expecting that he will be treated as a guest in accordance with the Greek concept of xenia. A close study of Polyphemus’s initial shock upon discovering the men reveals just how misguided Odysseus is about his plan. The giant blurs, “‘Strangers! . . . now who are you? / where did you sail from, over the running sea-lanes? / Out on a trading spree or roving the waves like pirates? ’” (9. 284-86). Clark cites this passage as evidence that the Cyclops sees Odysseus for what he truly is; and in retaliation, Odysseus must blind the creature (1989, 125). Though, examination of Odysseus’s response suggests that he perpetuates his own blindness to the severe reality of the situation. Had Polyphemus practiced the values of xenia, as evidenced earlier in Telemachus’ treatment of the stranger at his doorsill and Menelaus’s hospitality toward Telemachus and Pisistratus on their unannounced visit to the Spartan king, he would not have been so forward as to ask these probing questions before making his “guests” welcome. Since Odysseus works on an egotistical and faulty belief that the greater world works in alignment with his own worldview, he expects the sort of treatment he would afford his own guests. The error, though, is that such a conviction leaves the members of his crew with no option but to remain in the cave with Odysseus and face the horrid fate of the Cyclops. The men whom Polyphemus selects to eat never
have an opportunity to realize the self or to act in any independent manner the way Odysseus can. They are not even given names, let alone free will. In fact, they simply exist in this episode as the victims of Odysseus’s wrongheadedness and arrogance.

In addition, the dilemma of the Cyclops offers Odysseus alone a chance for self-actualization since so often he exists as an individual only when he is in a state of conflict. This episode provides its audience only one “man” on whom to focus. One might argue, since Odysseus has labeled himself “Nobody” he is committing an act of self-abnegation; however, the reverse seems to hold more truth. Since he names himself, he must have a concept of himself and his place in the world. Although this name may suggest a lowering of the self in some capacity, it actually helps to affirm the existence of the individual in the greater world through announcement. Odysseus, who knows himself to be part of an aristocracy, readily plays the roles of lesser men and even beggars when the situation calls for it in order to accomplish his goal of escape. Therefore, the taking on of a new identity through the renaming process demonstrates his “cunningly wise” attempts at self-preservation.

Yet, the true example of his subjugation of others through the realization of the self comes as a result of his choosing to taunt the Cyclops. When he is just barely out of rock-tossing distance, Odysseus calls out, “Cyclops — if any man on the face of the earth should ask you / who blinded you, shamed you so — say Odysseus, / raider of cities, he gouged out your eye, / Laertes’s son who makes his home in Ithaca!” (9.558-62). This occurs despite his crew’s attempts to prevent just such an outburst. Of course, Odysseus’s actions incur Poseidon’s wrath with the end result spelling the doom of the crew. Once again, his crew is given no opportunity for salvation. They simply must abide by the whims of their leader, which often cause greater hardship for them.

Clark’s argument notes a similar behavior in Odysseus’s insistence on hearing the Sirens’ song. Once again, Odysseus puts himself in a position of diminished authority by allowing himself to be “lashed by ropes to the mast” (12.195)—just as when he uses the name “Nobody” in the episode concerning the Cyclops—in order to gain some sort of ultimate upper hand toward fulfilling his end desire. He also plugs the oarsmen’s ears with beeswax to prevent them from hearing the Siren’s alluring but fatal song, allowing them to row past the island unscathed. Clark concludes that even though the Sirens exist beyond Odysseus’s domain, as does the land of the mighty Cyclops, he “is still driven [to hear their song] by his colonizing impulse, and devises a mechanism to symbolically master the Sirens” (1989, 120). Odysseus’s use of his crewmen, the beeswax, and the rope further exemplifies the rational man’s use of manpower and technology to secure his own
well being in the face of some opponent equipped only with its natural and inherent abilities. Clark likens this to "the entrepreneur who 'organizes' labor and who dines on caviar as a happy result" (120). A not dissimilar analogy can be found in an imperialist Europe that sought territories in far-flung reaches of the globe during the nineteenth century and earlier. Such colonists often ventured in preparation for hostile encounters and made ready with weaponry far superior to that of the indigenous people they encountered, be it in North America, Africa, or other regions. As with any colonizing peoples, the aggressors often come with an eye toward self-aggrandizement and Odysseus seems no different in this case. Granted, he does not seek to acquire anything materially from the Sirens, but in his very hearing their song and living to tell about it, he has obtained mastery over them. Yet again, Odysseus's special privilege of listening to this song comes at a price to the others around him. In this case the Sirens are stripped of their innate, though deadly, quality for the sheer pleasure of Western man.

