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THE COENS' *O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* AND HOMER'S *ODYSSEY*[1]

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"O Muse!
Sing in me, and through me tell the story
Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending,
A wanderer, harried for years on end …" (*OB* 3)[2]

The Coen brothers' 2000 film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* opens with this, Homer's epic invocation to the Muse. Subsequent title cards inform the viewer that the film was written by brothers Ethan and Joel Coen and "Based Upon 'The Odyssey' by Homer."[3] But the Coen brothers claim that they never read the purported model for their film adaptation: "Between the cast and us … Tim Nelson is the only one who's actually read *The Odyssey*."[4] And even when Ethan acknowledged that Nel-

[1] Over the years, my students have contributed to discussions which helped me formulate the ideas put forth in this essay. I am grateful for their participation and delighted that this film proved to be such a productive resource for teaching about classical literature and mythology. Special thanks go to Kirsten Day, Dirk R. Johnson, Eric Koeppel, Elke Segelke, Ulrike Wilson, and *Mouseion*'s editor and anonymous readers. Other well-informed studies of the classical motifs in this film include those by Danek, Ruppersburg, Weinlich, and two by Heckel. In particular, several of my more important observations are also made by Heckel. (In 2005a, Heckel makes several important observations also made herein, but my essay was already under review when I discovered this. I have since marked similarities where they occur.) David Pollio's excellent "Baptizing Odysseus: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and Homer's *Odyssey*," *Classical Outlook* 85 (2007) 23–27 was published too recently for me to cite.

[2] Quotations from the screenplay of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are cited as *OB*. Line numbers for the *Odyssey* refer to Robert Fitzgerald's translation, credited in the film's closing credits as the source of this excerpt. The tweaking of Fitzgerald's signature translation of the poem's opening line (his actual translation of *Od.* 1.1 begins "Sing in me, Muse …") hints of further liberties to come in the Coens' adaptation.

[3] The film was thus nominated for a 2000 Academy Award in the category "Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published."

[4] Romney 2000 as reprinted in Woods 2004: 176. George Clooney, though, is also on record as having read the ancient epic in preparation for playing the lead role: "I read the *Odyssey* after I read the screenplay, and it was amazing to discover the connections between the two" (interview with Paige Porter 1999).

son, who was a Classics major at Brown University, had read the *Odyssey* ("I wonder if he read it in Greek? I know he read it."), Joel did his part to sow doubt ("Did he?").[5] I join other scholars in suspecting that the brothers' claim not to have read the *Odyssey* is just as false and misleading a statement as their previous claim that their hit film, *Fargo*, was based on a true story.[6] Such mythologizing of their process delights fans of the Coen brothers but has been known to lead astray others who seek to define their art.

The film's soundtrack liner notes for the DVD announce that "The trio journey through a landscape of wonder and adventure populated by a series of outlandish characters who jumble together classical mythology, Southern archetypes and pop-culture imagery." Encouraged by the Coens' purposeful misdirection, most film reviewers (and many literary critics) chose not to focus on any connections between the film and the *Odyssey*. Since the Coens themselves minimize the extent of the influence of Homer's epic on the film, critics focus instead on the film's portrait of the Depression-era Deep South.[7] They point to an astonishing range of source material to account for the familiarity of these images and scenarios including great American literature of the age (Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, and James Agee's 1936 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, as illustrated by Walker Evans' photographs) and a wide range of films including *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1969), and *Down by Law* (1986).[8] Comedies by Preston Sturges such as *The Great McGinty* (1940) and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944) also make their mark, but not nearly as obviously as his *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), whose eponymous comedy film director/hero eventually abandons his goal of making a

[5] Romney 2000 as reprinted in Woods 2004: 176. In an interview with Kari Molvar, Nelson explains: "Well, I was a Latinist at Brown, more of an ancient-Rome classicist than someone who studied Greek. I read *The Odyssey* twice in different classes, but I have to admit I would have been even more excited if it had been an adaptation of the *Aeneid*."

[6] E.g. Ebert 2000, Danek 2002:85, Flensted-Jensen 2002: 15, and Weinlich 2005: 89.

[7] For elements in the film from American—specifically southern—history and culture see Ebert 2000, Bergan 2000: 209, French 2000: 185, Kellman 2001: 189, Collum 2001: 52, Danek 2001: 87, Ruppersburg 2003: 13–17, and Heckel 2005a: 579–580.

[8] For literary references, see Jackson 2000: 38; Jones 2000: 49; Block, Scott, Turan, and Hoffman 2001: 37. For films, see Bergan 2000: 209; French 2000: 184; Jackson 2000: 38; Jones 2000: 48; Danek 2001: 90–91; Hoffman 2001: 37; Ruppersburg 2003: 8 and 15, and film reviews by G. Perry, Block, and Scott.

serious film about poverty and despair in the Depression-era South, a film he had planned to call *O Brother Where Art Thou?*[9]

Even when Homer's poem *is* acknowledged as a source, appreciation seems limited. Many critics see little beyond obvious nominal echoes: the heroes of both poem and film share a name (Odysseus = Ulysses Everett McGill), as do their hometowns (Ithaka = Ithaca, Mississippi), and their wives (Penelope = Penny).[10] Many critics accept only a surface similarity in plot between film and poem: each hero struggles to overcome obstacles (Big Dan is the Cyclops, the sensuous women they meet at water's edge are the Sirens) in order to get home in time to prevent his wife from marrying another man.[11] Many others dismiss *O Brother* as nothing more than an episodic "road movie," a loosely connected series of vignettes and set pieces.[12]

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[9] For the influence of *Sullivan's Travels*, see Bergan 2000: 208–209, Ebert 2000, Jackson 2000: 38, Jones 2000: 49, Blake 2001: 30, 33, Content 2001: 41–42, Danek 2001: 88–89, Hoffman 2001: 36–37, Wall 2001: Flensted-Jensen 2002: 14, and Ruppersburg 2003: 8–10. Several critics are amused by the Coens' "delightfully postmodern activity of remaking a famous movie that never existed" (quotation in French 2000: 185; cf. Kellman 2001: 190).

[10] Even supporting characters have epic names (e.g. Governor Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel and Homer Stokes). *Ulees' Gold* (1997), a fine film written and directed by Victor Nunez, also depends on nominal parallels to make its connection with the *Odyssey* clear. It offers a kind of fantasy epilogue to the *Odyssey*, picking up the narrative long after the Vietnam War hero-turned-pacifist returns to his ravaged family. *Ulee* ("Ulysses" = Odysseus) regrets that his military service left his wife ("Penelope" = Penelope) to raise their young son ("Jimmy" = Telemachus) alone. His wife has been dead six years now, and his son, who suffered for want of a father-figure, is in jail for robbing a bank with his delinquent friends (the others escaped capture). Ulee is raising his grandchildren in the absence of their drug-addicted mother ("Helen" = Helen of Sparta), deemed the root cause of the family's misfortunes. The climax of the film comes when Jimmy's former friends (= suitors) invade Ulysses' home in search of the money from the heist and threaten violence. Like Odysseus, Ulee fiercely defends his family, but because he eschews violence, he is the more sympathetic character. In the end, the hoods are arrested, Helen is forgiven and embraced by her family, Jimmy expresses hope for a quick parole, and Ulee finds love again, with the girl next door.

[11] E.g. Puccio 2001: Vice, Schwartz 2001 and Harries 2001: B14. However, Content 2001: 45 suggests that rather than "matching characters in this film with their supposed counterparts from the *Odyssey*," the villains "can be seen more revealingly as a symbolic rogues' gallery of human institutions—business, politics, education—that corrupt us, dividing brother against brother."

[12] E.g. Prins 2001: 31, Vaux, Sanford 2000, Howe 2000, and Tatara 2001, who entitles his review "Homer would not be amused." Ebert 2000, however, suggests that the film's episodes don't always seem to mesh into a united whole precisely because "episodes [of ancient epics] were timed and intended for a night's recitation."

The Coens' purported ignorance of Homer's text—together with their well-known fondness for movies of past eras—has led some critics to conclude that the brothers actually got their knowledge of the *Odyssey* from Kirk Douglas' 1954 film *Ulysses* (G. Perry 2000 and Danek 2001: 90) or even from the Classics comic version of the tale (Hunter 2000, Taylor 2000, and Danek 2001: 90).[13] In fact, in interview responses ostensibly designed to prove the limited influence of Homer's *Odyssey* on the film, the Coens reveal a much more-than-passing acquaintance with the text:

> Ethan: We avail ourselves of [the *Odyssey*] very selectively. There's the sirens; and the Cyclops, John Goodman, a one-eyed Bible salesman …
>
> Joel: Whenever it's convenient we trot out the *Odyssey*.
>
> Ethan: But I don't want any of these *Odyssey* fans to go to the movie expecting, y'know …
>
> Joel: "Where's Laertes?" (laughter)
>
> Ethan: "Where's his dog?" (more laughter)[14]

In fact, although its details are of course very different, *O Brother* does indeed follow the general narrative template provided by the *Odyssey*. Yet the Coens mock those who look only for superficial plot parallels with the *Odyssey*:

> "Scylla and Charybdis? Where were they?" puzzles Ethan. The whirlpool at the end, surely? "Oh," the brothers chorus, "the whirlpool." Ethan grins pensively. "Oh, yeah, sure, Scylla and Charybdis" (Romney 2000).

