

University of Massachusetts Boston

ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

---

Classics Faculty Publication Series

Classics

---

2000

## Every Man's an Odysseus: An Analysis of the Nostos-Theme in Corelli's Mandolin

Emily A. McDermott

*University of Massachusetts Boston*, [emily.mcdermott@umb.edu](mailto:emily.mcdermott@umb.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/classics\\_faculty\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/classics_faculty_pubs)



Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Emily A. McDermott. "Every Man's an Odysseus: an Analysis of the Nostos-Theme in Corelli's Mandolin" *Classical and Modern Literature* 20.2 (2000): 21-37.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).

## Every Man's an Odysseus: An Analysis of the *Nostos* Theme in *Corelli's Mandolin*

Emily A. McDermott

In the sparkling first chapter of Louis de Bernières' *Corelli's Mandolin*, the world of Homer's Odysseus is explicitly invoked. This is hardly surprising in a historical novel which will detail the Italian occupation of the Greek island of Cephallonia, near neighbor of Odysseus' Ithaca, during World War II.<sup>1</sup> As Dr. Iannis, the novel's protagonist and the island's self-appointed historian, proclaims in the opening paragraph of his "New Personal History of Cephallonia":

The half-forgotten island of Cephallonia rises improvidently and inadvisedly from the Ionian Sea; it is an island so immense in antiquity that the very rocks themselves exhale nostalgia and the red earth lies stupefied not only by the sun, but by the impossible weight of memory. The ships of Odysseus were built of Cephallonian pine, his bodyguards were Cephallonian giants, and some maintain that his palace was not in Ithaca but in Cephallonia.

(5)<sup>2</sup>

The world of the novel resonates with acute awareness of the heroic past of Cephallonia and its movement from the greatness of its classical antecedents to a troubled present as "an island seemingly accursed and destined forever to be a part of someone else's game" (361-362). It is therefore quite fitting that both narrator and characters repeatedly advert to "that wily and itinerant king" (5) and voice Homeric quotations or

---

<sup>1</sup> Called Cephallonia (its Latinate name) throughout the novel, the island was Kephallenia in Homeric times and is Kefallinia in modern Greece.

<sup>2</sup> Page references are taken from Louis de Bernières, *Corelli's Mandolin* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994, published in Great Britain as *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* [London: Martin Sacker & Warburg, 1994]).

paraphrases;<sup>3</sup> the cast of characters even includes a modern Cephallonian giant.

What is less immediately apparent is that the novel contains a further pattern of *inexplicit* allusion to the *Odyssey*, along with a pervasive theme of *nostos*. Emphasis on "homecoming" helps create the novel's ardent encomium to the Greek homeland that inspires such fierce love of place in its people and promises them peace and regeneration. Odysseus, of course, declines an offer of immortality from Calypso, in order to return to his home on Ithaca (*Od.* 5.203-224). Dr. Iannis has a similarly passionate (if more ambivalent) attachment to his "island filled with gods" (5); he speaks as much for himself as for his daughter when he says: ". . . I don't think that Pelagia could live in Italy. She is a Greek. She would die like a flower deprived of light" (288). As the novel progresses, however, the continuous, if shadowy, juxtaposition of the alterity of the original Odysseus' epic world with the modernity of Dr. Iannis' island home both subverts the *nostos* theme and reinterprets it in light of the cataclysmic effects of World War II.<sup>4</sup>

The *nostos* theme first becomes prominent in the narration of the return from the front of the soldier Mandras, the ill-fated betrothed of Dr. Iannis' eccentrically independent daughter. Left at home immediately after Mandras' proposal by this "man who jumbled a marriage together with whitebait and war" (90), Pelagia consoles herself by pouring forth her emotions in daily letters to the front. When more than a hundred of these go unanswered, her ardor cools, and reflection gradually convinces her that hers has been a physical infatuation only, that—in her focus on "Mandras, so beautiful, luminous, and young; Mandras, as exquisite as Apollo" (83)—she has squashed doubts which "assailed her like an invasion of tiny invisible devils" (83) and plowed forward despite a half-realization that she does not know what kind of a man her lover really is. By the time Mandras does arrive home, this Penelope will be ready to call it quits.

The author early on dispels any doubts whether we are *meant* to read this doomed romance in terms of an Odysseus and a failed Penelope. In Pelagia's early epistolary effusions, we learn that, in an unusual onset of domestic ambition, she has begun "to crochet a big cover for our marriage bed" (108). Unfortunately, her domestic skills are rudimentary; she is thus forced repeatedly "to unpick" what she has crocheted (108). The unpicking of Pelagia's marriage coverlet becomes a comic but pointed leitmotif

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., 37 (cf. *Od.* 1.32-34), 89, 118 (cf. *Od.* 6.182-184), 121, 138, 277, 296, 301, 337, 349, 417.