To continue, once a reader uses the dissenting methods of Clark and other contemporary critics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* also reveal a double standard for those who are of the aristocratic ruling class and those who are not. In the few opportunities that lesser characters are given an independent voice, they are always presented in an unfavorable light, seemingly reinforcing the promotion of opportunism but only for the elite, a theory not unlike certain political agendas of the contemporary Western world, and the topic of argument for nearly all Marxist criticism.

Let us examine the few times that lesser, nonaristocratic characters are given an independent voice in the *Odyssey*. In Book 10, Odysseus tells Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians, "we were so close [to Ithaca] we could see men tending fires" (10.34). While Odysseus sleeps, however, his crew grows curious about the sack given to him by Aeolus, god of the winds. One crewman says, "Heaps of lovely plunder he hauls home from Troy, / while we who went through slogging just as hard, / we go home empty-handed" (10.45–47). The men proceed to open the sack—that in actual fact holds the wayward winds, not the coveted plunder the crew expects—and their ship is blown clear away from their homeland. It seems apparent that Homer intends audiences to see this insurrection as a most detestable breach of social order. Not only does this act violate the alliance of crew to captain, it desecrates the hierarchy of king to subject, a divine arrangement lorded over by Zeus himself.

In a second example, when the crew is stranded on Helios's Island and Odysseus instructs them not to harm the Sungod's cattle, the men ignore his urgings and slaughter some to stave off starvation. Helios's retribution comes when he pleads his case to Zeus who, in turn, strikes Odysseus's remaining
ship with a thunderbolt. In both cases the men who attempt to realize a sense of self and promote their own agenda receive punishment and scorn when that agenda conflicts with the designs of the ruling class.

Still, a third example of self-identity in the *Odyssey* comes in the form of the disloyal serving maid Melantho. She not only verbally abuses Odysseus when he is disguised as a beggar; she also has the audacity to become the lover of one of the suitors. Both actions suggest independence and declaration of the self. However, the sexual relationship seems to be the more heinous act against Odysseus because it is a strike at his position as an aristocrat. William Thalmann points out, “for suitors to sleep with [serving maids] is a blow at Odysseus’s property, an implicit claim of rival ownership” (1998, 72). It is a violation more in line with the greedy crewmen who mistakenly let loose the winds, rather than the act of self-sustenance those same crewmen commit in slaughtering the cattle. In this sense, the *Odyssey* tends to establish a view that any offence against the holdings of the divinely appointed ruling class cannot go unpunished. Although, in all three examples mentioned here, the characters that attempt to advance a self-interest counter to Odysseus’s interest create a rift in hierarchical structure. Consequently, one could conclude that such treatment of minor characters not of the ruling class promotes a tone of imperialism that permeates Homer’s texts and as a result endorses the *status quo*.

Yet, it is worth noting that in the *Iliad* Achilles also threatens the hierarchical fabric through his public feud with Agamemnon. In fact, the poem opens, “Rage— Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’s son Achilles, / murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses” (I.1-2). In no uncertain terms, Homer blames Achilles for the carnage suffered by the Argive forces as a result of his attempt at independence, but unlike the other characters whose promotion of the self left them unredeemable, Achilles remains a focal and even at times sympathetic character in the *Iliad*. Granted, this independence leads him to bow out of the fight, but as Lowell Edmunds notes, Achilles’s “loyalty to Agamemnon and to his fellows is based on the principles of *philia*, a kind of friendship. This *philia* is pre-political or apolitical” (2004, 42). Therefore, Achilles has no hierarchical tie to Agamemnon the way a subject might and has no absolute duty to follow him. Furthermore, both men are of the aristocratic class and as a result their declarations of self appear acceptable, welcome, encouraged or at the very least expected. On the other hand, when Thersites expresses a similar sentiment as Achilles, he is roared down and beaten by Odysseus, much to the delight of the other non-ruling class soldiers who remain nameless and loyal.

Contemporary scholars tend to read this episode in varying ways. Some see Thersites as evidence that Homer may not have supported the rule of a
small, dominant class, and therefore advocates some form of democratic voice; while others, such as Thalmann, see the dissent as revealing an actual tension among classes that ultimately reinforces the ideology of the ruling class.