No, in *O Brother* Scylla is not a man-eating monster, nor is Charybdis a whirlpool. They represent in the adaptation exactly what they represent in the original: a difficult choice between two equally undesirable options.[15] Just as Odysseus had to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis twice before he could reach safety (*Od.*12.289–338, 544–70), Everett, Pete, and Delmar twice avoid a similarly distasteful choice—death or

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[13] In an interview in the "Production Featurette" of the DVD, Joel Coen explains, "We sort of combined the Three Stooges with Homer's *Odyssey*" (cf. an interview with George Clooney in Bergan 2000: 212). By critics, *O Brother* has been dubbed "'Bonnie & Clyde' as told by Monty Python" (Turan 2000) and "Mad Magazine's version of 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men'" (Taylor 2000).

[14] Interview with Ridley 2000 as reprinted in Woods 2004: 183. Cf. an interview with Joel Coen in Romney 2000 as reprinted in Woods 2004: 176.

[15] *Pace* Weinlich 2005: 103: "The Coen brothers read Odysseus' fantastic adventures of Books 9–12 pragmatically, not symbolically." Although Weinlich's essay (read after I submitted this essay for review) offers a worthy approach and raises important questions, we disagree on a number of important ways in which text and film intersect.

prison—as provided by the sheriff in two separate meetings: "prison farm or the pearly gates!" (*OB* 15) and "the penal farm or the fires of damnation" (*OB* 34) (cf. Block 2000).

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is certainly the stuff of purposeful allusion. The Coen brothers evoke and conflate Homeric plot lines, characterization techniques, and motifs to create an altogether unique and original text of their own.[16] Similarities between the screenplay's dialogue and set directions with specifically the Robert Fitzgerald translation of Homer's *Odyssey* reveal what I will argue are conscious borrowings. It may be true that "It doesn't take a classics scholar to notice that the wily brothers have taken a few liberties with their source" (Scott 2000). Perhaps more surprising is how faithful to it they really are.

O BROTHER AS EPIC

Joel Coen has remarked that *O Brother* is intended to be "epic in scale, hopefully classic in its scope" ("Production Featurette" of the DVD). Production designer Dennis Gassner notes that even the washed-out look given the film by director of photography Roger Deakins was designed to create a "kind of metaphor, an illusion of antiquity" (Bergan 2000: 213). Like the epic *Odyssey*, through the presentation of the adventures of a hero (and his companions), *O Brother* reflects the totality of a culture, in this case offering a cross-section of all aspects of the Depression-era South: religious, political, economic, culinary, musical/artistic, technological, mercantile, and social (including race relations, class distinctions, and rules of hospitality, introduction and decorum).

At first it seems rather un-epic that the action of the film unfolds in a very short span of time ("They dam the river on the 21st. Today's the 17th!" *OB* 19). But we are reminded that although Odysseus' *journey* from Troy takes ten years, only a few days elapse from the time he begins to tell his tale and the moment he arrives home (cf. Heckel 2005a: 578). Also, neither hero's journey can be traced on a map (cf. Heckel 2005a: 580). Everett's frustrated exclamation at not being able to obtain sundries in a general goods store captures a mythic sense of placelessness familiar from the *Odyssey*: "Ain't this a geographical oddity … this

[16] Cf. Flensted-Jensen 2002: 14. Heckel 2005a articulates well the idea that proof of the film's sophisticated use of the model text is found in how its scenes variously invert scenes from the epic, transfer them into a new context, or melt several scenes into one. On the other hand, Kellman 2001: 189 argues that such observations only "gratify those viewers who see intertextual connections as confirmation of their own perspicacity."

place is two weeks from everywhere" (*OB* 18). Like Odysseus, Everett leads his crew westwardly (10.27 = *OB* 9) but doubles back on his own path (10.59–61 = *OB* 63) before eventually reaching home.

In a comic rendering of the epic style, the heroes of *O Brother*—Everett, Delmar and Pete—also represent the best qualities their culture has to offer. Although more than usually flawed and from the lowest societal stratum, Everett and his buddies are noble in spirit. Like Odysseus, they show fierce loyalty to their own families and to each other (response to betrayal is a *topos* common to both texts). Everett's uncharacteristic prayer at the end of the film, when death seems inescapable, even mirrors one made by Odysseus:

> "Rough years I've had; now may I see once more my halls, my lands, my people before I die!" (*Od.* 7.240–41)
>
> "I just want to see my daughters again. Oh Lord, I've been separated from my family for so long …" (*OB* 104)

Petty crooks all (a comic downsizing of Odysseus' piratical ways), Everett, Pete, and Delmar often find themselves victims of their own appetites and knowingly do wrong. But they always find themselves on the side of Good when they have to choose. They stand up against Evil even when it is unpopular and unsafe to do so (e.g. bringing down the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan) and they risk their own lives to protect those who can't help themselves (e.g. saving Tommy from being lynched, or freeing Pete from jail).[17] The Coens' comic vision also transforms every violent confrontation in Homer's model text into a comic enterprise in *O Brother*.

This comic tendency is apparent in *O Brother*'s transformation of Homer's epic hero, too. Odysseus is the model of leadership Everett would like to be but consistently falls short of. According to Fitzgerald's translation, Homer's Odysseus is "royal" (13.79), "master of many crafts" (18.452), and full of "sap," "prudence," "foresight," "wit," and "steadiness" (4.289–95). He is versatile (5.212), "canniest of men" (8.160), and "sly and guileful" (14.457). *O Brother's* Ulysses Everett McGill fancies himself a trickster and a wordsmith (*OB* 54) in the style of Odysseus. But far from having achieved the success of an Odysseus, Everett is just a run-of-the-mill con man, and not a very good one at that.

In Fitzgerald's translation of the *Odyssey*, the most frequently used epithet for Odysseus is "the great tactician."[18] Early in the film, Everett

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[17] Cf. Joel Coen's comments in interview with Romney 2000 as reprinted in Woods 2004: 179.

[18] E.g. 7.257, 8.440, 11.413, 11.438, 15.464, 17.18, 17.455, 19.52, 19.579, 23.147, and 24.391.

tacitly compares himself to Odysseus when he assures his compadres that "the 'ol tactician's already got a plan" (*OB* 19). Later he acknowledges that he really "didn't have no plan" (*OB* 33). But when the time comes to convince the boys that he is a worthy leader, Everett admits: "I know I've made some tactical mistakes .... And I've *got* a plan ..." (*OB* 89). But unlike Odysseus, Everett suffers both from a distinct lack of imagination and an inability to learn from his mistakes. The "big plans" (*OB* 91) Everett has for the future, for example, are to impersonate a dentist, even though he was serving time in jail for impersonating a lawyer.

Both Odysseus and Everett reinvent themselves continually during the course of their adventures. Odysseus tells more tales than just those fantastic ones we are supposed to believe are true (Books 9–12). As the "great master of invention" (quotation at 19.194; see similar phrasing in 13.380–81, 14.228, 19.310, 23.293), he presents false identities and/or stories to the Cyclops (9.366), to Athena disguised as a shepherd (13.327–65), to Eumaios (14.236–417), to Penelope (19.195–294), and to Laertes (24.333–45). Odysseus generally hides his true identity until he is satisfied that it is prudent to reveal it. Everett lacks Odysseus' characteristic restraint and insight. He and his friends freely identify themselves to strangers throughout their adventures: to Big Dan Teague (*OB* 54), to George "Babyface" Nelson (*OB* 38), and to the Sirens (*OB* 48). Delmar even identifies himself to the toad into which he believes Pete has been transformed (*OB* 51). When Everett does lie, the fairytale tends to become his new reality, for creating a better reality for himself is the only way he can win over his wife: "I wanna be what you want me to be, honey!" (*OB* 91).

The irony is that the one time Everett does do something noteworthy (recording the song that makes him an overnight success), he lies about his identity (*OB* 28), thereby preventing people—including Penny—from giving him any credit. Even Everett, Delmar, Pete, and Tommy themselves are unaware that they have become accidental pop stars of epic proportions. Unlike Odysseus, who is keenly aware of his long-ranging fame and strategically exploits or conceals it as necessary, the heroes of *O Brother* must blindly but comically blunder their way through the tale until its end, when they too come face-to-face with their destiny. And all along, we will delight and marvel that, despite his many shortcomings, Everett manages not only to survive, but to thrive.

SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS

Supernatural elements are as prevalent in *O Brother* as they are in the *Odyssey*, but with an important difference. Foundational to the *Odyssey*

is the undisputed Truth that the gods exist and that for good or for ill they involve themselves in men's lives.[19] In *O Brother*, however, the characters spend a good deal of their time arguing whether God, the Devil, and other beings with supernatural talents (wizards and seers, for example) exist at all.

It is generally part of the human condition to want to explain the inexplicable and to seek knowledge beyond our ken. In the *Odyssey*, it is the gods who provide the answers men seek. They communicate them to man through a variety of ways including dreams (e.g. 4.852ff., 19.620–42), prophecy (e.g. Proteus in 4.501–3, Teiresias in 11.112–52, and Theoklymenos in 17.201), bird auguries (e.g. 2.155–63, 15.198–99, 15.636–46) and meteorological signs (e.g. 20.110–17 and 21.471–72).

