

ODYSSEUS THROUGH THE AGES

Dr. Caroline Bishop, Tuesdays and Thursdays 2:00-3:20pm, Fall 2023



Odysseus, the mythical figure first introduced in the *Iliad*, is one of Western literature's earliest personalities, and he is also one of the most ubiquitous: from Homer to Euripides, Ovid to Shakespeare, Tennyson to the Coen Brothers, many authors and artists have made him their own. His famous encounter with the Sirens (pictured above) is just one of many elements of his story that has changed over time: notice how the Sirens morph from mythical monsters, to angelic/demonic figures, to mermaids, and finally, to human women whose power consists of the liberal use of grain alcohol!

In this course, we will trace these and similar changes to the figure of Odysseus across the ages. Beginning with his appearance as a warrior and trickster in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, we will watch him transform into a stage villain in the Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, and then become Ulysses, the Roman Odysseus, in the epics of Vergil and Ovid and the tragedies of Seneca. We will then turn to Odysseus' appearance in medieval poetry and romance and Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* before considering how he was reinterpreted for the modern world in novels by Margaret Atwood and Madeline Miller as well as in modern media like the graphic novel *The Infinite Horizon* by Gerry Duggan and the Coen Brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*.

Along the way we will watch Odysseus constantly shifting between the roles of respected counsellor and evil schemer, bold adventurer and cunning trickster, hero and villain, and discuss how each different Odysseus reflects the values and circumstances of the age that produced him. By the end of the semester, students will have learned what it is about Odysseus that makes him such an enduring figure, and one so intriguing to authors and artists.



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