Firstly, let us examine the build up to this episode. Agamemnon issues a test to the Achaean forces by ordering a return home. Much to his surprise, the men “cried in alarm and charged toward the ships” (II.174). It takes Odysseus to reinstate the fighting spirit in the soldiers, both the aristocratic leaders and the common ranks. Homer appears to display a particularly favorable view of aristocracy as seen through the way Odysseus goes about bolstering each class of fighters. “Whenever Odysseus met some man of rank, a king, / he’d halt and hold him back with winning words” (II.218–19). Compare this with his treatment of the men from the lower orders: “When he caught some common soldier shouting out, / he’d beat him with the scepter, dress him down” (II.229–30). Such obvious contrasts in behavior and manner might suggest a biased view of class, yet Odysseus could also be politically motivated in his words toward fellow aristocrats. If he speaks his disgust at their self-actualizing desires to flee the war at Troy and return to the business of their own autonomies and disregard the ideology of a unified ruling class, he risks embarrassing them and disrupting the social order of aristocracy, a fault already committed by Achilles through his condemnation of Agamemnon. Nevertheless, a beating of the lower classes with a scepter, of all objects, does appear to be a strong symbolic avowal of the ruling class’s dominance.

Kurt A. Raaflaub in his essay “Homer and the Beginning of Political Thought in Greece” offers a similar view:

The poet tries hard to discredit [Thersites] from the beginning, and when Thersites at the end gets his deserved beating the crowd is ecstatic: the greatest deed Odysseus has ever done. Having thus made clear that this man counts for nothing, the poet can let him say what actually is to be taken very seriously. For what Thersites says not only is explicitly described as venting the anger of the masses but corresponds closely with Achilles’ criticism [of Agamemnon]. (Raaflaub 2004, 29)

For Raaflaub, such an act reveals a poet who has an awareness of the power the masses can wield if properly united the way the ruling class seems to be. This potential could eventually sow the seed of change if not for the blunt violence of aristocracy in the form of Odysseus. By putting this legitimate criticism of the ruling class in the mouth of a dissenter, Homer can address the very real dangers of an unchecked oligarchy while still maintaining the expected adherence to social order.

William Thalmann, on the other hand, contends that Thersites’s outburst, while voicing an ostensibly actual aspect of the delicate balance among class-
es, in the end does more to reinforce the class divide than attend to any possible critique of the power structure. For Thalman, Thersites exemplifies the chaos that exists in the interplay between ruling and dominated classes. Because of his vulgar and brazen speech, this soldier is described as “the ugliest man who ever came to Troy” (II.250). To further accentuate the point that he is not to be taken seriously as a member of the social order nor as a soldier, he is discredited as “bandy-legged” and as one who always seeks to “provoke some laughter from the troops” (II.249). Essentially, Thersites fulfills the role of comic relief. Thalman calls him the “alazon or imposter” because he dares to assert himself in the face of a member of the ruling class (1988, 16). Yet, it is Agamemnon’s own actions and the actions of Achilles, of course both aristocrats that give Thersites the “courage” or possibly “impudence” to act. Ironically, Thersites’s name can mean both “courage” and “impudence.” Since he was witness to both Agamemnon’s self-serving, haughty demands and Achilles’s rant against such behavior, Thersites perhaps feels emboldened to vent his own displeasure.

As stated above, Thersites’s words express a legitimate grievance; one Achilles himself poses earlier. He says of Agamemnon:

How shameful of you, the high and mighty commander,
To lead the sons of Achaea into bloody slaughter!
Sons? No, my soft friends, wretched excuses—
Women, not men of Achaea! Home we go in ships!
Abandon him here in Troy to wallow in all his prizes. (Iliad II.272–76)

Compare this with Achilles’s first words upon hearing Agamemnon’s desire for Chryseis, the captive Trojan woman originally won by Achilles: “Shameless— / armored in shamelessness—always shrewd with greed!” (I.174–75). Although both point out the dishonorable act of lusting over women and plunder, only Thersites earns a beating from Odysseus for his indignation. Therefore Odysseus’s actions have more to do with maintaining social order than with any personal aversion to the sentiment. Thalman points out, “Like many comic characters, [Thersites] is on the margins of society and blurs class distinctions. His detached, ironic perspective also allows a peculiar clarity of vision, bringing into focus tensions and contradictions in society that otherwise would remain half concealed, tolerated by the commoners with inarticulate resentment at most” (1988, 17). In this sense Thalman agrees with Raaflaub’s contention that the sentiment of Thersites’ vitriol concerns an issue of import, worth acknowledging not only in terms of the story but in the greater society as well. Both also acknowledge that since Thersites speaks in the language of the ruling class, he proves a legitimate threat to the order necessary to maintain the class system. Such
a hazard further prompts Odysseus to beat him, and by doing so Odysseus once again commits an act of self-preservation, not unlike those mentioned earlier. Only here the “self” Odysseus strives to maintain is really the body of the dominant class and not simply the individual.

