

# THE MAKING OF THE WOODEN HORSE<sup>1</sup>

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In one of the *Odyssey*'s most self-conscious moments, Odysseus calls for the tale of his most heroic exploit—the fashioning of the wooden horse—to be performed in front of a live audience (*Od.* 8.492f.). Having once engineered the horse's physical construction, the hero now facilitates its reconstruction through the medium of song. Demodocus, the blind bard of Scheria, the mythological figure whose character and attributes have helped to shape the shadowy image of Homer himself,<sup>2</sup> complies with Odysseus' request. It is clear that he knows the material well; it is an established part of his repertoire. This moment serves to reveal the singular and remarkable renown of this myth. Just a few short years after Odysseus, together with the goddess Athena and the craftsman Epeius, masterminded the wooden horse and brought about Troy's downfall, the tale has travelled even to the remote and isolated community of the Phaeacians (cf. *Od.* 6.204f.). The story's rapid and widespread dissemination within the world of Homer's poem seems to resonate with the status of the myth in the real world, our own world. Just as it is within the *Odyssey*, the story of the wooden horse has been perpetually told and retold. And just as Demodocus is familiar with the tale, so is almost everyone today.

Odysseus calls on the bard to 'sing the κόσμος of the wooden horse' (*Od.* 8.492), literally, to sing its form or order.<sup>3</sup> The term κόσμος is endowed with both an architectural and a poetic force. It refers to the physical shape of the construction as well as to the precise order of the narrative. In accordance with this dual meaning, this discussion will address the *making* of the wooden horse, and its connection with the making of the myth of the wooden horse. I will argue that the physical construction undertaken by Odysseus and his collaborators has a close and revealing relationship with the less tangible process of μυθοποίησις. This term is generally understood to mean mythmaking, but additionally, it has the potential to signify the process whereby myth is rendered into poetic form. When Odysseus requests the song of the wooden horse which' Επειδὸς ἐποίησεν, ('which Epeius made', *Od.* 8.493),<sup>4</sup> his alliterative wordplay blurs the distinction between the physical and poetic creative processes.

In keeping with the theme of construction, this discussion is composed of three parts. In the first, I will position the wooden horse as a physical creation that is crafted through repeated performance. I will then propose that the wooden horse is not only crafted in poetry, but is additionally a tangible manifestation of the *process* of crafting poetry. Like an epic poem, the horse is pieced together out of diverse elements and is uniquely fashioned each and every time it is made. Finally, I will explore some of the ways in which this famous story has come

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1 An earlier version of this article was delivered at Flux, a conference hosted by the School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology at The University of Melbourne, on 10 November 2006. I am extremely grateful to everyone who has encouraged me to prepare the paper for publication. The feedback provided to me, first by my fellow postgraduate colleagues and subsequently by *Iris*' referees, has been invaluable.

2 On Homer's relationship to Demodocus, see Leeming (2003), 49; Graziosi and Haubold (2005), 23; Clay (1983), 11.

3 Consistently, translators adopt less oblique phrasing. In the Loeb edition Murray translates κόσμον as 'building' (see page 309), while Lattimore omits it entirely to have Odysseus declare 'sing us the wooden horse' (see page 135). I prefer the ambiguity of the term 'making' (as in the title, and the essential sentiment, of this article).

4 Davies (2000), 58, draws attention to the wordplay.

to be remade in our own era, in order to highlight the possibilities afforded by the modern age for playing with mythology and the mythological tradition.

Greek mythology is full of stories about building things. The gods create Pandora, Daedalus crafts the labyrinth, the Argo is made for Jason. Hephaestus fashions the shield of Achilles. The poets glory in extended descriptions of the construction process. A vivid example of this features within book five of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus builds a raft with which to depart from Calypso's island. A passage of almost forty lines (*Od.* 5.228-62) is devoted to the undertaking. He fells trees, trims and planes the timber, bores holes in the planks and pins them with dowels, and lashes them together with cords. He then constructs uprights, gunwales, a mast and a steering oar, and stitches the sails. The hero labours for four days to complete the project, which makes it all the more tragic when Poseidon obliterates his creation less than fifty lines later (*Od.* 8.291ff.).