<sup>4</sup> See Piero Boitani, tr. Anita Weston, *The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1994), 2-3, on the concept of "the alterity-modernity polarization" in the use of the Ulysses-figure.

identifying her with Penelope. The facts of the two women's cases are quite different, of course, as are their motivations. Penelope weaves her shroud in anticipation of her father-in-law Laertes' death; she unpicks it rightly as a ruse to deter her unwelcome suit by the impatient Ithacans—in other words, as a means to stay faithful to her absent husband. Pelagia, on the other hand, enters upon the project because it emblemizes her longing for consummation of her physical attraction to her fiancé: "I am beginning with things for the bed, because that is where our life will begin" (108). As the novel proceeds, though, it becomes increasingly evident that the unpicking of the coverlet (mentioned further at 110, 112, 195, 196, 213, 324, 363 and 415) has moved from being simply a sign of the heroine's domestic awkwardness to being a delaying tactic of her own, ironically directed at her betrothed himself. More precisely, it is representative of her growing reluctance to marry Mandras: later in the book we will see her handiwork "[burgeon] flawlessly" (363) as she anticipates marriage to her replacement Odysseus, the Italian officer Corelli.

But Corelli is still in the future at the time of Mandras' first *nostos*. The returning Mandras will find Pelagia disenchanted, but faithful and dutiful. She has evidently begun to assume—perhaps even to hope—that Mandras is dead (see, e.g., 84, 88, 119, 364). If *she* is surprised at his return, though, the reader has been awaiting it for quite some time.

Like Odysseus, Mandras is unrecognized upon his return. Pelagia enters her own kitchen to find "a stranger seated at the kitchen table, a most horrible and wild stranger" (128), his hair matted and "[seeming] to have no form nor colour" (128), wearing "the unidentifiable and ragged remains of a shirt and trousers, and a kind of surcoat cut out of animal skins that had been tacked together with thongs of sinew" (128). Pelagia assumes he is a stranger come to seek treatment from her father; she only realizes his true identity when the pet pine marten Psipsina jumps up and burrows in his pocket, and he knows her name. Mandras, already broken by the hardships he has faced in war and on his journey, is crushed:

"I would have died a thousand times, but I had you before my eyes like a cross . . . and I never forgot, I remembered every second . . . and all I could think of was Pelagia, I've got to get home to Pelagia, and now . . ." his body shook once more and a great sob burst out of him " . . . only the animals know me."

(131)

The parallels to the *Odyssey* are patent. Odysseus returns home in disguise, made old by the goddess Athene, who withers his skin and robs his hair of its natural color (*Od.* 13.430-432). He too is dressed in tattered rags and animal skins (*Od.* 13.434-437). He too is recognized first by an

animal, the aged dog Argos (*Od.* 17.290-327), while escaping recognition by his wife throughout their first meeting (*Od.* 19).

The differences between the two heroes' situations are also obvious. Most basically, of course, Odysseus returns home to a loving and loyal wife, while Mandras returns home to the bitter disappointment of a betrothed whose emotions upon seeing him are "despair, unbearable excitement, guilt, pity, revulsion" (130). There will be no happy ending for Mandras, even after he goes away again determined to do "things so great that even a queen would beg to be [his] bride" (141). It is also significant that Odysseus is purposely disguised, while Mandras is only disfigured. One effect of this distinction is realism: in modern-day Greece, goddesses do not at will make heroes old (as here) or shower them with grace and beauty (as at *Od.* 6.235); those who leave for war are likely to return home permanently scarred. A second effect is to set Odysseus up as an intellectual standard to which Mandras cannot attain.

The "wily" Odysseus prudently enters his city in disguise, so that he may reconnoiter and judge the fidelity of those who have remained at home before revealing himself. Mandras, on the other hand, blunders unthinkingly straight into the arms of a betrothed whose attraction to him, born from his physical charms and already weakened by his absence, has no chance of surviving his appearance to her in this repulsive condition. He obliquely recognizes his miscalculation when he says:

Don't touch me, Pelagia. I've got lice. And I stink. And I shat myself when a bomb fell next to me. I didn't know what to do, and I came here first. All the time I knew I had to get here first, that's all, and I'm tired and I stink.<sup>5</sup>

(130)

Mandras cements the mental contrast between himself and "the man of many ways" when he laments that, in talking about him as if he were not there, Pelagia, his mother and the doctor treat him as if he were "a body without a mind" (139). He thus encapsulates his essential problem: he cannot match up to the intellect and culture of either his literary prototype or his fiancée. It is when Pelagia discovers the reason all her letters have gone unanswered that the last vestige of her affection falls away: "For a reason that she did not understand, Pelagia was more repelled by this admission than by his filth. Had she betrothed herself to an illiterate, without even knowing it?" (130).

The tale of Mandras' actual wanderings, like the recounting of Odysseus' journey home (*Od.* 9-12), is told in flashback; the background

---

<sup>5</sup> Pelagia's second suitor, Corelli, on the other hand, is more prudent. When recuperating under her care from near-mortal injuries, he begs the doctor to shield his lover from the sight of his more unappealing bodily functions (341, 342).

that Odysseus fills in at the banquet with the Phaeacians, Mandras relates in interior monologue. Like Odysseus, he has been the "only survivor" of his expedition (141). As he struggles to return home, his journey—again like Odysseus'—is marked by progression from real world adventure to surrealism:<sup>6</sup>

I not only saw Pelagia, but strange monsters that threatened me with their maws filled with rows of teeth. There was a place where I was passing by a waterfall, a waterfall so high that it tumbled with a roar like that of the sea in a wild storm. It fell into a pool whose waters whirled and rotated, swallowing up anything that passed by it. . . . On my left was a cliff that jutted outwards so that nothing might climb it, not even a goat, and it seemed to me that there was a creature on it with three heads that intended to devour me. I stood there with nothing in my mind but the battle between my homeward desperation and the fear of the pool and the monster.

