The cognition of deception
Falsehoods in Homer’s *Odyssey*
and their audiences

Elizabeth Minchin

**Literary theory and cognitive theory**

What is it about a story that holds our interest? Why do we find some stories more engaging than others? How to explain the pleasure we find as we listen to or read stories? Certainly, a critical factor in any story’s success is its themes: stories about love, death, and personal relationships, for example, have always caught our attention. We know from experience, too, that much depends on the telling. There are some basic requirements: a story should not be longer than it need be—nor shorter; no matter how complex its plot, we expect its language to be clear and unambiguous; and we expect a certain orderliness in its telling. And yet there is more to a story than this. None of these presentational attributes explains the capacity of a story to engage its audiences.

Literary theory has for some time, at least from the 1970s, proposed that the reader, or the audience, has a role to play in the creation of meaning in a text. The most significant contributions in this respect have come from reader-response criticism, and the observations of scholars, such as Wolfgang Iser, who regard the audience as an active agent in a participatory relationship with the author. Iser, for example, claimed that a text to some extent controls the audience’s responses but that it contains ‘gaps’ that listeners or readers are required to fill.

From that same period there has been strong interest amongst cognitive psychologists in the mechanisms through which audiences engage with stories. This is an area where important advances have been made. In this chapter I respond to research currently emerging from cognitive studies that throws light on the mental activities performed by audience members as they fill ‘gaps’ and process complex narrative: I refer here to Theory of Mind (ToM). This cognitive capacity relies on a resource of neural networks that each of us has developed from our early years, which enable us to understand our own mental states and, on the basis of this understanding, to develop intuitions about the intentions and actions of those around us, even though this information has not been formally shared. This ability to ‘read’ the minds of others enables individuals to explain to themselves why others behave as they do, and thus supplies the link in the chain of causality that connects motivation and action. Just as people rely on this function in everyday life, they rely on it also as they process the stories that they encounter, where neither all the motives of the storyteller nor all the desires and intentions of the characters within the tale...
are made explicit. This research in cognitive studies, therefore, allows us to think not only about how the listeners or readers who make up a story’s audience participate in these ‘gap-filling’ activities but also how the work they undertake shapes their experience of the tale. By way of testing these ideas, I propose to observe what happens when a storyteller such as Homer throws some serious challenges at his audience and how his listeners might respond.

An ideal locus in which we might explore the experience of the audience in these terms is Homer’s *Odyssey*, a story in which disguise is central to the action. Disguise, of course, generates complication; and complication teases and tests audiences both internal (within the narrative) and external (in the real world). My discussion of the complications within the *Odyssey* will focus on a repeated scenario, as the hero, from the moment he arrives on Ithaca, complements his disguise with a string of false identities and a series of false tales.

**Telling false tales: a cognitive framework**

In 2014 psychologist Jeffrey Walczyk and his colleagues proposed a framework for understanding what they termed ‘serious’ lies—lies told in high-stakes situations. Through this framework, they argue, the course of any serious lie may be tracked, from the moment an individual is asked for information that he or she does not wish to reveal, through his or her evasive answer, to the response of the addressee. The framework itself is built up from well-established cognitive constructs, principally ‘working memory’, the ‘central executive’, and, as described above, ‘ToM’. None of these cognitive functions is exceptional; they use precisely the same brain areas as other mental processes. This ability, to deceive others through false information and to maintain that deception, is a skill we acquire in our early years: it first appears at about age three; and, except in extraordinary circumstances, it is a skill we never lose.

So let me talk briefly about the processes of generating a false tale, a serious lie. When individuals are put ‘on the spot’, so to speak, when they face a request for information, the truth itself is automatically retrieved from their long-term memory and, on transfer to working memory, is immediately available. But, as they weigh up the likely impact of the truth on their addressee, they may judge that an honest response is not an appropriate response. And they will assess what their addressee is likely to believe should they construct a false tale. These two functions are the task of ToM, that learned capacity to infer the state of mind of those around us in the real world. The central executive function of the brain, which integrates metacognition, working memory, and inhibition, supports and keeps track of these ToM inferences, and, at the same time, its inhibitory processes overcome unhelpful interference by the truth as the false tale is constructed.

As they construct their false tales, successful liars try to simplify the information they share. Although they wish to repress the truth, they may draw, strategically, on elements of it; they consult long-term memory to locate personal memories or events ‘vicariously experienced’ on which they can build; and they turn to episodic memory as a source of vivid, and authentic, detail. This strategy has three advantages: by staying close to the truth speakers find the deception easier to remember for the longer term; through their use of authentic experiences they are able to maximize the plausibility of their tale; and, critically, they are able to minimize the additional cognitive load that high-stakes deception generates. Whereas everyday deception, the white lie, has been shown to make minimal demands on cognitive resources, activities in connection with deception in high-stakes contexts—the decision to lie, the careful construction of the lie, tracking the response of the addressee, and recalling the lie—are more of a burden, particularly on working memory. Nevertheless, practice is helpful: a well-rehearsed lie can reduce that burden significantly.
These functions are all represented by the poet of the *Odyssey* in the person of Odysseus, for whom he (the poet) composes false tales to obscure the ‘truth’ about the hero’s identity and his past. Like any teller of a serious lie, the poet himself must inhibit the ‘truth’ (or what he has persuaded us is the real story); and yet he must not lose sight of it. He must construct a lie that is plausible and that will be favourably received by its audience; and he must keep track of that lie, so that he can construct answers that are plausible, in terms of the events of the story, to any follow-up questions. Odysseus’ lies are generated in what are depicted as high-risk situations in the storyworld, and his addressee is, in most cases, taken in by the fiction. But the context in which the lies will actually be judged is that of the story-realm, that zone in which the poet and his audience interact. It is in this realm that the plausibility of the fabrications attributed to Odysseus and the success of the tale as a whole will be measured.