It is easy to imagine Odysseus crafting the wooden horse in a similar sort of way—cutting down trees, preparing the timber, crafting the separate pieces to form, in this case, the shape of a horse. Significantly, both of these projects are followed by a departure by sea—Odysseus builds the raft and leaves Calypso's island (*Od.* 5.269-71) just as the construction of the horse at Troy is succeeded by the feigned departure of the Greek army (*Od.* 8.500f.). Michael J. Anderson has drawn attention to the structural correspondences between the wooden horse and a ship—both are hollow, wooden, curved vessels built for the purpose of transporting men.<sup>5</sup> Understanding the wooden horse as 'a kind of ship in disguise'<sup>6</sup> helps to clarify the way in which this mysterious construction might have been put together.

The detail supplied in the raft building sequence in *Odyssey* 5 becomes particularly significant when it is revealed just how vague the early sources are as to how the wooden horse of mythology was crafted.<sup>7</sup> Odysseus calls on Demodocus to sing the horse's κόσμος,<sup>8</sup> but when the bard responds, he elects to begin his account (ἔνθεν ἔλὼν ὥς, *Od.* 8.500) with the horse already built, the men inside, and the rest of the army in the process of desecrating their camp and sailing away. This avoidance of the specifics of the horse's construction is reflected in other texts. Very little is said in any source as to how the horse might have been made. To some degree, this is merely bad luck, a result of the misfortune of losing particular sources over the course of time. Almost certainly, Lesches' epic poem *Little Iliad* would have described the building of the horse, perhaps even in some detail. But Proclus' summary of the epic supplies only scant detail, and concentrates on the identity of the project's masterminds: Ἐπειὸς κατ' Ἀθηνᾶς προαίρεσιν τὸν δούρειον ἵππον κατασκευάζει ('Epeius builds a wooden horse according to the plan of Athena', *MI* arg. 4). Apollodorus is slightly more forthcoming. Though he too is silent with regard to the construction process, he not only makes reference to those involved, but also draws attention to the horse's material composition (*Epit.* 5.14):

Ἵστερον δὲ ἐπινοεῖ δουρείου ἵππου κατασκευὴν καὶ ὑποτίθεται Ἐπειῶ, ὃς ἦν ἀρχιτέκτων· οὗτος ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰδῆς ξύλα τεμὼν ἵππον κατασκευάζει κοῖλον ἔνδοθεν εἰς τὰς πλευρὰς ἀνεωγμένον.

5 Anderson (1997) 20-6.

6 Anderson (1997) 22.

7 Cf. Quintus 12.122-34 for a later account.

8 As I have already stated, literally the term means 'form' or 'order', but in this context also has the connotations of 'building' (as in Murray's Loeb translation) or 'making' (as in the title of this article).

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Later Odysseus has the idea of constructing a wooden horse, and he suggests it to Epeius, who was an architect. Using timber from Mount Ida he builds a horse that was hollow within and opens up at the side.

Here, Odysseus is credited with the inspiration for the scheme, and Epeius with the task of physical craftsmanship. Apollodorus is unique in revealing that the timber for the project is collected from Mount Ida, a site which also provides wood for several other large scale building projects, including the ships of Paris (Tryph. 59-61) and the funeral pyres of Patroclus (*Il.* 23.110-126) and, it can be imagined, also Hector. Virgil, by far the most comprehensive (and also the most influential) source for the myth has Aeneas describe how the Greeks *instar montis equum divina Palladis arte | aedificant sectaque intexunt abiete costas* (*Aen.* 2.15-6, ‘built a horse the size of a mountain, cutting pine trees to weave into it for ribs’). Here, the horse is as large as the place from which its building materials come. A scholiast on these lines adds that the construction was *in longitudine pedes C et in latitudine pedes L*, ‘100 feet long and 50 feet wide’, and alternative, though no less enormous, dimensions are suggested by Virgil’s other ancient commentators.<sup>9</sup>