(142-143)

There can be no doubt that "the pool and the monster" are meant to recall Odysseus' encounter with Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla, an evil monster (πέλωρ κακόν [*Od.* 12.87]) with six necks and heads, each marked by three rows of teeth (*Od.* 12.90-91), sits in a cave half-way up a cliff so sheer as to be unclimbable by mortal man (*Od.* 12.73-79). From there she scoops up and devours passing sailors (*Od.* 12.256). Her companion monster is the whirlpool Charybdis, who roils the sea's waters by swallowing them down and vomiting them back up again (*Od.* 12.104-106; cf. 235-243). It certainly matters little that the modern author has halved the number of Scylla's heads or transferred to them the number of her rows of teeth in Homer, nor that a peril of the salt sea has been shifted inland, where the towering waterfall is added to allow for a fresh-water whirlpool. Devotees of Homer will inevitably recognize in Mandras' words a clear and deliberate equation of his adventure with Odysseus'.

Homeric referentiality continues as Mandras moves on, for his next adventure is with a crone named Circe. The physical opposite of her Homeric eponym, the θεὰ καλλιπλόκαμος (10.220) who turned Odysseus' men to swine, this toothless hag is "small and withered, and . . . had tied her few strands of hair behind her head" (143). Like her Homeric counterpart, however, she is a pig-keeping sexual predator who feeds her

<sup>6</sup>The purpose of the *Odyssey's* veer into the supernatural after Odysseus' encounter with the Cicones in Bk. 9 has been the subject of much analysis, especially of the psychological sort. See, e.g., George de F. Lord, "The *Odyssey* and the Western World," *Sewanee Review* 62 (Summer, 1954): 406-427; Charles H. Taylor, Jr., "The Obstacles to Odysseus' Return: Identity and Consciousness in 'The Odyssey,'" *Yale Review* 50.4

herd on acorns (cf. 143 to *Od.* 10.242). Capping this episode is a parenthetical remark by Mandras—"I forgot to tell you that she had only one eye" (143)—which cleverly assimilates this witch to another of Odysseus' nemeses, the Cyclops Polyphemus.

While Pelagia will prove lacking as a Penelope, she more successfully takes on the role of Nausicaa during Mandras' return.<sup>7</sup> The agemates Nausicaa and Pelagia are both just awakening to the desire to wed. Nausicaa's sexual longings are discreetly veiled in her god-inspired eagerness to turn her mind to the domestic task of laundering—since she would not remain unmarried much longer (*Od.* 6.33)—and in her virginally transparent designs (*Od.* 6.244-245) on the hero who has approached and supplicated her naked, with only leaves to cover his genitals (*Od.* 6.128-129). The longings of the virginal seventeen-year-old Pelagia are, as suits the author's times, detailed more graphically (83); her view of her hero naked is also more openly erotic than its Homeric counterpart. Having gone down to the sea, like Nausicaa, Pelagia inadvertently glimpses Mandras swimming naked by his boat:

She . . . could not resist the idea that God had given her a chance to look over what was hers before she took possession of it; the slim hips, the sharp shoulders, the taut stomach, the dark shadow of the groin with its mysterious modellings that were the subject of so much lubricious female gossip at the well.

(89)

Typologically, nonetheless, the two virgins play a parallel role: that of a nubile helper maiden, who has seen her hero naked and will guide him—in Nausicaa's case, literally; in Pelagia's, through Mandras' hallucination—homeward.

\* \* \* \* \*

If, as I have suggested, Mandras—the "body without a mind"—is but a part of an Odysseus, his inverse is Dr. Iannis. It is the protagonist who masterfully supplies the wise, wily, resourceful, close-counselling element of

---

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Judith Fletcher, "The *Odyssey* Rewoven," *Classical and Modern Literature* 19.3 (Spring, 1999): 219, notes that the heroine of Byatt's *Angels and Insects* "metamorphoses, like the butterfly she is, from maiden to wife to enchantress." Appreciation of such sliding referentiality—whereby Pelagia becomes now a Penelope, now a Nausicaa, now a Calypso or Creusa; or Mandras, Dr. Iannis and Corelli in turn become Odysseuses—is critical to understanding intertextuality between the classical and modern works.

the Odysseus formula.<sup>8</sup> His keen understanding of human behavior and his self-taught *techné* as village doctor link him specifically with his prototype's role as "icon of experience, science, and wisdom."<sup>9</sup> We are told that, in his youth, he travelled widely as a sailor, thus associating him with Odysseus' role as "symbol of all sea-based civilizations";<sup>10</sup> yet throughout the dramatic time of the novel we see him as intensely home-centered, both personally and politically. Like the guileful Homeric strategist, he shows a distinct penchant for trickery, clearest in his determination "to exploit the exploiters" (167) during the occupation.<sup>11</sup> And, just as Odysseus had a wife whose own prudence and intelligence were both complement and compliment to his, Dr. Iannis has a Penelope who equals him in intellect;<sup>12</sup> this role is played not by his dead wife, but by Pelagia, the daughter who worships him, whom he has created in his image, and to whom he allows, admiringly: "You're almost clever enough to be my daughter" (66). And finally, much as Odysseus assumes the role of bard at the banquet of the Phaeacians, to sing the epos of his own deeds, Dr. Iannis takes up pen and paper to record the wondrous past of Cephallonia; the two thus become figures for their respective authors—Odysseus as "a model of poetry," Dr. Iannis as a model of historiography.<sup>13</sup> These similarities in character all align the doctor with elements of the Odysseus character that have become

