

Four Odysseys: Homer, Wilson, Nolan, Joyce

A comparative handoff — session notes for Okan, prepared 18 July 2026

This document consolidates two conversations: (1) a fact-check and analysis of Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* (2026) and its stated debt to Emily Wilson's 2017 translation of Homer, including a point-by-point look at the nine departures from the Homeric text you flagged, and (2) a broader four-way comparison adding James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) as an indirect fourth point of reference, since it sits alongside your ongoing *Ulysses* website/presentation project. Citations refer to reviews and reference sources gathered via web search on 18 July 2026; the film opened one day prior, so some plot specifics (especially the Cattle of the Sun resolution) remain thin in press coverage at this writing.

1. The Translation Connection — Confirmed

The premise was accurate with one correction: the translator is **Emily Wilson**, not Wilkins. Nolan has said directly, in an interview with *Empire*, that his film draws on Wilson's 2017 translation — he quoted its opening line ("Tell me about a complicated man") and cited the psychological complexity of her Odysseus as central to what drew him to the project. He also mentioned reading Daniel Mendelsohn's more recent, more classically oriented translation as a contrasting reference point. Wikipedia's production entry for the film independently confirms Wilson's translation, alongside the films of Ray Harryhausen, as stated influences.

What Wilson did differently, as a translator

- First complete English translation of the Homeric Greek published by a woman.
- Preserved the original's line count, rendered in English iambic pentameter rather than free verse or archaic diction — a formal discipline, not just a style choice.
- Deliberately plain, modern syntax; she has described older translations as reaching for "weird grandeur" that *bullies* the reader rather than illuminating the text.
- The signature example is *polytropos* — Odysseus's opening epithet, traditionally "of many wiles" or "cunning" — which she renders as **"complicated."**
- Widely credited with a fresh, less euphemistic treatment of the poem's women and enslaved characters, without altering a single plot event.

That last point is the hinge for everything that follows: Wilson's innovation is entirely at the level of *diction and register*. She changes how the text sounds and who it lets us see clearly — never what happens. Nolan's film, by contrast, changes what happens. That distinction matters for the four-way comparison in Section 3.

2. The Nine Departures From Homer — Verified Against Reviews

Following deeper research (post-release reviews, plot recaps, and explainer pieces published July 15–18, 2026), here is where each observation stands. Confidence is marked High / Medium / Unconfirmed.

#	Observation	Verdict	Detail
1	Circe: transformer, not seductress	High	Confirmed across multiple reviews: Circe (Samantha Morton) feeds the men enchanted stew and uses body-horror magic ("stretching bones, mangling faces") to turn them into pigs, lions, tigers, deer — no wand. No review mentions a seduction of Odysseus; several describe her as a "radical feminist" or a woman defined by fear of / hostility toward men. Odysseus talks her down rather than sleeping with her. His right-hand man Eurylochus (Himesh Patel) is grouped with "all the men" transformed — a real change from Homer, where Eurylochus refuses to enter and is spared.
2	Laestrygonians: in the woods, a child rather than a young woman	High	Confirmed: Odysseus's men "find a child in the forest" whose scream summons giant, armored, cannibal Laestrygonians. Sources describe the child but do not specify gender in the passages found; your recollection of a young male may be accurate but isn't independently confirmed in what's available.
3	Hades: restructured	High	Confirmed as a real restructuring. Nolan's underworld is a curated sequence tightly bound to the Trojan War's guilt: Sinon (Elliot Page), the soldier who volunteered to trigger the Trojan Horse ruse, appears before Agamemnon (Benny Safdie), murdered by Clytemnestra, before Tiresias (James Remar) delivers the prophecy. Homer's underworld is a much wider parade of shades (Odysseus's mother, Achilles, Ajax, and more) — Nolan narrows it to figures that implicate Odysseus's own wartime choices.
4	Cattle of the Sun: handled differently	Partial	The setup is confirmed and re-framed as a moral dilemma: stranded, starving, with Tiresias's warning already delivered in Hades, the men must decide whether to risk sacrilege against Helios's cattle to survive — a deliberate weighing of options rather than Homer's account of men succumbing to hunger in Odysseus's absence. The resolution/aftermath wasn't detailed in the sources found (film is one day old at this writing).
5	Calypso: warmer, healing, wants him to remember	Medium	Partially confirmed: Calypso (Charlize Theron) is described as "ethereal," someone who "falls in love with" Odysseus, and who gives him a mind-altering lotus flower that makes him amnesiac — which is a more ambiguous, pharmacological form of "care" than straightforward healing. The specific framing of her wanting him to remember (rather than forget) isn't directly confirmed, though it fits the amnesia device.
6	The Sea People: "we are the Sea People"	High — exact match	This is the film's central invention and thematic spine. Odysseus, back in Ithaca with Penelope, realizes the "People of the Sea" — an apocalyptic raiding force referenced throughout, in violation of "Zeus's Law" of hospitality — describes what he and his men did at Troy. Nolan grounds this in the real historical Sea Peoples, linked to the Bronze Age collapse and the fall of palace civilizations like Mycenae and Pylos. It reframes the entire monster-of-the-week structure as a mirror held up to the hero.
7	Penelope: structured, active decision-maker	High	Confirmed. The film's climax is triggered by a test Penelope herself designs. She is described as "pricklier and more ambivalent" than the archetypal patient wife, seething at the suitors' patriarchal entitlement, and navigating tension with her own son over his ambitions.