In this account, there is considerable variation as to what kind of wood is used. Virgil refers to the horse being crafted out of a veritable forest of different tree types, including fir, maple, oak and pine.<sup>10</sup> While W. McLeod has been troubled by this inconsistency,<sup>11</sup> I want to propose that this variety underscores the composite nature of the construction. Designed and built by multiple engineers; the horse is crafted out of a range of different building materials. In Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, the Chorus describe the agent of their downfall as being χρυσεοφάλαρον (*Tro.* 520, ‘armed with trappings of gold’). This opulent depiction finds an echo in the comments of Virgil’s scholiasts who note that the wooden horse’s knees, tail and eyes were endowed with autonomous movement.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the wooden horses that are described in the texts of Homer, Euripides and Virgil, as well as by Apollodorus and other late commentators, are diverse in form, but united in one sense: they are all difficult to pin down. Aside from Apollodorus’ trapdoor and the trappings of gold alluded to by the Chorus of the *Trojan Women*, it is hard to get a sense of what the construction looks like, let alone how it was actually fashioned. But one thing is clear; the wooden horse is firmly fixed within a performative context. The story is told, and retold, again and again. This applies equally within the myth’s internal setting as it does to our own world.

The *Odyssey*—the earliest literary source for the story—clarifies this point. Let us return to Demodocus’ performance at the court of the Phaeacians on Scheria—sung at the request of Odysseus himself. This episode has been thought to resemble the real life context in which Homeric epic was performed.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere in the poem, Menelaus relates the story to Odysseus’ son Telemachus (*Od.* 4.269-89), and Odysseus himself tells it to Achilles when he

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9 Cf. Servius on *Aen.* 2.150: *Hunc tamen equum quidam longam centum uiginti [pedes]* ‘Some record that this horse was 120 feet long and 30 wide.’

10 Olive wood is conspicuously absent from this list, a point which may be significant when its use in Odysseus’ bed (*Od.* 23.190ff.) is considered.

11 McLeod (1970) 144.

12 The scholiast on *Aen.* 2.15 writes *cuius caudam et genua mobilia fuisse tradidit* (‘its tail and knees could move’) and on *Aen.* 2.150 Servius adds *latum triginta fuisse tradunt, cuius cauda genua oculi monuerentur* (‘its tail, knees and eyes could move’).

13 Ford (1992) 9.

encounters him in the Underworld (*Od.* 11.523-32). The influence of this narrative topos on Virgil is obvious. In book two of the *Aeneid*, the story of Troy's fall is recounted in such graphic detail that it is easy to forget that it is a reported narrative.

Other texts that treat the aftermath of the Trojan War also emphasise the performability of the narrative, with additional consequences for its reception in the real world. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the king recounts the horse's conquest on his triumphant but doomed return from Troy (*Aga.* 824-8), and in Euripides' *Trojan Women* first Poseidon (*Tro.* 11-4) and later the Chorus (*Tro.* 515-21) also make reference to it. Such allusions are presented to the drama's internal characters as well as its assembled audience, implicating both groups in the storytelling process.

Thus while the physical form of the horse remains elusive, the construction is perpetually recrafted through the communication between storyteller and audience. As a result, the wooden horse is as much, if indeed not more, a product of poetry as it is a physical construction. In the next part of this paper I want to look more closely at this connection, and in doing so, posit that the myth of the horse might reveal something about the phenomenon of myth more generally.