Thus, it can be concluded that Odysseus, who is heralded for his cunning and power with words, actually resorts to the barbarism of brute force and physical violence in an attempt to protect an ideology that favors him over the “others.” In this moment the whole class structure can collapse under the weight of mass revolt, but rather “Thersites, through his defiance and the reaction it provokes, involuntarily performs a healing function for his society” (Thalmann 1988, 17). This “healing” occurs when the soldiers who witness his beating begin to laugh and mock Thersites themselves. In fact, by the end of the episode, the nameless soldiers recondition themselves in the language and value system of the ruling class’s ideology by jeering, “Never again, I’d say, will our gallant comrade/ risk his skin to attack the kings with insults” (II.323-24). Therefore, the catalyst for a possible recognition of the social ills committed by the unconstrained ruling class is lost through the unconscious affirmation of that very ruling class by those it subjugates.

Aside from allowing only those members of the ruling nobility to appear in a positive light when they express a concept of the self, Homer also holds a double standard when it comes to the types of behaviors deemed acceptable at home and abroad. It is on this issue that Michael Clark makes his most damning but also his most poignant criticism of Homer and subsequently Homer’s influence on Western thought. For Clark, “the whole of the Homeric oeuvre ostensibly endorses plunder as a primal act of survival and supremacy” (1989, 115). In fact, a great deal of the battlefield banter in the Iliad concerns the ritual of stripping armor from a defeated warrior. For example, after Hector slays Patroclus, Menelaus confronts the Trojan prince and taunts him with claims that he can ease Patroclus’s parents’ grief “if only [he] brought [Hector’s] head and bloody armor home/ and laid them in Panthous’ loving arms” (XVII.44-45). Later when Hector challenges Achilles, he promises, “once I’ve stripped your glorious armor, Achilles, / I will give your body back to your loyal comrades” (XXII.305-06). In both instances, the right to the armor by the victor demonstrates the clear symbolic subjugation of the defeated warrior. That is why, as a matter of personal and ethnic pride, Menelaus along with the other Achaeans fights stalwartly to try and prevent Hector’s stripping of Patroclus’s corpse. Without these tokens of achievement Hector’s victory would ring hollow.

The Odyssey too promotes this view regarding plunder. Shortly after leaving Troy, Odysseus and his crew “sacked the [Cicones’] city, / killed the men, but as for the wives and plunder, / that rich haul [they] dragged away
from the place” (9.45-47). Although these acts may be thought of as the spoils of war committed against an ally of the enemy, a later incident suggests this type of behavior to be reflective of a pervasive opportunistic mindset that values the ill-gotten gain over all other kinds. As Clark asserts, Odysseus’s own words to Athena upon his return to Ithaca imply that any reward given to one as a gift “is less worthy of respect than that which has been taken via brute force—a model vaguely reminiscent of the bull-headed capitalist who respects only what is ‘earned the hard way’” (1989, 115). In this particular episode, Athena, disguised as a shepherd boy, comes upon Odysseus, who has just returned to his homeland bearing the gifts given to him by the Phaeacians. Unaware of the goddess in disguise, Odysseus launches out on an elaborate fabrication outlining how he acquired the loot at the battles of Troy and how he killed the man intent on robbing him of it. All of these examples appear to indicate that the imposition of one’s will upon another individual or group commands the greater sense of manhood and essentially self-hood. Yet, it cannot be overlooked that these instances of buccaneering, or supposed buccaneering, all take place away from Ithaca.