---

<sup>8</sup> This is the "type" of Odysseus in the post-Homeric tradition termed the "politician" or "Iliadic hero" by W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1992), 162—a recent reprinting, with a bizarrely anti-Odysseus and anti-Stanford foreword by Charles Boer ("The Classicist and the Psychopath"), of W.B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in The Adaptability of A Traditional Hero* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1963). The other Odyssean type identified by Stanford—that "of the lonely wanderer"—has played a more important role in the *nostos* of Mandras.

<sup>9</sup> Boitani (above, note 4) 5.

<sup>10</sup> Boitani (above, note 4) 3.

<sup>11</sup> On Odysseus' relation to the trickster of folklore, see, e.g., Stanford (above, note 8) 10.

<sup>12</sup> J.W. Mackail, "Penelope," in Conny Nelson, ed., *Homer's Odyssey: a Critical Handbook* (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1969) [a reprinting of J.W. Mackail, "Penelope in the *Odyssey*," *Classical Studies* (London: John Murray, 1925), 54-75] successfully argues that the keynote of Penelope's Homeric characterization is "a sort of impressiveness, mingled of skill, wisdom, and character" (44). Philip Whaley Harsh, "Penelope and Odysseus in 'Odyssey' XIX," *American Journal of Philology* 71.1 (1950), 4, adds that "Of all the characters in the *Odyssey*, she alone is a match for Odysseus in cleverness...."

<sup>13</sup> Boitani (above, note 4) 5.



canonical over the ages. Even by themselves, they might be sufficient to guide us to a conception of Dr. Iannis as an Odysseus—but the identification of the two heroes is clinched by a striking plot typology.

Soon after Mussolini's Italian forces occupy Cephallonia, an order is given "to billet officers upon suitable members of the local population" (164). It is thus that Captain Antonio Corelli enters the Iannis household. Situationally, this billeting makes the Italian forces analogues for the suitors, the rapacious Ithacans who move into Odysseus' home in his absence and make free with his household stores. Odysseus, to be sure, had more stores to ravage, and Dr. Iannis is quick to point out to Corelli the straitened conditions of his household: "This is Cephallonian meat pie, . . . except that, thanks to your people, it doesn't have any meat in it" (171). Dr. Iannis, the occupied, gains the upper hand over Corelli, first by making this tender-hearted occupier feel the unjustness of his own position ("I don't care how bad you feel, that is not my problem. I am not the aggressor" [170]), then by rephrasing his own part in the billeting as *xenia*, freely given hospitality in the Homeric manner: "You will find that we do not lack hospitality. It is our tradition, Captain, to be hospitable even to those who do not merit it" (170). By the end of the occupation, all grudging will be gone, as the doctor will have come to love and respect both Corelli and his faithful friend Carlo Guercio. The suitor-motif will recur, in the negative, in the epitaphios the doctor speaks at Carlo's burial: "In him there was no rude arrogance, he was no nefarious ruffian to misuse another's home" (338).<sup>14</sup>

The appearance of the suitor-motif clearly confirms Dr. Iannis' presentation as an Odysseus figure. If the good doctor had only been an Odysseus in warrior strength as well as wit, he might have been able to rid his beloved island of invading forces entirely. As it is, however, when he is presented with an infestation of suitors, he is not powerful enough to throw off his disguise, stand up with bow in hand and slaughter them all, as Odysseus does in *Odyssey* 22. This failure is due partly to his lack of physical prowess; even more essentially, it is a necessary result of his living in a post-epic world, where conflicts are global, and one man's strength—even a whole island's strength—cannot avail against superior man-power, weaponry and military organization. As one of Cephallonia's "wits and eggheads" (121), though, he can draw on the mental legacy of Odysseus the *πολύτροπος*, master of lies and conceiver of the Trojan horse, to resist.

<sup>14</sup> Corelli will, of course, become a suitor in Dr. Iannis' house in the literal sense as well, when he and Pelagia fall in love—a role prefigured when, in their first meeting, he twice penitently falls on his knees before the heroine (167, 168).

Along with his fellow Cephallonians, Dr. Iannis turns to every kind of passive-aggressive stratagem and dirty trick to assert Greek dominance over the dominators. In Italian, he denies speaking Italian (157). When the billeting is mandated, he somehow shifts the ground of the discourse between himself and the Italian officer in charge, so that he ends up wangling medical supplies in return for "hospitality" (166). He teaches a trusting Corelli obscenities in the guise of formal pleasantries (195). Along with the disaffected Carlo Guercio, he masterminds, publishes and distributes across the island a scurrilous and parodic pamphlet "[celebrating] the life and achievements of Benito Andrea Amilcare Mussolini, Who from unpromising beginnings has led us to perdition" (221).