Who Homer was, when and where he lived, and when and how he composed the two poems that are attributed to him—some of the issues which comprise the so-called Homeric Question—were a source of consternation for ancient critics and remain the focus of a lively academic debate. But on one matter scholars tend to be in agreement. Although the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are regularly upheld as the first great works of western literature, they are also located at the end of a poetic tradition, one spanning multiple centuries. A mythological corpus, communicated orally from one generation to the next, supplied Homer—whoever 'he' was—with an extensive body of material from which to construct his poems. The wooden horse is generally considered to be one of these traditional story elements, an established motif which a Homeric audience would have been very familiar with.<sup>14</sup>

In 1986, in a chapter entitled “Priam's Castle Blazing”, A Thousand Years of Trojan Memories',<sup>15</sup> Emily D.T. Vermeule confronted the Homeric Question by contesting the poet's very humanity. According to her, 'Homer is not a person, but a process, not a noun but a verb.'<sup>16</sup> Expanding on an etymology devised in the previous decade by Gregory Nagy,<sup>17</sup> she proposes that the verb *to homer* might be the result of the fusion between the adjective ὁμός (*homos*), meaning 'together', and the verb ἀραρίσκειν (*arariskein*), 'to fit'. In essence, Homeric poetry is something that is fitted together.

Vermeule goes on to liken the crafting of an epic poem to an act of physical construction. In her words, the poet is 'like a carpenter using timbers and pegs to make a hall or a ship.'<sup>18</sup> Her analogy calls to my mind another large scale building project in which wood is the principal building material. Much like a dining hall, and as we have already seen, very much like a ship, the wooden horse is a vaulted space in which men sit, a man-made construction in which individual elements are skilfully joined together.

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14 Cf. Schein (1984) 14, Hedreen (2001) 87.

15 Vermeule (1986).

16 Vermeule (1986) 86.

17 Nagy (1979) 297-300.

18 Vermeule (1986) 86-7. Nagy (1979) 298 notes an Indo-European tradition which links the poetic with the physical.

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Vermeule's observations make it possible to regard the making of the wooden horse as equivalent to the poetic process itself. For just as Homer's poems are the products of diverse narrative traditions, a fusion of established and original elements, so similarly is the wooden horse composed of various materials joined into a cohesive, monumental whole.

Furthermore, Vermeule reveals, such constructions are fluid; in effect, they are in a perpetual state of flux. 'Whatever he homers can be larger or smaller and he can build it differently next time,' she writes.<sup>19</sup> It is her belief that Homer's poems are the products of an oral poetic tradition, and additionally, that the works were composed through the process of performance. Using established formulas and mnemonic devices the poet creates an improvised work, one that would never be sung exactly the same twice over.

This reading is a useful one, for it permits a connection to be made between the development of epic poetry and the wooden horse. Both evolve through the medium of repeated performance, and, like Homer, the horse is never represented in exactly the same way. In order to illustrate this notion, I now want to move beyond the limits of the ancient world to explore the construction, and indeed ongoing reconstruction, of the wooden horse myth in contemporary contexts. To do so is to be spoiled for choice—the contemporary age is populated by a plethora of manifestations of this myth, from the computer virus to the prophylactic device. But in order to maintain clarity of argument, I have elected to limit this discussion to just two of today's wooden horses. These representations of the myth are especially interesting as they incorporate different media and straddle the boundary between the real world and alternate spheres. The first wooden horse starred in a film but has since become a tourist attraction, and the second is an original creation which, since being posted on the internet, has gained both a popular and critical reputation. These two case studies highlight the singular renown of the wooden horse myth, now as in antiquity.

Let me begin with Wolfgang Petersen's 2004 blockbuster *Troy*. The film alleges itself to be a 'retelling of the *Iliad*,'<sup>20</sup> but like many of its Sword and Sandal forebears, the narrative encompasses the full round of the Trojan Cycle, from Helen and Paris' elopement to the ultimate sack of the city. It is a frequent source of surprise that the fall of Troy is not featured within the *Iliad*,<sup>21</sup> and works such as Petersen's serve to reinforce these commonly held misconceptions about the narrative parameters of Homer's poem. At the time of its release, the reviewer David Elmer justified the horse's inclusion in the film. He said that 'it's hard to blame Petersen...for appropriating the wooden horse because it's perhaps the only feature of Homer's work that the 15 to 19-year-olds who make up the target audience in the US might recognise.'<sup>22</sup> His comment highlights the pervasive power of the wooden horse motif. Regardless of how familiar (or, for that matter, unfamiliar)<sup>23</sup> the average person is with Homer's epics in their original form, they—somehow—know about the wooden horse. As

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19 Vermeule (1986) 87.