External audience members have the advantage, so to speak, over members of the internal audience, in that, even as they listen to one of the hero’s false tales, they know the ‘real’ story of Odysseus’ identity and his recent history. But they are not omniscient. They are left to infer the intentions of the poet himself, who can be as reticent about the desires and intentions of the characters within the tale as he is about his intentions for his story as a whole. As David Herman observes, the ability to comprehend narrative ‘requires’ us to situate participants in the tale ‘within networks of beliefs, desires, and intentions’—which we must supply from what the storyteller has told us and from our own resources, in particular our ToM. And, I add, we must be able to situate the storyteller too within those same networks.

My aim in this present exercise is to draw on these ideas in cognitive studies in order to outline a new way of analysing some of Homer’s most challenging scenes. Ultimately, I aim to illuminate aspects of cognitive activity in the members of Homer’s external audience as they try to track the hero’s lying tales and their effect; and I shall show how, as external audience members are teased and tested by the poet (as they observe internal audience members being teased and tested by the hero), their ToM-led processing activities (and their pleasure in resolving these lower-level exercises) foster their engagement with the tale as a whole.

Before I turn to my selection of the ‘serious lies’ that Odysseus tells the people he encounters on Ithaca, let us consider a singular moment in Odysseus’s account of his wanderings, a moment when the hero, throwing caution to the winds, tells the truth about himself. Odysseus and his men have escaped from Polyphemus; they are on board their vessel and are leaving the land of the Cyclops (9.462–472). Their safety seems assured. At this point Odysseus taunts the giant, not once, but three times. Ignoring the pleas of his companions, he reveals to Polyphemus his identity (502–505). This is indeed unusual behaviour in our hero, who has been associated by tradition with the stealth of the ambush (*Il*. 10.242–247, 338–531), the deceit of the Wooden Horse (*Od*. 4.269–289), and an ingenious escape only a little earlier from that same Cyclops’ cave (*Od*. 9.424–467).

What appears to have happened can be explained in cognitive terms: at the very moment when the hero should have been responding to an ambush-situation, where caution is crucial, he exhibited the behaviour of a triumphant Iliadic hero on the battlefield. At this crucial moment, as he defies Polyphemus, Odysseus’ central executive, operating on its default ‘Iliadic’ setting, has ignored its normal inhibitory processes, which would have urged silence on him or, at least, would have led him to suppress the truth. It is this unhappy moment of truth-telling that brings the Cyclops’ curse and Poseidon’s wrath upon the hero, and this in turn prolongs his journey and leads to the special circumstances of his homecoming.

**Odysseus tells a false tale to Athena**

The first of the serious lies the hero tells is the false tale he composes shortly after he wakes in his own fatherland (13.187–188). At this point Odysseus does not recognize Ithaca
Elizabeth Minchin

(οὐδὲ μν ἔγνω, 188), because Athena has poured a mist over the island. She does so, the poet suggests, to create the opportunity to advise her protégé of the situation on the island and to change his appearance (190–193). To complement the unfamiliar setting, Athena has disguised herself as well, as gods are wont to do. She has assumed the form of a young shepherd boy.

Odysseus addresses this young stranger. Approaching him as a suppliant (231), the hero asks where he is and the name of the people who live there. As the shepherd announces that the island is Ithaca, Odysseus rejoices. The truth—that this is his homeland—springs automatically to his lips (250–251). He is at the point of betraying himself. But he has learnt his lesson from that earlier lapse of attention with the Cyclops. Once again, much is at stake: the hero does not know what his reception in his homeland or in his palace will be. Furthermore, when he was in the Underworld he had heard Agamemnon’s tale of his homecoming (11.405–434) and he had absorbed Agamemnon’s advice (that he should return without attracting notice, κρύβοι, and not openly, μηδ’ ἀναφαδνά, 11.454–456). This, then, is the motivation for his subsequent actions. As the poet makes clear, Odysseus’ inhibitory processes engage: he ‘pushes back’ what he was about to say (πάλιν δ’ ὡς λάβετο μῦθον, 254) and, relying on ToM and working memory (we assume), he prepares a false tale.27 His goal at this point is to protect himself and the gifts he had been given by the Phaeacians.28