Like Mandras, however, Dr. Iannis is only part of an Odysseus: he is the mind, without the body, *logos* without *ergon*. When, at the end of the war, he is dragged away by the Greek communists, he discovers that qualities of mind are not sufficient to fight against brute strength and viciousness. Up until this point in the narrative, the doctor has seemed an Antaeus, one who draws his strength from the Greek earth beneath him. His security in such power is reflected by the very first mention of *nostos* in the novel, which (significantly) is referred not to the returning soldier Mandras, but to the homebody Dr. Iannis.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the chapter in which Mandras will complete his *nostos*, the doctor is away on a two-day trip up Mt. Aenos to treat the goatherd Alekos' flock; the first introduction of the *nostos* theme is inserted—seemingly casually—into the doctor's animadversions on the pleasure of his own unassuming homecoming: "... the doctor believed that the pleasure of homecoming was more than recompense for the pains of setting out, and that therefore it was always worth departing" (127-8). The purpose of this odd-seeming transfer of the *nostos*-motif from its logical referent (Mandras) to the protagonist will only become clear much later in the narrative, when a cruel journey will disprove his optimistic rule about the pleasures of both travel and return.

It is the deepest source of pathos in the novel that the doctor, who has functioned so effectively as an Odysseus of the mind when his feet are planted in his native soil, will be defeated by his brutalization by the communists. He will return—but not triumphantly. Rather, he will "[shuffle] into the kitchen supported upon the arms of two workers of the Red Cross" (390), his grand and magnanimous spirit "utterly broken" (370). The tragic vanity of his *logos* is figured by the eight years of speechlessness in which he ends his life.

<sup>15</sup> "Nostalgia," of course, as distinct from *nostos*, has played a prominent part in the book since the opening of Dr. Iannis' "Personal History," quoted above.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the novel progresses, the same Corelli who has played suitor to the "much-devising" Dr. Iannis will become an Odysseus in his own right. Sole survivor of the massacre of the Italian forces on Cephallonia by the Germans, he is rescued by the Cephallonian giant, secretly nursed back to health by the doctor and Pelagia, then sent on his way back to Italy in a fishing boat. Though here we find Pelagia (who has already played both Penelope and Nausicaa) briefly pressed into service as Calypso—"She wanted to keep her captain on the island, but knew that she would kill him if she did" (346)—she will quickly revert to her primary part as Penelope. Whereas Mandras by the end of the novel has proved only an incidental Odysseus, a foil—in fact, in his final return as a Communist "Nazi rapist" (368), an impostor—Corelli is the Odysseus of her heart. Pelagia will wait virginally for Corelli, even though convinced he is dead, to the age of seventy.

De Bernières' portrayal of Corelli as an Odysseus, however, quickly runs up against the fact that an Italian Odysseus is something of a paradox. From ancient times onward, as Stanford notes, there has been an intrinsic contradiction between the Greek values Odysseus represents (intelligence, cunning, and craft) and Roman emphasis on *gravitas* and *maiestas*: "Ethically . . . [Ulysses'] characteristic Greek resourcefulness and subtlety conflicted with the deep-seated Roman admiration for stability and directness."<sup>16</sup> This conflict is at the heart of de Bernières' drawing of the Greek and Italian national characters, which allows the tricky Greeks to achieve a certain ascendancy over their naive and touchingly gullible captors;<sup>17</sup> it also has roots stretching back to classical epic.<sup>18</sup> Fittingly, then, as he tells this final *nostos*, de Bernières draws inspiration not only from Homer, but also from a Virgilian, or Italian, fount. The intrusion of Virgilian elements into

<sup>16</sup> Stanford (above, note 8) 129.

<sup>17</sup> The general Cephallonian success in this endeavor is perhaps best exemplified by the town authorities' holing themselves up in town hall and refusing to surrender to "a nation that we have utterly routed" (163); after a comic stand-off, a German officer is brought to the island, and (as Corelli later tells the story to Carlo) "the authorities emerge triumphantly from the town hall, having humiliated and vanquished us on our first day of conquest" (163). This paradoxical summation both testifies to the Greeks' symbolic assertion of control in uncontrollable circumstances and recalls, with a twist, Horace's famous epigram on the cultural conquest by Greece of its Roman conquerors: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* (*Ep.* 2.1.156).

<sup>18</sup> De Bernières' Greek vs. Italian stereotype replicates Virgil's opposition of the sly Greeks and the easily duped, proto-Roman Trojans in *Aeneid* 2; Virgil's version, in turn (as Stanford [above, note 8] points out, 129-130), is derived from the Alexandrian Lycophron.

the more straightforward Homeric *nostos* will both highlight the complications intrinsic to an Italian Odysseus and undermine the reader's confidence that the romance at hand will end as happily as that of Odysseus.