20 The DVD copy blurb reads 'Brad Pitt picks up a sword and brings a muscular, brooding presence to the role of Greek warrior Achilles in this spectacular retelling of the *Iliad*.'

21 Luce (1975) writes that '[e]veryone knows that Troy was taken with the aid of a wooden horse, but many will be surprised to learn that there is no mention of this stratagem in the *Iliad*' 137. Cf. Raaflaub (1999) who of the *Iliad*'s conclusion writes that '[t]he poem ends there and does not mention the stratagem of the Trojan horse' 203.

22 Elmer, David. 'Blood Sweat and Spears' in *The Weekend Australian*, May 15-16 2004, R4.

23 Cf. Latacz (2004) 143-4, who makes a distinction between the widespread knowledge of Troy and Homer's little known status.

one of the most recognisable and photogenic elements of the Troy saga, the horse's inclusion in the film is understandable. *Troy* has been harshly criticised for its extravagant budget, poor script, and radical revisions of the traditional narrative. In this version, both Menelaus and Agamemnon die at Troy, while Achilles survives to participate in the city's sack, even entering into wooden horse.<sup>24</sup> In the end, Paris and Helen flee Troy's ruins together (running into Aeneas on the way). While some have regarded these emendations as blasphemous, for my purposes they ultimately substantiate Vermeule's interpretation of the myth-making process. Petersen is simply crafting an alternative version of the Troy story.

His wooden horse is built rather differently too. Breaking with ancient tradition, the film takes pains to depict the inspiration for the ruse and the process of its physical construction. In a somewhat laboured sequence, Odysseus is represented witnessing a comrade whittling a toy horse for his child at home; evidently, the hero meditates that the building of a much larger horse might allow them all to return to Greece. Odysseus then facilitates the making of a wooden horse that is utterly unlike Euripides' gold-decked creature or the animated creation described by Virgil's commentators. Petersen's horse is a haphazard construction held together crudely with ropes, fashioned out of scraps of discarded wood and the hull of a dilapidated ship—in this case, the horse's nautical associations are made explicit. There are no tidy joins here, and when the time comes for the hidden warriors to leave their hiding place, they do so not via a neatly crafted trapdoor like the one described by Apollodorus, but instead from all over the body of the horse, which visibly disintegrates as they do so. A subsequent scene shows the remains of the horse going up in flames, a unique moment in which the construction's final fate is explicitly revealed.<sup>25</sup>

In reality, Petersen's wooden horse survived this inferno to take on a new role. During May 2004, the horse spearheaded the film's promotional campaign, touring the capital cities of Europe and Asia to attend opening night celebrations. Its striking and spectacular visual form made it the ideal marketing device. Eclipsing even Brad Pitt, the wooden horse was the star of the film. Much as news of the wooden horse and its role in the sack of Troy travels through the world of the *Odyssey* even faster than Odysseus does, so this horse promoted its own reputation in conjunction with the film's release. Following the tour, the horse was presented as a gift to the Turkish settlement of Çanakkale, the closest city to the archaeological site of Troy.<sup>26</sup> The notion of the Turks, the geographic descendants of the Trojans, accepting the gift of another wooden horse is a comical one. Coincidentally, in late 2006 this theme was also exploited by the ABC's *The Chaser's War on Everything*. In a segment entitled 'Has anyone learned from history?' the team approached prominent Sydney locations—the Opera House, the Channel Nine Studios, the Army Barracks—with a wooden horse loaded on the back of the trailer. Consistently, the horse was accepted into the secure area, with just one exception—the Turkish embassy refused to grant the horse entry.

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24 An act which seems inconsistent with his traditional character. Hedreen (2001) makes it clear that 'Achilles would not have tried to take the Trojans through trickery; he would have attacked them openly; he would not—this is the important point—have gotten inside the wooden horse,' 176.