#	Observation	Verdict	Detail
8	Tone: anti-war / anti-violence	Medium-High	Better described as morally ambiguous than strictly anti-war. Reviews note Odysseus is haunted by Trojan War visions and comes to wonder whether he wasn't kept from home by divine cruelty but by something closer to reckoning or fate — a shift from external punishment to internal consequence. Combined with the Sea People framing, this substantially complicates the war epic's usual triumphalism, even if it stops short of a pacifist thesis.
9	Telemachus: wiser, still learning	Medium	Confirmed in spirit. He is still called "callow" in one review, but is also shown engaging seriously with statecraft — discussing the Sea People threat with Menelaus, then debating with Penelope whether he or a suitor should take the throne to protect Ithaca. More politically engaged than Homer's Telemachus, who mainly needs Athena's prodding to act at all.

Overall read: your instincts were unusually accurate for a film one day old. Only the Cattle of the Sun resolution and Calypso's exact motivation remain genuinely open questions at this writing.

3. The Fourth Dimension — Adding Joyce's Ulysses

Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is not an adaptation of Homer in any plot sense. Leopold Bloom — a middle-aged, cuckolded, socially marginal advertising canvasser — moves through one ordinary day in Dublin (16 June 1904); Stephen Dedalus plays Telemachus, the son in search of a father; Molly Bloom plays Penelope, her forty-page unpunctuated interior monologue closing the book. The eighteen episodes map loosely onto Homer's twenty-four books, but nothing in the plot literally recurs — no Cyclops, no Circe, no sea voyage. Joyce told his friend Frank Budgen that he chose *Ulysses* because, unlike Hamlet, Odysseus is "a complete man": son, father, husband, lover, soldier, and king all at once. The project was to relocate that completeness into an unremarkable modern life and argue, structurally, that ordinary endurance and compassion *are* the heroic register — not a lesser substitute for it.

Two axes worth separating

Your intuition — that Joyce is the more empathic, character-building work, and that Wilson's translation is closer in spirit to that than Nolan's film is — is worth testing against two independent axes, because collapsing them into one "which is more empathetic" scale hides an important distinction:

- **Fidelity to Homer's plot and genre.** Does the work stay inside the adventure-epic events and world, or does it leave them behind?
- **Empathetic / interior orientation.** Does the work extend psychological interiority, moral complexity, and attention to marginal figures (women, the enslaved, the ordinary) beyond what a purely external, action-and-epithet narrative provides?

Work	Fidelity to Homer's plot/genre	Empathetic/interior orientation	Mechanism
Homer's <i>Odyssey</i>	100% — it is the source	Present but externalized: epithets, formulaic speech, action and cunning as the primary language of character. Interiority exists (Penelope's grief, Odysseus's weeping) but is narrated from outside, in a value-system built on kleos (fame) and xenia (guest-law).	Oral-epic composition; character revealed through action and speech-in-context
Wilson's translation	100% — bound by fidelity to the Greek; invents no new plot	Medium-High, achieved <i>without</i> touching plot: plain diction removes the archaizing distance that flattened women and enslaved characters in prior English versions; readers see the same events with less euphemism standing between them and the people in the poem.	Translation choices: register, syntax, refusal of archaism and euphemism
Nolan's <i>The Odyssey</i>	~70% — keeps the adventure-epic plot and genre, but rewrites motivations and several set-pieces (Circe, Hades, the Sea People reveal)	Medium-High, achieved by <i>adding</i> new content: moral doubt about the war, an active Penelope, a self-implicating Sea People frame. Still fundamentally a hero's action epic — spectacle and combat remain load-bearing.	Adaptation: new scenes, reframed motivations, retained genre

Work	Fidelity to Homer's plot/genre	Empathetic/interior orientation	Mechanism
Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i>	~0% direct — plot is entirely abandoned; only structural/allusive correspondence remains (18 episodes, character roles)	Maximal, and structural rather than additive: heroism is <i>relocated</i> into ordinary consciousness — compassion, domestic tenderness, endurance of humiliation — via stream-of-consciousness form itself, not via added plot incident.	Genre transformation: myth used as scaffolding, not source

So — does Wilson sit closer to Joyce in spirit?