Man's quest for knowledge drives the action in *O Brother*, too. The phrase "looking for answers" haunts the film. Everett conjectures that "Looking for answers" (*OB* 12) is the reason Cora Hogwallop left her husband. He also notes that "Looking for answers" is the reason that Christianity is so popular (*OB* 23). Big Dan Teague, the larcenous Bible salesman, sees this as a weakness he is happy to exploit: "Folks're lookin' for answers and Big Dan Teague sells the only book that's got 'em!" (*OB* 54). Penny takes a more practical approach. She plans to marry a man with "prospects" (*OB* 72) because her children "look to *me* for answers" (*OB* 72). Everett unsuccessfully presents himself as the true answer to Penny's prayers when he plaintively cries to his estranged wife, "*I've* got the answers!"(*OB* 90).

Pete and Delmar believe that God answers prayers (e.g. *OB* 62 and *OB* 104). Everett, on the other hand, is a rationalizer, the only member of the group to remain spiritually "unaffiliated" (*OB* 27). He dismisses belief in divinity as "ridiculous superstition" (*OB* 25) and scoffs at supernatural explanations for natural phenomena (e.g. *OB* 9). For their faith, he dismisses his friends as "ignorant fools," "hayseeds" and "dumber'n a bag of hammers" (*OB* 25–6). When Delmar delights that baptism has cleansed him of his sins and brought him salvation ("Neither God nor man's got nothin' on me now," *OB* 24), Everett reminds him of the power of earthly law: "Even if it did put you square with the

[19] Odysseus credits "some god, invisible" (10.157) with steering his ship to safety. He is grateful that during a hunt "some god's compassion set a big buck in motion to cross my path" (10.173–74). Athena sends a wind to take Telemachus home (15.362), and as father and son prepare to slaughter the suitors, Telemachus notes that "One of the gods of heaven is in this place" (19.51). In the end, Athena herself commands the men of Ithaka to make peace (24.592–94), and her words are punctuated by Zeus "drop[ping] a thunderbolt smoking at his daughter's feet" (24.602–3).

Lord, the State of Mississippi is more hardnosed" (*OB* 25).[20] And yet, Everett and his friends enjoy the benefits of success for which there is no apparent earthly explanation.

The most supernatural of sources for answers in *O Brother* is, of course, the blind railroad man (*OB* 7–9), with whom the film both opens and closes. With his oddly insightful prophecy, this character challenges Everett's view of the world right from the start of the film:

> You seek a great fortune, you three who are now in chains … And you will find a fortune—though it will not be the fortune you seek …. But first, first you must travel—a long and difficult road—a road fraught with peril, un huh, and pregnant with adventure. You shall see things wonderful to tell. You shall see a cow on the roof of a cottonhouse, uh-huh, and oh, so many startlements …. I cannot say how long this road shall be. But fear not the obstacles in your path, for Fate has vouchsafed your reward. And though the road may wind, and yea, your hearts grow weary, still shall ye foller the way, even unto your salvation …. Izzat clear?! (*OB* 8–9)

This speech is designed to fulfill the same purpose as the one Teiresias (the *Odyssey*'s blind seer) gives Odysseus in the Underworld.[21] Both detail a particularly odd prophecy that will come to pass (cow on the roof of a cottonhouse ≈ people mistaking an oar for a winnowing fan). And both share details of the hero's future that turn out to be true. Delmar and Pete are awed that the seer seems to know that they seek the secret treasure Everett told them he buried before being incarcerated, but dismayed to hear that they are not destined to find it. Everett is momentarily spooked that the seer would even know about this treasure, since it was a lie fabricated to convince Pete and Delmar to cooperate in the jailbreak.

Nevertheless, Everett is able to reject belief in superstition for his version of science/rationality. He cavalierly dismisses the uncanny abilities of this "ignorant old man" (*OB* 10) as the kind of "para-normal psychic powers" acquired by the blind in compensation for their loss of sight (*OB* 9). His immediate goal, of course, is to dispel Pete and Del-

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[20] In the soundtrack liner notes to the DVD version of *O Brother*, the "blissful Baptist congregation engaged in riverside immersion" is equated with "the Lotus-Eaters [9.98–102] who lull Ulysses' cohorts." Equating the consumption of a narcotic-like plant with baptism to fulfill hope of salvation is indeed, as Danek 2001: 87 suggests, a new twist on the idea of "religion as the opium of the people." Flensted-Jensen 2002: 18 concurs: "Delmar and Pete are drugged, not by a fruit, but by religion."

[21] For a comparison of the two prophecies, see Flensted-Jensen, 2002: 18 and Heckel 2005b: 58. See Werner 2003: 175 for the similarity of their archaic and poetic speech patterns.

mar's doubts. But the scene has programmatic importance as well. This is just the first of many conflicts between Pete and Delmar, who believe in the supernatural and divine, and Everett, who trusts in the ability of man—and particularly in himself—to make his own way in the world. Over and over in the film, Everett's vision of the world will be forcefully challenged by the characters he meets and the difficulties he faces (beginning with the Sirens, the first of the Odyssean adventures). Although it might seem to us that Everett, like Odysseus, enjoys some sort of divine guardianship that also extends to his companions, Everett will to the end see success as his reward for keeping faith in himself.

THE SIRENS

In Fitzgerald's translation of the *Odyssey*, the Sirens lure their victims with their seductive song, "crying beauty to bewitch men coasting by" (12.48–49). Odysseus describes their song as "haunting" (12.191). The singing of the Sirens in *O Brother* is described as "*barely human*" (set directions, *OB* 47) and "*unearthly*" (set directions, *OB* 48). In the "Postscript" to his translation, the one acknowledged as a source by the Coens, Fitzgerald describes the "conjuring kind of echolalia" of the sirens' song in Greek, and how "the crooning vowels are for low seductive voices …" (Fitzgerald 1962 [1998]: 493). The haunting song of the film's sirens is true to these very qualities.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus himself explains how much he wanted to hear the sirens' song (12.246–47). But Circe encouraged him to have his crew lash him to the mast so that he could listen in safety. "Shout as you will" (12.65), she warned, the crew must "keep their stroke up, till the singers fade" (12.67). In *O Brother*, Pete is the first to hear the song of the sirens, and he screams "PULL OVER!" (*OB* 48). Bereft of any overt divine guidance, Everett scratches his head and wonders aloud, "I guess ol' Pete's got the itch" (*OB* 48) as he pulls the car over and Pete races through the woods ahead of his friends.

The source of the singing in *O Brother* is a trio of women described as "*beautiful but marked by an otherworldly langor*" (*OB* 48). They stand upon a tongue of rock that juts into the river as they wash clothes in the water. Seductively drenched, these three river sirens, as if anonymous forces of nature, ignore the boys' attempts to engage them in conversation and intoxicate them with their presence, their song, and their corn liquor. And when Everett and Delmar awaken from their debauch, they find Pete missing. A series of set directions explains how Delmar comes to the dramatic conclusion that Pete has been transformed into a toad:

Pete's clothes are laid out on the ground, not in a heap, but mimicking

> *the human shape, as if he had been simply vaporized from within them.*
>
> *…*
>
> *Delmar stares horrified at the pile of clothes: a spot in the middle of the shirt is rising and falling, rising and falling.*
>
> *…*
>
> *Everett joins Delmar to look. The rhythmic rising and falling now travels up the shirt. A large yellow toad sticks its head out from under the collar.* (*OB* 51)

Delmar shrieks: "Them sigh-reens did this to Pete! They loved him up and turned him into a horney-toad!" (*OB* 51). Later, Pete himself explains what happened, that the Sirens "lured me out for a bath and then they dunked me and trussed me up like a hog and turned me in for the bounty" (*OB* 79). In *O Brother*, then, the Sirens are conflated with the *Odyssey*'s Circe, who also sings in a "beguiling voice" (10.243–44), serves Odysseus wine, bathes him, and seduces him (10.391–417).[22] But Circe actually *does* transform Odysseus' men into animals (10.264–65). And just as the transformation into swine reflected the piggish nature of Odysseus' men, Everett concludes that Pete's transformation into a toad is also "some kind of judgment on Pete's character" (*OB* 52). Delmar is determined "to find some kinda wizard can change 'im back" (*OB* 52), just as Odysseus went to Circe the sorceress to restore his men (10.437–39). (When Pete is found later with his human form restored, though, he will not have become, like Odysseus' men, "younger, more handsome, taller than before," 10.440.)

In the meantime, Delmar and Everett care for toad-Pete just as Circe cared for Odysseus' swine-men. Circe housed the pigs in a sty (10.263) and provided them with "acorns, mast, and cornel berries—fodder for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth" (10.267–68). Similarly, Everett does not forget his friend when they dine at an upscale restaurant: "And I don't suppose the chef'd have any nits or grubs in the pantry, or—naw, never mind, just bring me a couple of leafs a raw cabbage" (*OB* 53). We find out later that Delmar even provided the toad with a "bed of straw" (*OB* 59) in his shoebox.

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[22] For the conflation with Circe, also see Danek 2001: 86–87; Content 2001: 45; Flensted-Jensen 2002: 19; Werner 2003: 177; and Ruppersburg 2003: 11. In fact, the Sirens in *O Brother* represent all the women who threaten to turn Odysseus off course, including Calypso, who Zeus says coaxes Odysseus with her "beguiling talk, to turn his mind from Ithaka" (1.76–7). The detail of washing laundry in the river suggests tangential use of the Naussica episode, too (6.97–99). On this, see Danek 2001: 86–87; Weinlich 2005: 105; and Heckel 2005b: 59.