25 Petersen's horse breaks with tradition, since in general ancient sources tend to avoid depicting the construction's destruction. As a result, the horse is cast as a vessel which, having fulfilled the purpose for which it was built, is no longer needed. The absence of overt depictions of this moment permits the myth a continued vitality. This can be witnessed particularly strongly at the site of Troy, where the wooden horse 'continues' to loom over the city walls.

26 Which, as noted in the previous footnote, has its own wooden horse. Built in 1975, the construction has undergone renovation recently, a process which serves as an evocative reminder of the status of this myth—now, as in antiquity.

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Those in Sydney might have learned from history, but the city of Çanakkale welcomed their gift with open arms. The monumental creature has since been installed in the tourist precinct and functions as a tangible reminder of the region's mythological history, as well as an enduring advertisement for the film. The exploits of this horse demonstrate the potential for a mythic motif to be transformed. In the film, the horse is crafted out of recycled materials—scraps of old wood, tattered ropes, the wreck of a ship. Its material composition in the film reflects a rejuvenated existence in the real world as a touring celebrity, and finally as a tourist attraction.

The internet has proved to be an extremely valuable forum within which to chart this transformation. As Diane P. Thompson has commented, the web is a repository for the mythic motifs and narratives of antiquity, and especially the Troy story. In *The Trojan War: Literature and Legends from the Bronze Age to the Present* (2004) she writes:

Troy has found a welcome home on the Internet, where patient searches bring up an amazing variety of Troy-related items, ranging from the sublime (paintings of Troy through the ages) to the ridiculous (Trojan Horse viruses and a LEGO Trojan Horse).<sup>27</sup>

This latter creation,<sup>28</sup> which Thompson finds so ridiculous, confirms the continued interest in the act of reconstructing the myth. The award winning creator of the LEGO horse, Susan Hoover, stresses the faithfulness of her design by pointing out that the construction really is hollow and that the warriors are carrying authentic weaponry. But simultaneously, she is eager to highlight its originality; this is not a ready-made kit available for purchase in a toy shop. Only after repeated requests has Hoover released instructions detailing how to replicate her singular creation. Now, this is a DIY wooden horse that you too can build at home.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this wooden horse is that, plainly, it is not made out of wood. Hoover's use of LEGO—the quintessential building block, the atom of the toy world—seems to me to function as a particularly potent reflection of the poetic process. LEGO is such a marvellous toy because the pieces can be stuck together to form an almost infinite number of creations—a house, a pirate ship, a dinosaur. What one creates is limited only by the specific dimensions of each individual piece, the size of one's collection, and one's imaginative powers.

In the first part of this paper, I suggested that since the wooden horse's physical construction is referred to only rarely and obliquely in the ancient sources, the repeated retelling of the myth gains significance as an alternative form of refashioning. The wooden horse is remade each and every time its story is recounted. I then sought to highlight the connection between this phenomenon and the making of Homeric poetry, drawing upon an analogy of Emily Vermeule's in which she likens the process of crafting an epic to the act of fashioning something out of wood. Finally, I described two contemporary wooden horses whose construction is explicitly revealed. It seems that our own era affords this myth new freedoms, presenting opportunities not only for remedying antiquity's silences, but also some

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27 Thompson (2004) 212.

28 Available at <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/hoover/trojan-horse.html> (Accessed 5 March 2008).

scope for being actively involved in the creative process. Armed with the instructions of Susan Hoover and the necessary building blocks, anyone can fashion a wooden horse.

These conclusions have supported my contention that it is possible to consider the crafting of the wooden horse as an expression of *μυθοποίησις*, the process through which myth itself is made. In the development of a mythic narrative, individual elements are fused together into a formidable and captivating whole, one which exhibits dynamic changes over the course of time. The same can be said of the horse. The ongoing interest in the construction's fashioning reveals the enduring appeal of this strange and singular story.

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