So where does that leave those characters who commit plunder within Ithaca? Firstly, they perpetrate a crime against their fellow citizens and divine law by violating the concept of xenia, which governs the behaviors of guests as well as hosts. Secondly, they demonstrate a faulty view of the Odyssean ethic because they choose to execute their acts of plundering within the boundaries of their own society. Therefore, they are rightly deemed reprehensible and deserving of punishment. The incriminating acts the suitors perform against Odysseus’s household are not much different than what Odysseus and his crewmen have committed elsewhere, but the intent cannot be justified due to the suitors’ relationship to the oikos, or ruling household, of Odysseus. Since many of the suitors are actually citizens of Ithaca, their shameful deeds strike at the heart of the social hierarchy. Granted, even though the men are nobility themselves, this distinction does not lessen the severity of the threat. Once again, in slaughtering the suitors, Odysseus executes an act of self-preservation and self-actualization. His revenge restores the social order just as we have seen him do earlier in the incident at Troy. Clark affirms, “the modern parallel is not difficult to conceive, the one in which imperialistic activity is not only condemned, but unheard of, at home—be it within the United States, Europe, or the industrialized ‘West’ in general—and yet is all too commonplace, even ordinary, away from the center” (1989, 116). Such a striking parallel may prove it evident, though not very flattering, that Homer continues to be alive and well in our own culture. Thus, the suitors’ actions demonstrate the Odyssean colonial influence in all its “ruthlessness and ambiguity” (117). Furthermore, they express just how
pervasive this behavior can become. What appears to be perfectly natural when committed elsewhere and against an enemy turns out to be grotesque and shameful when performed at home.

So it seems appropriate to return to the question posed at the onset by Heath and Hanson, “Who killed Homer?” The answer, aptly enough, seems to be “Nobody.” He lives in our society as naturally and ubiquitously as the air we breathe. We may not notice his influence because all we do and are maintain his indelible mark. As Clark notes in his argument, some time ago William Bennett called for higher education to return to a core of great texts that expressed the best Western civilization had to offer on the human experience (1989, 111). It might sound like a noble endorsement and unquestionably Homer’s works deserve to be at the center of such a notion, but to blindly accept wholesale what these texts offer is to fall victim to a grievous error. Thus, the current trend in cultural criticism of dissenting readership, or what one may call reading “against the grain,” seems profoundly appropriate for examining Homer and all “great” works. As Thalmann states at the close of his book, The Swineherd and the Bow:

If it is true that ideology can only be fully recognized as such in a culture and among people removed from oneself, then uncovering how ideologies work in a culture so distant as that of eighth-century and Archaic Greece can help us look afresh at the discourses that today variously justify and disguise huge and ever growing economic, social, and racial inequalities. . . . A text, furthermore, that has enjoyed the rather ambivalent honor of being made a “classic” requires this special effort of “reading against the grain” if it is not to be taken for granted and reduced to banality. . . . And so an alternative to taking the narrative’s alleged values as self-evident is to interrogate it for the ways in which it represents political experience, as opposed to reproducing it, and to ask the reasons for the particular ways in which it does so. (Thalmann 1998, 305)

In a current political climate that tends to see the world in terms of us (good) and them (bad), no greater evidence can we have of Ancient Greece’s inspiration on contemporary thought. For every “Axis of Evil” we can turn to Homer and find a parallel in the Trojan allies, such as the Cicones, who are reduced to nothing more than targets for plunder. With each passing day that we see the attempt to spread Western influence across the globe, we can look to Polyphemus’s cave, or the shores of the lotus-eaters and the Laestrygonians and see the ignorant attempts to make a wider world fit into a more familiar, narrower point of view. Yet, generosity and camaraderie also exist in our Western world, along with cunning and innovation. These too are the stalwarts of our ancestors. Therefore, the West cannot but be colored with Homer’s brush. His critics and champions alike only help to amplify his per-
manence within our culture, and every new addition to the canon wears the beggar's rags that conceal the Odyssean ethic underneath. While some may be direct reshappings of the myth, as has been recently undertaken by many writers including Margaret Atwood and Elizabeth Cook along with film director Wolfgang Peterson\(^5\), others are an indirect *homage* as delivered in the Coen brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*\(^6\) So indeed the bard still lives in all we do and say, both the good and the bad. Nevertheless, naysayers and detractors will continue to bewail his demise regardless of how plainly he sings through our every deed and exploit.

Notes


3 See *APA Newsletter* 29.2 (April 2006).

4 All in-text quotations reference Robert Fagles's translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

5 Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) recasts the story of the *Odyssey* from Penelope's point of view, aided by her twelve hanged maids. Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* (2001) retells the story of the hero of the Trojan War in a strikingly contemporary fashion. Wolfgang Peterson directed the film *Troy* (2004). This bastardization of the myth of the Trojan War takes a number of liberties with the plot, including killing off central characters who survive the war such as Menelaus.

6 See review of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Content 2001, 41-48). For another thought-provoking article on Homer's influence in current cinema, see Blundell and Ormand (1997, 533-69). This article contends that the Western genre closely reflects Greek epic in that both promote a rigid value system and ideology of manhood.

Works Cited