The wanderings of Virgil's proto-Roman hero in the first half of the *Aeneid* were consciously patterned on those of Odysseus. Thus, the *Aeneid* too is built around a homecoming of a sort: Aeneas, exiled from the ruins of Troy, goes through his odyssey in search of a *new* homeland. While Italy is only a name to him, his strivings to reach Italian soil can be viewed—especially retrospectively by Roman author and audience—as a kind of coming home. In the erotic sphere, by contrast, Odysseus and Aeneas are precisely opposite archetypes. Whereas Odysseus' homeward journey takes him toward his faithful wife, Aeneas' journey to Italy separates him cruelly from the women he loves: first, from his Trojan wife Creusa, then from his lover Dido. Corelli's situation is the most complicated of all three heroes.

The Greek Odysseus' public/civic and personal/erotic goals are in fortunate harmony; by contrast, Aeneas' public mission ever requires sacrifice of his personal desires. Corelli's attempt to satisfy both public duty and personal need (i.e., to be an Odysseus) will require that he undergo two separate *nostoi*.

Once the Italian forces surrender to the Allies, Corelli's duty as an Italian officer is to win safe return for himself and his troops to Italy. Unfortunately the Germans have not yet surrendered; their forces on Cephallonia consider the Italians traitors and are determined to block their withdrawal. Unsupported by the Allies and victimized by their own vacillating leaders, the Italians will fail of return, massacred brutally by their former friends. Only Corelli survives, saved in his honorable effort to die with his troops by his friend Carlo. He will be the only one of his company to win *nostos* to Italy. His romance with Pelagia, however, and his disillusionment with Fascist policies have conspired to make him feel that his true home is in Greece:

He remembered what the doctor had told him about *xenitia*, the terrible nostalgic love of one's native land that hurts the exiled Greek, and felt it turning in his own breast like the twist of a bayonet. He had his own village now, his own *patrida*, and even his thought and speech had changed.

(356)

Thus, his truer *nostos* will be to come back again after the war to Greece, an adoptive country and the country of his heart. Appropriately, the context turns Virgilian, reflecting the problems of this cross-cultural Odysseus, at precisely the point when the captain is about to be spirited out of Greece

and back to Italy. Specifically, his departure from Pelagia is related in terms evocative of the poignant sundering of Aeneas from Creusa at the end of Book 2 of the *Aeneid*.

As the little party consisting of Bunny Warren (the British Liaison Officer who speaks to the Greeks in Etonian classical Greek and greets Corelli with a solemn "Ave"), Dr. Iannis, Pelagia and Corelli sets out for the seashore, the author first comments on the dilatory patrolling of the area by the Germans, then adds: "The journey to the beach did not therefore consist of the stuff of great adventures" (355). This mention of "great adventures," even in the negative, serves to underline metafictionally the epic background of the coming episode. In effect, the comment subverts itself by implying the opposite of its stated meaning (much as the parallelism between the Italian forces and the suitors of the Odyssey was emphasized, not negated, by the statement that Carlo was not a ruffian to take advantage of another's home). The assertion that this journey was less than epic, then, paradoxically alerts us to listen for epic elements in its narration.

Early on in the scene, the classically-minded reader may begin to feel a similarity between the modern family's journey to the beach and the one where Aeneas—with his father on his back, his son by his side and his wife pulling up the rear—leaves his war-torn home to escape by sea (*Aen.* 2). When Pelagia begins to fear that "she would lose contact with her father in front of her" (355), we note that Creusa did lose contact with the rest of her family and was never again seen alive. "Behind her, Antonio Corelli, although called to strength by the need to protect the fiancée in front of him, felt much the same emotions" (355): we congratulate Corelli (or actually Bunny Warren, who deliberately ranked them so Pelagia would be in front of Corelli, rather than behind) for not forgetting, like Aeneas, to safeguard his female companion. The capping indication that we are correctly thinking in Virgilian terms comes in the continuation of Corelli's thoughts: "He was oppressed by an enfeebling sense of futility and melancholy, and almost wished that they would meet a German patrol, so that he could die, fighting and killing, ending it all in lightning and fire, but ending it now" (355). In his suicidal urge to die fighting, and so to spare himself the pain of "exile," Corelli becomes a striking analogue of Aeneas—when the hero first seizes arms upon realizing that the Trojans are under siege (*pulchrumque mori succurrit in armis* [*Aen.* 2.317]); when he reacts to his father's initial refusal to flee with a renewal of desire to die fighting (*Aen.* 2.668-670); and when, years later, he laments his survival in exile: *o terque quaterque beati, / quis ante ora patrum Troiae sub moenibus altis / contigit oppetere!* (*Aen.* 1.94-96).

Interestingly, at the moment of Corelli's actual departure, it is hard to say who is playing the part of Creusa: Pelagia or Corelli. In Aeneas' final

scene with his wife, she is a ghost: a *simulacrum*, an *umbra*, and an *imago* (*Aen.* 2. 772-773, 793). She speaks to him, then *tenuis . . . recessit in auras* (*Aen.* 2.791), eluding his grasp:

ter conatus ibi collo dare bracchia circum;  
ter frustra compressa manus effugit imago,  
par levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno.  
(*Aen.* 2.792-794)

Once Corelli's boat arrives, the description of his departure is couched in similarly dreamlike descriptive terms. The boat itself seems somehow insubstantial: "He heard the hollow sound of oars striking the gunwales of a skiff, the creak of wood on leather, and looked up to see the silhouette of the craft approaching, the shadows of two men labouring together" (356). A brief goodbye, and then:

After he had plunged through the surf and clambered aboard, vanishing into the darkness like a ghost, Pelagia ran into the waves until the sea reached her thighs. She strained to see him for the last time, and saw nothing.