THE CYCLOPS

At this restaurant (decorated with a bust of Homer), Everett and Delmar meet the film's Cyclops character, the one-eyed Big Dan Teague. Homer's Polyphemus is a monster who is also a shepherd. Big Dan is a shepherd of sorts (a Bible salesman intent on fleecing his flock) who is really a monster. Like Polyphemus, Big Dan is physically imposing: set descriptions call him "broad-shouldered" (*OB* 53) and "a big man" (*OB* 54). Like the isolated Cyclops, who lives alone in his cave (9.202), Big Dan sits alone at his table (*OB* 53). In each tale, initial contact between the Cyclops figure and his victims establishes the monster's home field advantage: Big Dan's "Don't believe I've seen you boys around here before …" (*OB* 54) is equivalent to the Cyclops' "'Strangers … who are you? And where from?'" (9.274). In both texts, the greed of each hero leads to his downfall. Odysseus wants the Cyclops' fat sheep, lambs and kids, and stores of cheese (9.233–36) plus whatever else he might have to offer (9.249). Everett and Delmar are interested in Big Dan's promise of "the vast amounts of money [to] be made in the service of God Amighty [*sic*]" (*OB* 55).

At Big Dan's suggestion, the group relocates to "more private environs" (*OB* 55) out in the country. The Cyclops, too, prefers to graze his flock "remote from all companions" (9.203). A trick camera angle causes the hulking figure of Big Dan, now sitting alone in the foreground, to appear so large that he dwarfs the massive tree behind him. This shot evokes the Cyclops as described by Odysseus, "a brute so huge, he seemed no man at all of those who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather a shaggy mountain reared in solitude" (9.203–7).

In each Cyclops scene, the monster enjoys a meal of meat provided by his victims. Homer's Cyclops "dismembered [the men] and made his meal, gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones" (9.313–18). Similarly, Big Dan, a self-proclaimed "man of large appetites" (*OB* 57), attacks his meal of chicken fricassee, a recipe that specifically includes skin, flesh, and bones (a meal for which Everett paid). Even his disgusting eating habits resonate with those of the Cyclops:

> Drunk, hiccupping, [the Cyclops] dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men (9.404–5)
>
> *Big Dan is just sucking the last piece of chicken off a bone. He tosses the bone over his shoulder, belches, and sighs* (set directions, *OB* 57). (In the film, an open bottle of beer indicates that he has been drinking, too.)

Even before Odysseus meets the Cyclops, he senses trouble: "for in my bones I knew some towering brute would be upon us soon—all outward

power, a wild man, ignorant of civility" (9.229–31). Everett, on the other hand, witlessly looks forward to "civilized conversation" (*OB* 55) with Big Dan. Everett and Delmar are naively impressed with Big Dan's cultured ways, such as his proclamation that conversing while eating is "coarse and vulgar" (*OB* 57).[23] Neither expects the savagery about to be unleashed against them.

After Big Dan finishes his meal, he "*reaches up and with one hand easily rips a stout limb off a tree*" (*OB* 58) as effortlessly as Homer's Cyclops "broke a hilltop in his hands and heaved it" after Odysseus and his retreating men (9.524–25).[24] Even after Big Dan provides Delmar with his "exercise in psychology" (*OB* 57) by beating him senseless with the branch, Everett remains utterly, comically, clueless: "What's going' on, Big Dan?" (*OB* 58). The Cyclops then takes a swing at Everett: "*The blow catches Everett on the chin and sends him reeling*" (*OB* 59). The measured physical comedy of the scene displaces any overtones of horror. Rather than cradling a bloody, broken jaw, Everett simply falls flat on his back and after a beat spits out a mouthful of half-chewed corn. In this film filled with beatings, lynchings, shootings, and fist-fights, violence has no serious consequences. This scene in particular, modeled on one of the most horrific in all of literature, is designed to register as cartoon violence.[25]

After incapacitating his victims, Big Dan then seizes the coveted shoe box. Disappointed to find only a toad, he proceeds to commit gruesome, murderous violence against the third of their number: "*He squeezes the frog, crushing it, and tosses it away against a tree*" (*OB* 60). This is similar to the treatment Odysseus says the Cyclops gave to *his* victims: "he clutched at my companions and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies to beat their brains out, spattering the floor" (9.314–15). Both Big Dan and the Cyclops "[know] none but savage ways" (9.204). Homer's scene ends: "So we moved out, sad in the vast offing, having our precious lives, but not our friends" (9.616–17). In *O Brother*, this parallel scene also concludes with a survivor mourning the bloody loss of a comrade: "*Delmar staggers to his feet and stumbles over to the car-*

[23] Similarly, Odysseus and his men wrongly conclude that the anthropophagic Laestrygonians are civilized because they have a settlement, road, families and homes with hearths (10.112–18). For further discussion, see Flensted-Jensen 2002: 20 n. 14.

[24] Heckel (2005b: 60) equates Big Dan's cynical lesson with the Cyclops' cynical guest-gift. Davidson (2000: 19) reminds us that the Cyclops, too, had a club made from a tree.

[25] "[The film] has a good deal less violence, obscenity and sex than Homer's *Odyssey*, and not nearly as much as the average American folk song" (Scott 2000).

cass of the frog, weeping" (*OB* 60).

REUNION

Eventually, both heroes return home safely to their Ithaka, having escaped from some kind of imprisonment. In the *Odyssey* this occurs through divine fiat (Zeus orders Calypso to release Odysseus, 5.118–121), while in *O Brother* the defining factor is the will of Everett (who "just hadda bust out" of Parchman's Farm, *OB* 81). Each hero is driven to prevent his wife's impending marriage to another man. Odysseus learns of his wife's predicament from Teiresias in the underworld (11.131). Everett receives a letter from Penny in the mail (*OB* 81).

Upon their long-awaited homecoming, both heroes meet their child(ren) before meeting their spouse. Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, at first presents himself as a stranger to his own son Telemachus, whom he meets at Eumaios' hut.[26] Then Athena allows Telemachus to see the true Odysseus, who embraces his child with fatherly affection (16.223–24). But startled by this beggar's miraculous change of appearance, Telemachus rejects him: "You cannot be my father Odysseus!" (16.228–29). Odysseus responds:

> "This is not princely, to be swept
> Away by wonder at your father's presence.
> No other Odysseus will ever come,
> For he and I are one, the same; his bitter
> Fortune and his wanderings are mine.
> Twenty years gone, and I am back again
> On my own island. (16.238–44)

Only after Odysseus explains Athena's divine intervention do father and son have their long-awaited, and very emotional, reunion (16.253–60). Telemachus is delighted to welcome the heroic Odysseus, the honored father the son was taught would one day return to his ever-faithful Penelope. Everett is just as happy as Odysseus to see his chil-

[26] Odysseus' reunion with his swine-herd Eumaios reappears in inverse allusions when the boys visit Pete's cousin Wash Hogwallop. When first approached, Wash is destructively whittling a piece of wood down to a nub with his knife; Eumaios is carefully cutting sandals from oxhide (14.26–27). Both farmers provide friendly accommodation to the travelers; Wash Hogwallop's eventual betrayal contrasts with Eumaios's steadfast loyalty. Delmar saves a piglet from the burning barn and returns it to the boy who rescues them while Odysseus eats "the young porkers" (14.91) slaughtered for his dinner. For further comparison of Eumaios and Hogwallop, see Danek 2001: 86; Werner 2003: 176; Heckel 2005a: 582; and Heckel 2005b: 58. For this peaceful interlude as corresponding to Odysseus' respite in Scheria, see Weinlich 2005: 92 and Heckel 2005a: 582.

dren, and he comes by his beggar's looks honestly. Despite the sight before their eyes, though, his girls too have cause to distrust that the man standing in front of them is their father returned home after a long absence:

YOUNGEST
Daddy!

MIDDLE
He ain't our daddy!

EVERETT
Hell I ain't! Whatsis 'Wharvey' gals? — Your name's McGill!

YOUNGEST
No sir! Not since you got hit by a train!

EVERETT
What're you talking about — I wasn't hit by a train!

MIDDLE
Mama said you was hit by a train!

YOUNGEST
Blooey!

OLDEST
Nothin' left!

MIDDLE
Just a grease spot on the L&N!

EVERETT
Damnit, I never been hit by any train! (*OB* 67)

In *The Odyssey*, Telemachus has been prepared for his father's return. In *O Brother*, Everett's daughters have been told that he will not be returning, hence their confusion. The difference is due not only to the shift in the character of the epic hero, but also to that of the epic hero's spouse. In *O Brother*, Penny "turns out not to be the embodiment of wifely constancy Homer rhapsodized" (Scott 2000). She not only divorced her husband "from shame" (*OB* 71) while he was incarcerated, but she then lied to her children about his untimely death. In this way, Everett, just like Odysseus, can be said to have returned from the dead.

Everett's daughters then tell him about their mother's new beau, who is set to replace him. And just like Odysseus, Everett sets his children straight about how he is their only true father:

MIDDLE
He's a suitor!

EVERETT
Hm. What's his name?

MIDDLE
Vernon T. Waldrip.

YOUNGEST

Uncle Vernon.

OLDEST
Till tomorrow.

YOUNGEST
Then he's gonna be Daddy!