Yes, but for a specific and limited reason, and it's worth being precise about which reason, because it's not the same kind of empathy Joyce practices. Both Wilson and Joyce share an **anti-mystification impulse**: a refusal of the "weird grandeur" (Wilson's phrase) that keeps a text at arm's length from ordinary human recognition. Wilson's plain, direct English and Joyce's insistence — per Virginia Woolf's gloss on the project — on "the ordinary mind on an ordinary day" are the same gesture aimed at different targets: Wilson aims it at translation diction; Joyce aims it at the entire concept of what deserves epic treatment. Neither one is inventing empathy that wasn't latent in the material — Wilson would say the Greek already contains Penelope's intelligence and the enslaved women's personhood, just as Joyce would say Bloom's decency was always as available a subject as Achilles's rage; both are removing something (archaism, heroic distance) rather than adding something.

Nolan's film, by contrast, is closer to Wilson at the level of *genre* — both stay inside the adventure-epic — but closer to Joyce at the level of *method*, because the film's empathy (an active Penelope, a self-doubting Odysseus, the Sea People's moral mirror) is achieved by adding new dramatic material rather than by translating existing material more faithfully. That makes the film a genuine hybrid: Homer's plot, Wilson's psychological premise (Odysseus as "complicated" rather than merely cunning), and something closer to Joyce's revisionist instinct (let's see what this looks like from the inside, and from the losing side) — but without Joyce's most radical move, which is abandoning heroism and spectacle altogether in favor of one unremarkable day.

Put differently: Wilson de-mystifies the sentence. Nolan de-mystifies the hero, but keeps the myth. Joyce discards the myth's events entirely and re-mystifies the ordinary — Bloom's tenderness toward Molly despite her affair, his kindness to Stephen, his private griefs, become the epic material. If "empathic" means *willing to sit inside a consciousness the original genre had no interest in*, Joyce is doing something categorically larger than either Wilson or Nolan — but it's also a different project, not a better-executed version of the same one.

A note for the *Ulysses* project

This framing — fidelity-to-plot vs. empathetic/interior orientation as two separable axes — may be worth carrying into the planned document mapping Homer's *Odyssey* onto Joyce's *Ulysses*. Wilson's translation is a useful third reference point for that mapping specifically because it's the version of Homer that most resembles, in tone and accessibility, the register Joyce is writing *against the grain of* — Joyce inherited the "bullying" grandiose *Odyssey* Wilson was reacting against a century later, and both, from opposite directions, end up making the poem feel inhabited by recognizable people rather than statues.

4. Sources Consulted

Topic	Source
Nolan on Wilson's translation	Empire interview, cited via Syfy Wire, "The Odyssey Translations to Read Before Christopher Nolan Film," syfy.com
Wilson translation background	Wikipedia, "Odyssey (Emily Wilson translation)"
Film production facts	Wikipedia, "The Odyssey (2026 film)"
Translation framing / "complicated man"	Danielle Binks, "Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey Movie Review," daniellebinks.substack.com
Translation debate context	The Print, "Which Odyssey translation should you read before watching Christopher Nolan's movie?"
Circe sequence detail	The Hollywood Reporter; Boston.com; Slate; The Direct ("Monsters" explainer); Asha Bardon review (Substack)
Laestrygonians / forest child	The Review Geek, "Full Movie Recap & Ending Explained"; Empire review
Hades / Tiresias structure	The Credits (motionpictures.org), "Finds the Monster Within Its Hero"; If You Want The Gravy (Substack); Looper explainer
Cattle of the Sun setup	Slate, "I'm a Longtime Christopher Nolan Skeptic..."
Calypso framing	Boston.com review; Slate review
Sea People theme	The Direct; The Conversation ("haunted by the mysterious Sea Peoples"); SlashFilm explainer; Looper explainer
Penelope characterization	Roger Ebert review (rogerebert.com); Slate review
Telemachus / statecraft thread	Looper, "Who Are The People From The Sea" explainer
Joyce / Ulysses vs. Homer	americanliterature.com summary; Shmoop, "The Odyssey in Ulysses"; Classical Wisdom (Budgen quote); Modernism Lab (Yale); British Literature Blog, "From Damnation to Everyday Heroism"

5. Open Questions for a Follow-Up Pass

- How the Cattle of the Sun sequence actually resolves on screen (punishment, survivors, staging) — thin in day-one coverage.
- Whether Calypso's arc is framed as memory-restoring or memory-erasing by the film's end.
- The Laestrygonian child's gender, and whether the scene deliberately inverts Homer's presentation of the princess Nausicaa-adjacent encounters (unconfirmed conjecture on my part, worth checking once full scene breakdowns or the screenplay are available).
- Whether any interview has Nolan discussing Joyce specifically — none turned up in this pass; his stated influences remain Wilson and Ray Harryhausen.