(356)

Imagistically, Corelli is Creusa here: it is he who recedes ghostlike from Pelagia's grasp. His instant insubstantiality and inaccessibility can be taken as prefigurings of a failure to return, of his "death" to Pelagia. Typologically, though, Pelagia is a Creusa left behind as her lover heads into exile by sea, bound for Italian shores. The insertion of the Virgilian model into the Odyssean formula reinforces the dark suggestion that Pelagia's abandonment will not prove temporary. If she is more Creusa than Penelope, then we are guided to believe the spate of dark hints dropped over the past several pages that there will be no reunion—that their farewell embrace will indeed prove "the last time he held Pelagia" (356).

At one point, while voicing her fears that Corelli may never return, Pelagia surprises us by comparing herself directly with Penelope, thus making explicit a parallel which for 344 pages has been implied but not stated:

He had given her his ring, . . . and she turned it in the lamplight, looking at the demi-falcon rising, . . . and underneath the words "Semper fidelis." She feared in her heart that back home he would dismiss her, that the words would apply to her only, that she would be left forever, faithful and forgotten, waiting like Penelope for a man who never came.

(344)

Intriguingly, as soon as the equation Pelagia = Penelope is made explicit, it is also undercut. Penelope waited, but she was, after all, reunited with Odysseus. It is, rather, the oblique imagistic transformation of Pelagia from a Penelope to a Creusa that hints at the possibility of her permanent abandonment by Corelli.

As conditions on Cephallonia go from bad to worse, through German occupation, to Communist takeover, to earthquake, the reader awaits Corelli's return. There are hints that he *has* returned, from the "ghost" that Pelagia glimpses that seems to leave a rose on Carlo's grave every October, to the Italian earthquake-relief worker whom we see visiting the grave. But we are left in perplexity over why, if these are Corelli, he will not reveal himself. The Corelli who left was temperamentally no duty-bound Aeneas; it's hard to imagine what cause could be keeping him from Pelagia. He could have followed up on his ambition to become a professional mandolinist—and, to be sure, the doctor has counselled him that he might have to choose between being a musician and loving Pelagia (288). But somehow, given Corelli's passionate nature and the magnitude of his love as portrayed so far, it seems unthinkable that he would not attempt to keep both his vocation and his love.

When we finally learn the answer, it is 1993, forty-eight years after he boarded the skiff, and the tardy Odysseus has at length deigned to return. The explanation for his delay is extremely lame. He *had* returned before; he *was* the "ghost" Pelagia had seen. But when he saw her, she was holding an adopted foundling infant. He therefore assumed she had married someone else, and he left. He has checked on her many times since then but still has not ascertained, almost fifty years later, that his initial assumptions were false.

If we resist the temptation to attribute the weakness of this plot device to authorial *aporia*, and accept it as psychologically and situationally "true," then we must radically re-evaluate Corelli's character and assess both the nature of his eventual *nostos* and the thematic thrust of the entire novel in light of this re-evaluation. Because he has finally returned, Corelli has proved more an Odysseus than an Aeneas—but a singularly inept one. The only Odysseus who gets his romantic *nostos* right is Homer's: he reconnoiters, discovers his Penelope is true, and re-unites with her happily. Mandras, by rushing in without forethought, has helped to finish off any romance that might be lingering in Pelagia's heart. Now Corelli goes too far in the other direction, adopting a misguided course of excessive circumspection and indirection, applying judgment far inferior to that of his wily prototype, and in so doing undermining his own characterization as one ruled by a grand erotic passion. Basically, in trying to act Greek, this Italian has outsmarted himself. This is, however, only a partial answer. It would be truer to say that only the Homeric Odysseus gets his romantic

*nostos* right, because only he is involved in a genuine epic. For, in a very real sense, *Corelli's Mandolin* ceases to be "epic" as soon as Corelli climbs aboard his ghostly ship and sails away from Pelagia.

Up until that point in the plot, it is easy to characterize the novel as "epic." It has many of the essential ingredients: the broad sweep of history, the intersection of two nations locked in struggles for national identity, larger-than-life heroes of national and moral significance, a didactic purpose, extensive geographic scope, exotic journeying, heroic battle. As we read, we feel ourselves enwrapped in a heroic, mythological past. As an unnamed reviewer quoted on the frontispiece remarks: "de Bernières has the gift of turning the bloody mindlessness of great events into myth."<sup>19</sup> The conscious and repeated contextualization of the novel within the worlds of Odysseus and Aeneas further deepens its epic tone. Upon Corelli's departure for Italy, however, the narrative style changes subtly, and we find ourselves emerging from a heroic past into a much more ordinary present.

The lovingly detailed and expansive narrations of the years before 1945 are abruptly curtailed. Narrative style becomes economical, reportorial, almost journalistic. With the shift in style, we almost feel the life being squeezed out of the once-lively little island. The loss of anecdote reflects the ever-increasing spiral of deprivation the islanders are thrown into. The years slide by so quickly, we feel their mundanity. A quick mathematical calculation is instructive: the five years from 1940 to 1945 take 356 pages to narrate; we move through German occupation, Communist takeover and earthquake (eight years of intensifying privation) in 32 more; then, as if modern times cannot bear the weight of too much elaboration, we skim from 1953 to 1993 in a final 48.