EVERETT
I'm the only daddy you got! *I'm* the damn paterfamilias! (*OB* 68–9)

Similarly, Telemachus informs his own father about the recent events concerning his mother and her suitors (16.285–304). Odysseus assures him of the divine assistance they will receive (16.309) when it comes time to put his plan in motion. But Everett lacks both Odysseus' patience and his confidence in divine intervention. Angry and without a plan, he foolishly decides to confront his wife, Penny, and her fiancé, Vernon T. Waldrip.

Homer's Penelope is "tall in her beauty as Artemis or pale-gold Aphrodite" (17.45). She is wise (e.g. 17.45, 17.739, 19.682) and tender (17.512). We see her weep (e.g. 4.756, 4.770, 21.59–60, 23.34) and we hear her laugh (17.710). She lives in a palace with a staff of servants and herds of livestock to live off in the extended absence of her husband ("not twenty heroes in the whole world were as rich as he," 14.119–120). When Penelope finally comes to understand that Odysseus has returned to her, she welcomes him with joy (23.230–34).

Penny McGill, when we finally meet her in Woolworth's, is described as "*a woman in her thirties with a haggard, careworn face*" (*OB* 70). She is clearly exhausted by the demands of parenting seven children. She is smart in a hard-as-nails kind of way, without the luxury of feeling sorry for herself. (She won't even smile until she is back on Everett's arm at the end of the film, and even then her joy will easily turn to "indignation," *OB* 109.) Penny needs a husband to provide for her family in hard economic times. But when Everett returns, she disavows him: "He's not my husband. Just a drifter, I guess … Just some no-account drifter …" (*OB* 72). Vernon T. Waldrip seems the better catch by far: "Vernon here's got a job. Vernon's got prospects. He's bona fide! What're *you*?" (*OB* 72).

Early in the *Odyssey*, the mature Telemachus, no longer the babe Odysseus left "still cradled at [Penelope's] breast" (11.524), questions his own paternity out of self-pity (1.260), not from any real concern that he is not Odysseus' son (physical resemblance marks him as such throughout the poem).[27] But the paternity of the baby Penny holds to her breast is very questionable indeed. Like his other children now divorced from

[27] Weinlich (2005: 101) astutely observes that in contrast, the girls' adoption of their mother's language and voice shows their identification with her.

him, the baby (a stranger to Everett) doesn't even carry his name (*OB* 70). This insult of erased paternity is more than Everett can bear.

FISTFIGHT

A scene of confrontation between rivals then occurs in both texts, again with comic defusement in *O Brother*. When Everett calls Penny a "lyin' … unconstant succubus," Waldrip calls him out on his manners:

> WALDRIP: You can't swear at my fiancée!
> EVERETT: Oh yeah? Well you can't marry my *wife*! (*OB* 72).

Vernon T. Waldrip's trespasses—using Everett's hair treatment and planning to become head of his household—are the comic equivalent of the crimes committed by the suitors, as described by Teiresias (11.130–31): "insolent men eating your livestock as they court your lady." Werner (2003: 184) notes that in his arrogance, Waldrip even reminds us specifically of Antinoos. Inevitably, a violent clash between husband and suitor(s) occurs in both texts. But the details of this fight between Everett and Waldrip are taken from a scene that precedes Odysseus' slaughter of *his* wife's suitors, the fistfight between rival beggars Odysseus and Iros (cf. Danek 2001: 86 and Heckel 2005b: 60). In both texts, a crowd gathers to watch the fight. In *O Brother*, Everett fails to land a single blow. And despite being used as a punching bag, he sheds not one drop of blood:

> *[Everett] takes a wild swing which Waldrip easily eludes. Waldrip adopts a Marquess of Queensbury stance and prances about, delivering stinging punches to the nose of a stunned and outclassed Everett* (*OB* 72).

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus mangles Iros with just one punch. After his defeat, Iros is unceremoniously ejected from the premises:

> Now both contenders
> put their hands up ….
> The two
> were at close quarters now, and Iros lunged
> hitting the shoulder. Then Odysseus hooked him
> under the ear and shattered his jaw bone,
> so bright red blood came bubbling from his mouth,
> as down he pitched into the dust, bleating,
> kicking against the ground, his teeth stoved in. (18.108–9; 115–121)
>
> Then, by the ankle bone,
> Odysseus hauled the fallen one outside,
> crossing the courtyard to the gate, and piled him
> against the wall. In his right had he stuck
> his begging staff and said: "Here take your post.
> Sit here to keep the dogs and pigs away … (18.123–30)

In *O Brother*, it is Everett—clearly a lover, not a fighter—who suffers the indignity of defeat and expulsion:

> EXT. WOOLWORTH's
> *Its glass doors swing open and Everett is hurled out and bellyflops into the dust of the street.*
>
> BRAWNY MANAGER:
> … And stay out of Woolworth's! (*OB* 72–3)

CINEMA SCENE AS *KATABASIS*

Everett and Delmar then retreat to the local cinema and perform a kind of stylized *katabasis* from which they emerge with crucial information that will affect their future.[28] The theater and the underworld are alike in that they both lie beyond the reach of the sun.[29] In both texts, the hero positions himself first, and then a throng appears. When the prisoners from Parchman's Farm are ushered into the theater, the leaking daylight that illuminates their passage gives them a fluttery, less than substantial, appearance similar to that of the shades in Hades (cf. Content 2001: 45). The shade of Odysseus' dead mother, for example, Odysseus describes as "impalpable as shadows are, and wavering like a dream" (11.231–32).

Both Odysseus and Everett are surprised to meet a lost comrade. Everett stares at Pete "As if at a ghost" (*OB* 75). Odysseus describes the shade of Elpenor as a "faint image of the lad" (11.93): he *is* a "ghost" (11.97). Rather than a pool of blood, it is a few rows of empty seats in the movie theater that separate Everett and Delmar from their recently departed friend and his new associates. Pete's harshly whispered warning—"Do not seek the treasure! It's a bushwhack" (*OB* 74)—corresponds to Elpenor's similarly dire warning to Odysseus: "Do not abandon me unwept, unburied, to tempt the gods' wrath" (11.81–2). The authority feared in *O Brother*, though, is human, not divine.

And only in *O Brother* do we find the added dimension of humor, when Delmar tries to explain their surprise and delight at being reunited with Pete: "We thought you was a toad!" (*OB* 75). Despite Delmar's lack of discretion—his repeated stage whispering and body language are anything but subtle—the other prisoners act as if they simply don't hear anything. Neither do the shades in Hades interact in any way with Odysseus unless they are invited (11.164–67). Odysseus cuts his

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[28] For the pattern of *katabasis* in ancient literature and its adaptation in modern film, see Holtsmark 2001: 23–50, esp. 25–27. Heckel (2005a: 585) also equates this scene with Odysseus' *nekyia*.

[29] See Helios' threat "to light the dead men in the underworld" (12.491) if Odysseus' men are not punished for eating his kine.

time in Hades short for fear of "the gods below" (11.49). Delmar and Everett fear the prison guards, a mortal set of overseers who *can* hear them and are similarly responsible for imprisonment and punishment. And this is consistent with the rest of the film, where the powerful figures that affect our heroes are not gods but god-like mortals: Homer Stokes, Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel, and Sheriff Cooley, all of whom manipulate and exploit human beings in their own battle for power.[30]

Another link between this movie-theater scene and Book 11 of the *Odyssey* is that each features a hero's expression of distrust toward women in general because of his wife's personal betrayal. The diatribe against women delivered by Agamemnon is adapted and reissued here by the wounded Everett.[31] Agamemnon explains how he was murdered by his own wife Clytemnestra upon his homecoming: "But that woman, plotting a thing so low, defiled herself and all her sex, all women yet to come, even those few who may be virtuous" (11.501–4). Agamemnon hopes that his words of advice will save Odysseus. "Let it be a warning even to you" (11.514–15): "The day of faithful wives is gone forever" (11.534).

An angry Everett feels similarly betrayed by his wife Penny: "Deceitful! Two-faced! She-woman! *Never* trust a female, Delmar! Remember that one simple precept and your time with me will not have been ill spent! … Hit by a train! Truth means nothin' to Woman, Delmar" (*OB* 73).[32] We have seen how Penny is no Penelope. But neither is she a vengeful Clytemnestra, despite the metaphorical killing off of her husband (in both cases perpetrated for the ostensible good of the family at large). And Everett will eventually win the peaceful reunion with his wife that was denied to Agamemnon.

KU KLUX KLAN RALLY AS DEFEAT OF THE CYCLOPS

It should come as no surprise that Cyclops-character Big Dan Teague turns out to be a Klansman. Like the anthropophagic Cyclopes, the Ku Klux Klan represents a threat to culture and civilization, a threat whose

[30] In service of this argument, Werner (2003: 185) makes the excellent observations that the politicians' images are emblazoned everywhere, and that Pappy's voice emanates from unseen sources (the radio), that Pappy's voice emanates from unseen sources (the radio), and that the Sheriff's "*luziferische Macht*" is finally extinguished by the flood.

[31] Several other conversations Odysseus has in the underworld are represented elsewhere in *O Brother*. Teiresias (11.112–52) = the blind seer (*OB* 8–9) and the rundown of family affairs by Odysseus' mother (11.204–27) = the recounting by Wash (Pete's cousin) of Hogwallop family misfortunes (*OB* 11–12).

