

Scholarly Feedback: Homeric Studies and American Song Culture in Coen Brothers Films

Joel and Ethan Coen have written and produced two films that rely on the *Odyssey* as a framing device, each film set at a crucial moment in the history of traditional American song culture. The first of these films, “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?” (2000) is set in depression era Mississippi and deals with the popular “discovery” of traditional American song that coincided with the proliferation of radio and recording technology. The later film, “Inside Llewyn Davis” (2013) is set in the New York folk music scene of the 1960s, the heart of the so-called “rediscovery” of American folk music, which saw the musical tradition reshaped and repurposed in radical new ways. Odyssean motifs run through both films, explicitly in the first and more subtly in the second, and have been noted by reviewers and scholars alike. What has been unexamined, however, is the fact that the Odyssean elements therein are presented as parts of an oral song tradition themselves, one that mirrors the song tradition featured in the film.

My paper addresses this omission first by pointing out how an awareness of the orality of Homeric song influenced the film makers’ presentation of American song tradition. In “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?” this is most clear in the film’s ruminations on the changing nature of southern song culture occasioned by the new technology of radio and audio recording. After all, these technological innovations changed American song much as writing changed that of Greece. “Inside Llewyn Davis” explores how that new technology eventually changed audience expectations regarding artistic innovation, a change that fundamentally altered American song. The film’s titular character, for example, sings numerous songs but the only one that makes him any money is simultaneously the film’s most innovative and most facile. Similar issues attend the development of oral song culture generally, including the song culture of ancient Greece. The film’s running references to the *Odyssey* link it to “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?” not only in theme but in intellectual approach to song culture generally. This pair of films then represents an important shift in popular reception of Homer subsequent to the work of Milman Parry.

I then move to discuss the broader topic of how classical scholarship, including classical reception studies, is affecting classical reception itself. Not only is the depiction of folk song in both of

these films shaped by advances in Homeric scholarship, but the central joke of “Inside Llewyn Davis” is essentially a joke on the very people who study Homer in popular art. One of the film’s key plot points, foreshadowed very early, is Llewyn’s arduous journey to and back from the Gate of Horn music club to learn from a promoter the future of his career. The audience is, therefore, quite intentionally led to see Llewyn as an Odysseus figure, like Ulysses Everett McGill, the main character of “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?” The analogy, however, fails in the end as we learn that the film’s actual Odysseus figure is an academic couple’s cat, named Ulysses, whose adventures parallel those of Homer’s Odysseus far better than Llewyn’s do. The joke here is, I think, inspired by the popular and academic obsession with identifying the Homeric analogues in “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?” In this case our attempts to study classical reception have essentially become part of the reception itself.

Taken together these two phenomena highlight the fact that in the study of classical reception scholars are not always detached observers of the artistic process but can also be accidental contributors to it. It is therefore incumbent upon us as scholars of the classics and classical reception to consider our role in affecting the subject of our own study.