The result is that, by the time Corelli returns, it seems almost not to matter any more. This is not because the characters have grown old, but because they have become so ordinary. They are no longer Cephallonian giants, but such people as we see about us every day in the modern world. The layers of mythology have been stripped away from this romance.

Pelagia's great promise is never fulfilled. She never becomes a doctor. She finishes her father's history, but it sits on a shelf unpublished and unread. She ends up as keeper of a taverna, catering to foreign tourists. Her socialist adoptive daughter's success as proprietor of a souvenir shop that sells "reproduction amphorae, worry beads, dolls dressed in the fustanella of the evzones, cassettes of syrtaki music, snorkelling equipment" and a long list of other gew-gaws (405) is emblematic for the movement of

---

<sup>19</sup> Review from the *Boston Phoenix* (no author named), excerpted as an advertising blurb on the frontispiece of the novel's paperback edition [Louis de Bernières, *Corelli's Mandolin* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994)].



the novel's world: a movement away from an extravagantly heroic era, into a resolutely realistic and commonplace one.

Corelli is significantly more reduced. His ineptitude as an Odysseus and his concomitant betrayal of the promise of his grandly passionate nature deal crippling blows to his heroic stature. The magical mandolinist "with nightingales in his fingers" (287) ends up a good composer, but not a great one ("I'm just a trickster waiting to be found out" [427]). More problematically, none of the excuses he proffers for his delayed *nostos* can return him to his prior dimensions as epic lover. The enraged Pelagia is quicker to forgive him than this reader, at least.

Two codicils to his characterization complete the tarnishing of his image. His disillusionment at the discovery that his friend and savior, Carlo Guercio, had been covertly homosexual (425-426) is disappointing to a reader who has known Carlo's secret since the beginning of the book and has witnessed Pelagia's easy adjustment upon discovering it (372). It is not that Corelli's reaction is not understandable in realistic human psychological terms; it is simply that it is not what we would hope for from an Aeneas to his *fidus* Achates. More devastating to his stature, however, is his off-hand admission that it had occurred to him that the baby he saw with Pelagia might have been the product of a war-time rape, and this possibility "made a difference" in his willingness to return: "We had some notions about dishonour and tainted goods, didn't we?" (424). The spell woven by this enchanting character who, as a young captain, filled the night-air of the island with the lovely strains of a mandolin named Antonia, turned the barracks latrine into a small La Scala, treated captives with the deference owed to superiors, dealt severely with those who took unfair advantage of the vulnerable, and even forgave his own Judas—the spell, above all, of one who professed himself votary of a perfect love—is shattered here. What romantic can forgive the suggestion that his grand amour for Pelagia was this fragile, this centered on externals? If Livy's Collatinus could recognize that Lucretia was without blame (Livy 1.58.9), can we not expect as much from a twentieth century hero?

Technically and thematically, this is heady stuff. Form does not only reflect content here, it shapes content. As the epic world of the book's first 356 pages unravels like Pelagia's coverlet, its epic truths are proven illusory too. In addition to the diminishment of the previously magnificent characters and the cheapening of the epic wartime romance, gone is Dr. Iannis' majestic vision of the grandeur that is Greece—his profound sense of home and his "invincible" humanity (371). Defeated, he writes *finis* to his history with the words, "In the past we had the barbarians. Now we have only ourselves to blame" (372). It is the silencing of his voice which most powerfully and profoundly affects the tone of the novel, suggesting pessimistically that the humanity figured by this Odysseus character is

quenchable after all. At the same time, national identities whose immutability is argued by the book's frequent ethnic stereotypes—Germans “can't sing” (285); Croats are fractious brutes (121); Turks are “voluptuaries and lunatics” (148); Italians are “charming chicken-thieves” (358)<sup>20</sup>—are blurred, even lost. Pelagia, disillusioned like her father both by the “barbarity of the civil war” (376) and by the social ostracism her eccentric feminism has brought upon her, “[gives] up being Greek” (376) and “[pretends] to herself that she [is] Italian” (377). Corelli, on the other side, sickened by the late-appearing revelation of Fascist atrocities, and “ashamed of being an invader” (423), becomes an expatriate, living in Athens and adopting Greek citizenship. By the end, then, the *nostos* theme which has pervaded the novel has been fundamentally subverted. The climactic homecoming of Corelli, the book's third and last Odysseus, turns anti-climactic. It is no longer imbued with the grand nationalistic significance of Odysseus' or Aeneas' journeys; such nationalism is outdated in the post-World War II era. And, even as a return to the country of the heart, it has lost its grandeur, as its extravagant romantic vision is irreparably contaminated by the infection of realism.

*University of Massachusetts at Boston*

---

<sup>20</sup> For more passages which involve politically incorrect *obiter dicta* by Dr. Iannis or de Bernières himself, see: 21, 31, 53, 121, 122-123, 147-148, 164, 189, 198, 200, 201, 204, 216, 217, 238, 240, 289, 348, 358, 378, 383-384.