[32] Cf. Everett's later characterization of the sirens' betrayal as "typical womanly behavior" (*OB* 79).

destruction all civilized men must devote themselves to. In fact, both the Cyclops and the Klan derive their name from the same Greek word *kuklos*, meaning "circle." The Cyclops' circle refers to his one "round eye" (*kuklos* + *ops*); in the film the Klan's circle crest (adopted as its sinister symbol of unity) appears on the shields and robes of the color guard and on the robe of one Klansman—Big Dan—whose authoritative action during the rally marks him as that highly ranked Klan official, the Grand or Exalted Cyclops.[33] The single-eye hole in Big Dan's custom-made KKK hood is both a uniquely Coen-esque mark of comic genius and a reminder of this *kuklos* connection.

Jackson rightly notes that the scene of the Ku Klux Klan rally "manages to be at once camp and authentically sinister" (2000: 39), but many critics shy away from the fearlessness with which the Coens mock the Klan, its rituals, and its credo.[34] Despite the tone of this "symbolic, obscene, hilarious parody" (Ruppersburg 2003: 21), the details of this Klan ritual also evoke images familiar from ancient mystery cults: the isolated and nocturnal setting, milling initiates dressed in ceremonial garb, burning torches, chanting, choreographed dancing, a barely repressed frenzy that finally erupts in mob violence, and of course, the blood sacrifice. The haunting lyrics of the song "O Death," sung by the Grand Wizard himself, concern the fate of men after death, the *raison d'être* of any mystery cult. (This wizard, however, is not exactly the kind Delmar said he hoped to run across [*OB* 52].) Everett, Pete, and Delmar violate the sanctity of these mysteries (a lynching) by desecrating the symbols of the cult (Confederate flag and burning cross) and by absconding with the sacrificial victim (Tommy). Homer Stokes later identifies their disrespect as the worst of their crimes: "And these boys here trampled all over our venerated observances an' rich'ls!" (*OB* 94).

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[33] In the introduction to his 1905 novel, *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York 1905), Thomas Dixon identifies the mythology-derived Klan ranks: "The organisation was governed by the Grand Wizard Commander-in-Chief, who lived at Memphis, Tennessee. The Grand Dragon commanded a State, the Grand Titan a Congressional District, the Grand Giant a County, and the Grand Cyclops a Township Den" (2). The book inspired D.W. Griffith's 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*.

[34] Many film critics wrote that the army of dancing Klansmen moving across the field in the shape of a cross seems reminiscent of the choreography of the Busby-Berkeley extravaganzas of the 1930s. It is also reminiscent of the equally irreverent rotating pinwheel-swastika formed by the dancing Nazis in the surprise hit musical "Springtime for Hitler" embedded in Mel Brooks' 1968 film, *The Producers*. Ebert (2000) and Jones (2000: 48) also detect Nazi-like evil lurking behind the comedy.

But although delayed due to the vagaries of the plot, this scene in the film depicts the vanquishing of the Cyclops (with whom they are reunited at last).[35] Both sets of heroes find a way to remain invisible in the presence of the enemy. Odysseus and his men lash themselves under the bellies of the blind ogre's sheep, and Everett, Delmar and Pete commandeer the costumes of the color guard.[36] Once he has become aware of the deception, each Cyclops seeks help from his brethren against the interlopers. But in each tale, the hero's trick prevents their intercession. When Polyphemus calls, "Nohbdy, Nohbdy's tricked me, Nohbdy's ruined me!" (9.443), his fellow Cyclopes decide not to interfere. Big Dan, who "senses" (*OB* 83) the boys' presence, dramatically unhoods them.[37] But the disguise the boys had used earlier for Pete's prison break (faces smeared black with shoe polish, *OB* 78 and 79) serendipitously distracts their would-be attackers: "The color guard is colored!" (85), the Grand Wizard yelps, as the others stand stock-still and stare.[38] In the moment of confusion that follows in each text, the leader urges escape: Everett's "Run, boys!" (*OB* 86) is equivalent to Odysseus' "Row, row, or perish" (9.532).

The film's Cyclops character is able to thwart his enemy's attempt to poke out his sole eye (with the Confederate Flag pole). But this attack turns out to be only a tactical distraction that renders him blind (and deaf) to Everett's sabotage in the shadows. In each text, it is the sight and sound of force and fire (significant vocabulary underlined) that best dramatizes how each Cyclops is vanquished by a flaming weapon of wood:

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[35] See also Heckel (2005b: 60) for this scene as corresponding to the blinding of the Cyclops.

[36] This detail of *O Brother*'s Ku Klux Klan rally, in addition to the familiar rhythmic cadence of the marchers, seems clearly borrowed from the rally of the Wicked Witch's army in the post Depression-era film, *The Wizard of Oz* (as noted by Oliver, Taylor, Hoffman 2001: 37, and Ruppersburg 2003: 18).

[37] Big Dan sniffs out the true identity of the color guard when he recognizes the distinctive odor of Everett's hair jelly. Although the Cyclops of neither Homer nor Virgil has a similarly freakish "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum sense of smell" (quotation from Davidson 2000: 19), over time the monster has acquired such abilities as his story has become conflated with other cannibalistic giants of folklore (especially with the giant from Jack and the Beanstalk). See, for example, this excerpt from a dialogue written for Virgil's Cyclops in a popular elementary Latin book: "phi, phae, pho, phum sanguinem olfacio Troianorum virum" (Maurice Balme and James Morwood, *Oxford Latin Course*, Part One [Oxford 1996] 63).

[38] Thanks to Kirsten Day for her observation that such a scene was typical Buster Keaton fare.

"So with our brand we bored that great eye socket
while blood ran out around the red hot bar.
Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball
hissed broiling, and the roots popped. In a smithy
one sees a white-hot axehead or an adze
plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—
the way they make soft iron hale and hard –:
just so that eyeball hissed around the spike." (9.42–428)

From somewhere we hear a loud BOINK, as of a wire popping. …

From somewhere, another BOINK.

As Big Dan's look reaches front again, his smile fades.

His eye tracks up—up—

CREEEEEEK!—The fiery cross is twisting and starting to fall.

At the foot of the cross Everett snaps its last guy wire with his pincers—BOINK—and the four men sprint off.

WHOOOOSH—As the crowd scatters, the cross descends toward Big Dan, frozen, looking up. It crashes in a shower of sparks and embers that obliterates Big Dan Teague (86–87).

VICTORY IN THE GREAT HALL

As in the *Odyssey*, the final showdown between the hero and his rival(s) occurs in a great hall (the palace of Odysseus, King of Ithaka—the town hall of Ithaca, Mississippi). True to the comic nature of the adaptation, unlike Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors, Everett's victory will be a bloodless coup. But before Everett can take action, he must once again quell dissension in his ranks. Just as Eurylochos repeatedly challenges Odysseus' authority, so too Pete challenges Everett's (cf. Danek 2001: 90 and Heckel 2005b: 58). Naturally, Everett does not respond as Odysseus fantasizes, "to draw the blade that swung against my side and chop him, bowling his head upon the ground" (10.485–87). The physical altercations between Everett and Pete, though lively, are short-lived and without serious consequence (e.g. *OB* 82).

In the *Odyssey*, there comes a time—while on the island of Thrinakia—when Odysseus reluctantly realizes that he can no longer coerce his men into doing the right thing: "Eurylochos, they are with you to a man. I am alone, outmatched" (12.380–81). In effect, Odysseus abandons his comrades to their deserved fate. Now standing outside the hall in Ithaca, Pete asks Everett for the second time: "Who elected you leader a this outfit?" (*OB* 89 = *OB* 6). Like Odysseus, Everett smarts under his

associate's challenge, but he is not willing to give up on his dream, or on his friends:

> EVERETT: "So you're against me now, too! … Is that how it is boys?"
>
> *Silence. No one wants to meet Everett's eye. He is saddened.*
>
> "The whole world and God Almighty … and now you. Well, maybe I deserve this. Boys, I … I know I've made some tactical mistakes. But if you'll just stick with me; I need your help. And I've *got* a plan. Believe me, boys, we can fix this thing! I can get my wife back! We can get outta here!" (*OB* 89).

Despite their initial reluctance, Everett's friends agree to his cockamamie plan to sneak into the hall. These three—Delmar, Pete, and Tommy—are thus the comic equivalent of the three who help Odysseus fight the suitors: Telemachus, the swineherd Eumaios, and the cowherd Philoitios (22.292–96). In order to gain access to the site of their imminent confrontation with their rivals, both Odysseus and Everett must hide their identities. By turning him into a beggar, Athena has magically changed not only Odysseus' clothes but also his physical features (13.538–47). The boys in *O Brother* comically content themselves with donning false beards ("Really false beards," notes Roger Ebert). They sneak into the building and present themselves as the band.

When Odysseus is ready to take back his wife, he dramatically reveals his true identity: "shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands leapt and stood on the broad door sill, his own bow in his hand" (22.1–2). He then addresses the suitors directly, informing them of their imminent death:

> You yellow dogs, you thought I'd never make it home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder, twisted my maids to serve your beds. You dared bid for my wife while I was still alive. Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide heaven, contempt for what men say of you hereafter. Your last hour has come. You die in blood. (22.37–43)

In contrast, the less-than-heroic Everett sneaks up behind his less-than-faithful wife, pulls down his beard to reveal his face, and whines a complaint that carries rather less of a punch than Odysseus' speech: "They're my daughters, Penny! *I'm* the king of *this* goddam castle!" (*OB* 92). But Penny remains unmoved.

In each text, the hero enters a contest for his wife that he is uniquely suited to win. In the *Odyssey*, the contest of the bow is Penelope's idea (19.663), arrived at through a dream, and thus understood to be the counsel of the gods. She explains that she will marry the man who can match her husband's great feat of stringing the bow and shooting an arrow through twelve axe heads (19.669–70). Everett is stumped about

how to convince his wife that he too has prospects. Only when the Soggy Bottom boys sing the first measures of "Man of Constant Sorrow" and the crowd goes wild do they understand the far-ranging consequences of their earlier money-making venture of "sing[ing] into a can" (*OB* 27).[39] Their celebrity gives them the leverage Everett needs both to win over Penny and to defeat his rival (just as Odysseus' great strength and adroitness at the bow singled him out of the crowd).

Even the scene of the disgraced Homer Stokes being run out of the hall on a rail (a peculiarly American ritual) has a correspondence to the *Odyssey*, in Odysseus' orders concerning the dispatching of the traitor Melanthios. Both Melanthios and Stokes represent the rotten subculture the hero must eradicate for his community to be strong and proud once again. The details of their indignation are different but they both suffer humiliation before they are permanently put out of action (Melanthios will lose all his points, and Homer Stokes his political future):

> You two go throw [Melanthios] into the storeroom, wrench his arms and legs behind him, lash his hands and feet to a plank, and hoist him up to the roof beams. (Odysseus to Eumaios and Philoitios, 22.192–94).
>
> *Two men advance through the clapping audience holding high either end of an eight-foot rail. When they reach Stokes, other audience members help load him onto the rail … Stokes is being run through the crowd on the rail, jeered at and pelted with comestibles until he bangs out the exit* (*OB* 96).

A successful politician, Pappy O'Daniel knows when "Oppitunity knocks!" (*OB* 96). And his curious choice of exclamation here—"Holy moly. These boys're a hit!" (*OB* 92)—seems designed to evoke the name of the magic plant—the *molü* (10.343)—that protects Odysseus from harm.[40] It is at this moment that the governor—in his capacity as the highest ranking law enforcement officer in the state – pardons the escaped convicts. So wondrous is the nature of Everett's victory in *his* great hall. But the motive of this self-proclaimed "f'give and f'get Christian" (*OB* 97)—to win over an electorate clearly soured on Stokes—is no purer than anyone else's. When Pappy invites the crowd to sing with

[39] It has also been noted that the title of Everett's signature song, "Man of Constant Sorrow," is even a loose translation of Odysseus' name in Greek. Cf. Ruppersburg 2003: 12. In Fitzgerald's *Odyssey*, both Penelope (4.885) and Teiresias (11.104) call him a "man of woe," and Telemachus notes that "the man was born for trouble" (4.350). Odysseus himself states, "My life is pain" (7.164).

[40] Worth noting since every other exclamation in the film is explicitly Christian: "Holy Saint Christopher!" (Delmar [*OB* 50] and a policeman [*OB* 16], "Sweet Jesus" (Delmar [*OB* 51, 83]), "Weeping Jesus on the cross!" (Pappy [*OB* 56]), and "Jesus!" (Everett's favorite exclamation [*OB* 6, 10, 63 etc.).

the Soggy Bottom Boys as they perform his theme song for a grateful audience, Everett wins the governor's wink of approval for being smart enough to play along (*OB* 98).

By killing the Grand Cyclops, Big Dan Teague, Everett quashed a powerful voice in the local Klan. Now by destroying the political career of Homer Stokes, its Grand Wizard, Everett eliminates one more threat to civilization. And his weapon against this threat is the strength of the local culture—their acceptance of "ol'timey music" played by a "miscegenated" (*OB* 94) band. As the governor's newly appointed "brain trust" (*OB* 97), Everett finally has better prospects than Waldrip who, Everett notes with some satisfaction as he walks out of the hall with Penny on his arm, must now go "on relief" (*OB* 98). By revealing his "true" identity as Jordan Rivers of The Soggy Bottom Boys, Everett wins back his wife.[41] He also takes ownership of his rightful fame as a more-than-local hero.

GEORGE NELSON

As the victorious Everett leaves the great hall, a character introduced earlier, George "Babyface" Nelson, makes his final appearance. George Nelson is an important character in any analysis of *O Brother* that concerns the *Odyssey* because in many ways his fate is the one avoided by Odysseus. Like every mythic hero, Odysseus is motivated by the thirst for glory, more of which he earns with every victory. So, too, does George Nelson revel in his fame, earned by his record number of bank robberies and all-around bad-boy image. Both mock those who dare to think they have the power to vanquish them. George's diatribe against the cops shares a similar tone and message with Odysseus's final words to the Cyclops:

> COME AND GET ME, COPPERS! YOU
> FLATFOOTED LAMEBRAINED SOFT-ASSED
> SONOFABITCHES! NO ONE CAN CATCH ME! I'M
> GEORGE NELSON! I'M BIGGER THAN ANY JOHN
> LAW EVER LIVED! HA-HA-HA-HA-HA! I'M TEN-
> AND-A HALF-FEET TALL AND AIN'T YET
> FULLY GROWED! …
> HA-HA! COME ON YOU MISERABLE SALARIED
> SONSABITCHES! COME AND GET ME! (*OB* 38–39)

> O Kylops! Would you feast on my companions?
> Puny, am I, in a Caveman's hands?
> How do you like the beating that we gave you,

[41] Also noted by Weinlich 2005: 98.

> you damned cannibal? Eater of guests
> under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you! …
> Kyklops,
> if ever mortal man inquire
> how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him
> Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:
> Laërtês' son, whose home's on Ithaka!' (Odysseus, 9.519–23, 548–52)

Odysseus' men see wisdom in flight, not in provocation: "Godsake, Captain! Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!" (9.536–37). And like Odysseus, George Nelson unnecessarily goads his pursuers after he has removed himself from harm's way. Odysseus proudly (yet foolishly) draws on his storied fame as "raider of cities." George Nelson is desperate for just such a reputation: "I'M GEORGE NELSON AND I'M HERE TO SACK THE CITY A ITTA BENA! [*sic*]" (*OB* 39). But Odysseus is confident in his reputation as a warrior. George's insecurity is so great that after a little old lady refers to him by his popular nickname "Babyface" during the robbery, the formerly exuberant crime king slinks out of the bank with his head and spirits hanging low.

Now near the end of the film, the captured George Nelson stands tall as he is paraded through the streets. "*Grinning and game despite his heavy restraints*" (*OB* 100), the gangster is finally secure in his notoriety and long-sought proof of manhood:

> Lo, boys! Well, these little men finally caught up with the criminal a the century! Looks like the chair for George Nelson. Yup! Gonna electrify me! I'm gonna go off like a Roman candle! Twenty thousand volts chasin' the rabbit through yours truly! Gonna shoot sparks out the top of my head and lightning from my fingertips! … *I'm George Nelson and I'm feeling ten feet tall.* (*OB* 100)

George ends up not like Odysseus, but like his crew. Nelson is a bank robber whose greed for fame is legendary: "WE'RE GOING FOR THE RECORD—THREE BANKS IN TWO HOURS!" (*OB* 39). Odysseus' men, too, were greedy. By slaughtering and eating the forbidden cattle of Helios, they bring divine punishment on themselves. And even though George's crimes are many, the sole outcry from the assembled crowd—"Cow-killer!"—points to *his* wanton act of bovicide, too.[42] Their punishments are analogous as well: Zeus sends down "one white-hot bolt" (12.495) to kill Odysseus' men, and the state of Mississippi sends George to the electric chair (cf. Heckel 2005b: 59).

[42] Odysseus' despair at his men's reckless act of killing Helios' kine (12.475–78) was captured earlier in the film when Delmar gently remonstrated George for machine-gunning those innocent cows: "Aww, George, not the livestock" (*OB* 39).

LOCAL AUTHORITY'S LAST STAND

The neat distinction tacitly made throughout the film between the power of civic law (in the film) and that of divine law (in the epic poem) is purposely muddied in the following scene to illustrate the complexity of the problem. Everett leads his friends on their final journey to his cabin to collect Penny's old wedding ring (as she insists).[43] There they are ambushed by the sheriff who has relentlessly pursued them since their prison break. Everett's confrontations with the sheriff throughout the film are paralleled with Odysseus' run-ins with Poseidon (cf. Flensted-Jensen 2002: 22). It was Odysseus' egomaniacal need to inform the Cyclops of his real name that caused Poseidon to target him, and it is Everett's vanity—represented by the trail of pomade cans and hairnets he leaves in his wake that allows the sheriff's bloodhound to sniff him out.

Both Poseidon and Sheriff Cooley are representatives of local law determined to thwart a higher authority.[44] The gods arrange for Odysseus' safe passage home because it has been ordained by Fate (1.28). Poseidon, though, is described by Zeus as "one god, flouting the will of all the gods" (1.102–4). Poseidon continues to harass Odysseus even after he knows that Odysseus must be given safe passage home: "Here is a pretty cruise! While I was gone, the gods have changed their minds about Odysseus. Look at him now, just offshore of that island that frees him from the bondage of his exile! Still, I can give him a rough ride in, and will" (5.296–300).

Similarly, the Sheriff considers himself above both the law (which he derides as a mere "human institution," *OB* 104) and the lawmakers (he ignores the pardon given to the boys by the governor). But the sheriff never bows to a higher imperative, as even Poseidon does in the end.[45] The sheriff concludes that Fate has not been properly served, and he anoints himself its executor: "You have eluded fate—and eluded me—for the last time" (*OB* 102). With guns pointed at their backs and nooses swinging in their faces, their only recourse is prayer.[46] Earlier in the

[43] As in the Reunion scene, the Coens are again taking liberties with sequencing (using motifs from the middle of the *Odyssey* here at the end of their film).

[44] Tommy's description of the sheriff also equates him with the devil (*OB* 27). Tommy claims that he met the devil at a crossroads to sell his soul, a staple of southern mythology and specifically associated with the legend of Robert Johnson, the blues guitarist on whom Tommy's character is based. This also resonates with classical mythology, for Hecate, too, is associated with both crossroads and the underworld.

[45] This important distinction is ignored by Weinlich in her similar comparison of the sheriff with Poseidon (2005: 105–106).

[46] Nooses, of course, figure in the post-slaughter scene in the *Odyssey*, too:

film, Everett had derided true believers: "I guess hard times flush the chumps" (*OB* 23). Now he falls to his knees along with his friends. He confesses his sins, expresses genuine regret that he disavowed God in the past, and prays for forgiveness and salvation.

But to their surprise Everett and his friends, like Odysseus, survive this final attack of their nemesis.[47] In the *Odyssey*, "the god of earthquake heaves a wave against [Odysseus] high as a rooftree" (5.379–80). In *O Brother*, the plot of the sheriff is foiled by (rather than consisting of) "a wall of water" (*OB* 105) that literally comes crashing through the trees. Odysseus's boat "careered like a ball of tumbleweed blown on the autumn plains, but intact still" (5.339–40). The submerged hero of *O Brother* endures a similar trial, with the expected comic turn:

> *A silent world. Everett tumbles in the current in natural slow motion. Suspended around him are scores of tins of Dapper Dan pomade. Other objects spin slowly by: framed sepia-tinted family portraits, tree limbs, a fishing pole, an outhouse door, a frying pan, a noose, an old banjo, the wild-eyed frantically paddling bloodhound, a tire with a rope tied around it (set directions, OB* 105).

"Tangled by the seacloak of Kalypso" (5.332), Odysseus fights his way to the surface "spouting brine, with streamlets gushing from his head and beard" (5.333–34). The Nereid Ino knows that Poseidon cannot drown Odysseus "despite his rage" (5.353), and she counsels the hero to shed the cloak and use her immortal veil as a talisman. His boat now blasted into smithereens, "Odysseus clung to a single beam, like a jockey riding" (5.384–85). Again, a similar scene, minus any overtly supernatural elements, is found in *O Brother*:

> *Everett pops out of the water next to [the coffin], gasping for air, shaking his head clear of water, and moving his shoulders to finish freeing himself from the rope round his wrists. Pete and Delmar emerge nearby, gasping for air. The men hang onto the coffin, which bears them downstream.* (set directions, *OB* 105–6).

Although this flood scene has been derided as "self-consciously absurd" (Content 2001: 47) and "an outrageously unlikely final sequence" (Blake 2001: 33), the narrative template supplied by the *Odyssey* demands it. It

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Telemachus hangs the servings maids who slept with the suitors (22.523–26) because they "made a mockery of my mother and of me, too" (22.514–16). The Sheriff feels that a mockery is being made of justice. The setting for each hanging is just outside the hero's residence.

[47] As with Big Dan and Homer Stokes, the Sheriff simply disappears along with the threat he once posed. In *O Brother*, purification and redemption come through water (baptism, flood), while fire, used by Odysseus to purify the great hall (22.545–46), is the weapon of the police (*OB* 15) and the Klan (*OB* 83).

also brings the philosophical argument concerning the existence of God front and center. Was the flood a "miracle" as Delmar thinks (*OB* 106), a Christian *deus ex machina*? (so Danek 2001: 94). Pete thinks so: "We prayed to God and he pitied us!" (*OB* 106). Everett disagrees, and argues that his own momentary lapse into prayer is forgivable, for "any human being will cast about in a moment of stress" (*OB* 106). His "perfectly scientific explanation for what just happened" (*OB* 106) credits their timely rescue to a plan of Man (i.e., the scheduled flooding of the river), not to an action of God. Even the incongruous sight of "a cow on the roof of a cottonhouse," fulfillment of the blind seer's odd prophecy (*OB* 9), can be explained by this equally unusual set of circumstances.

After the *Odyssey* ends, we know that the humbled Odysseus will follow Teiresias' instructions (11.133–48) and carry that oar inland until someone asks him about the winnowing fan on his shoulder, and there he will build a shrine to Poseidon and make his sacrifices. Odysseus will forever quell Poseidon's wrath by spreading enlightenment about his cult to a people formerly in the dark about him. Ulysses Everett McGill delights in the knowledge that the flooding of the river (the film's version of bringing the sea inland) will bring electricity to the South, *literally* bringing illumination to a backward people:

> No, the fact is, they're flooding this valley so they can hydroelectric up the whole durned state …
>
> *Everett waxes smug:*
>
> Yessir, the South is gonna change. Everything's gonna be put on electricity and run on a payin' basis. Out with the old spiritual mumbo-jumbo, the superstitions and the backward ways. We're gonna see a brave new world where they run everyone a wire and hook us all up to a grid. Yessir, a veritable age of reason—like the one they had in France—and not a moment too soon. (*OB* 106)[48]

An irrepressible optimist, Everett peers into a future filled with hope. In any other situation, the ignorance of the human condition (and his-

[48] This speech is surely a comic inversion of the scathing indictment of "progress" in the 1972 film *Deliverance* (based on James Dickey's novel and directed by John Boorman), whose plot similarly concerns a Deep South adventure undertaken by four friends before the Tennessee Valley Authority creates a lake where one had not existed before. (The speech is made by the character named Lewis Medlock, played by Burt Reynolds, and is not found in the novel.) Other evidence of the influence of this film is scattered throughout *O Brother*. Not coincidentally, *O Brother*'s musical director T Bone Burnett (in an interview cited in Willman 2001: 81) suggests *Deliverance* as one of the few other mainstream entertainment sources of early twentieth-century Southern American music.

tory) revealed by his comparanda might fill an audience with dread.[49] But the Coens have prepared us well. This is the Everett we have come to know and love. His non-negotiable belief in the works of man is an outgrowth of his confidence in his own abilities, no matter any evidence to the contrary.

POST SCRIPT

Once re-established as lord of their realms, both Odysseus and Everett undergo a metamorphosis of sorts. Odysseus literally becomes a new man: "[Athena] made him taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair in curls like petals of wild hyacinth but all red-golden" (23.177–79). Everett is just better dressed, well-scrubbed and freshly pomaded. Odysseus is delighted to be reunited with his Penelope (23.399–400). We know that Odysseus looks forward to a long life—an uneventful retirement, surrounded by loved ones—followed by a peaceful death (11.148–51). Everett's sentiments are similar: "But I don't mind telling you, I'm awful pleased my adventuring days is at an end …. Time for this old boy to enjoy some repose." (*OB* 107). But Penny is not content just to have her husband back. She needs the symbol of their love—her wedding band—back, too (cf. Heckel 2005a: 588 and Weinlich 2005: 98–99). Everett muses, "… finding one little ring in the middle of all that water … that is one hell of a heroic task" (*OB* 109). And certainly one for which he is not equipped. While their daughters are literally tied together with a string, Penny has Everett on an even tighter leash. Has Everett exchanged one kind of confinement for another? (so Content 2001: 48 and Werner 2003: 187). Perhaps, but he remains good-humored to the end, for like Odysseus, he has won exactly the life he wants.

CONCLUSION

The blind railroad man's re-appearance at the end of the film marks the successful conclusion to our heroes' journey. The "fortune" (*OB* 8) they were destined to find, their "reward" (*OB* 9) for staying the course, turns out to be love, friendship, and success. But even though the blind seer had prophesied that "Fate has vouchsafed your reward" (*OB* 9), success never seemed a lock for Everett. Unlike Odysseus, he not only had to defeat a rival, but he also had to win back his wife's love. Odys-

[49] Cf. Ruppersburg 2003: 23. Content 2001: 48 notes that "Electricity is a metaphor for the false promise of rationality and progress, an end to the Dark Age, a literal enlightenment" and points to the imminent electrocution of George Nelson as proof that such progress "has its victims too." Heckel argues that although the flood saves the lives of the heroes and eliminates their enemies, it does not usher in the new age Everett hopes it will (2005a: 587).

seus' happy end (as announced in the proem of the poem, 1.28) is always a foregone conclusion. Everett's unexpected success is both more surprising and sweeter. We can't know why comic hero Everett and his pals succeed despite their many shortcomings (cf. Flensted-Jensen 2002: 23). Certainly, such an end was most unlikely. Is their success due to happy coincidence and plain old good luck? Or do coincidences really exist at all? Could these unlikely heroes really be Fortune's favorites? Or is the Christian God they pray to responsible for their good fortune? All we can know for sure is that in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Coens offer a vision of the world both heartwarming and mystifying, in a way that makes us smile despite ourselves. Unlike Homer's *Odyssey*, our world is full of inexplicable events. Why can't we just accept that some of them bring happiness and joy?

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