Let us engage again with the framework for serious lies that I described above. As we follow the false tale that the poet has created for Odysseus, we infer the mental activities the poet has attributed to his hero. First, we understand that Odysseus has read the social context, has concluded from the young shepherd’s appearance what his listener might know of the world, and has guessed at what might impress him. He shapes his story around a number of well-established ‘facts’ that will serve this purpose, constructing a believable timeline and inventing only as much detail as is necessary to achieve his goals. In his new guise, as hero of his own false tale, Odysseus comes from Crete, a location so remote, he hopes, that his account cannot be disproved.29 He has heard of Ithaca, he says. He is a hero of the Trojan campaign, and a friend of Idomeneus, his fellow countryman; he is the kind of man, he implies, who is awarded spoils after a successful campaign, who will kill to protect what is rightfully his, and who will not submit himself to others (13.256–271). Such an economical combination of fact and fiction underpins any successful lie. At the heart of this false tale we find another figure familiar to us (and, apparently, to the internal audience also) from the ‘Troy-story, and some familiar themes: Idomeneus is a leading hero in the action of the Iliad; Odysseus’ claimed association with him, even as a subordinate, is a claim to status.30 Furthermore, the division of spoils and the quarrels that arise over them represent a theme familiar to the internal audience from the ‘Troy-story more generally and to the external audience from the version of the ‘Troy-story that we know from the Iliad.

Odysseus goes on to say that he has been brought to Ithaca by Phoenicians, who, having promised to take him to Pylos or Elis, have tricked him—in accord with their reputation (272–286).31 His lie is carefully tailored to the situation as he sees it: he seeks sympathy and respect—for his status and for his readiness to defend his own interests, and sympathy for his current plight.32

But this false tale does not persuade his addressee. As a goddess, Athena, being omniscient, knows the ‘real’ story of Odysseus. What is interesting here is that in this episode, in which Odysseus tells the first of his lies, Athena, in the storyworld, models for us, the external audience, the response the poet expects in his listeners as they hear such a tale, and as they hear the other false tales that Odysseus later tells on Ithaca.33 As she listens, Athena smiles (287), recognizing the hero’s natural propensity for deception and, I suggest, taking some pleasure in her own easy ability to detect the lie.34 Indeed, she compliments her protégé on his deviousness (291–295). And this, the poet hints, is what we should do too. We should enjoy the experience of detection; we should admire Odysseus for his cunning; and we should congratulate the poet.
who has created this episode. Our enjoyment and our admiration will not be limited to this
tale alone. There are more spectacular manipulations of the truth ahead, as Odysseus defers the
moment of recognition until he has tested even his wife.

But what kind of mental activities have we, the ‘knowing’ external audience, been engaged
in? Mark Turner has long been interested in the capacity of the human mind to activate and run
different, even incompatible, stories at the same time. Some stories—jokes, for example—do
not make sense unless we are able to process them from more than one perspective. Likewise,
the cognitive processes associated with lies and deception (for a knowing audience) require
activity at two levels: first, with regard to the memory of the actual situation as we understand
it and, second, with reference to the false tale that we hear. These dual-processing activities
require us, first, to shift from perspective to perspective, overlaying each lie on what we already
know of the epic account of Odysseus; second, to compare the two narratives (the ‘real’ and
the false); and, finally, to reach some understanding of the goals of the hero—and of the poet.

**Odysseus’ second false tale to Eumaeus**

I turn now to a tale that Odysseus tells Eumaeus, his swineherd host, on his first evening in his
dwelling. Odysseus, disguised now as a beggar, has already complemented his disguise with an
elaborate Cretan tale that takes up many of the elements of his false tale to Athene, but which
goes further, announcing the imminent return of Odysseus. As the evening chill makes itself
felt, the beggar asks his host for a blanket. Indeed, the poet tells us that the hero was testing
(πειρητίζων) Eumaeus, to see whether he would give him his own cloak or the cloak of one of
his men (14.459–461). In putting his request he tells a story of a venture that, he boldly claims
(εὐξάμενος, 463), he undertook in the course of the Trojan War. Naming two of the great
heroes of the Trojan campaign, Odysseus and Menelaus, as leaders of an ambush, he includes
himself (now the beggar) as a third (470–471). Bad weather came on (475–477); he (the
beggar) was caught without a cloak for warmth (478–482). He remarked on his condition to
Odysseus (486–489), who, promptly devising a plan to deal with the problem, incited the hero
Thoas to leap up in haste and run off to take a message to Agamemnon (495–498). Thoas’s cloak
now became available for our storyteller, the beggar (499–502).

As the beggar offers this second false tale to Eumaeus the poet persuades us that he (the beg-
ggar) has carefully tracked his host’s reactions to his earlier concoction and is confident that his
host has accepted its principal elements—except for the information about Odysseus’ return
(363–365). In reusing elements that are ‘real’ or, at least, consistent with his earlier false tales,
he (more accurately, the poet) reduces his cognitive load. The cloak-tale is set in the context
of the Trojan expedition. So much is plausible. It includes the big names from Troy: plausible
again; and it reflects quite accurately the wily mind of its hero, Odysseus.

The poet, of course, has told the external audience in advance why the beggar will tell this
story. And the beggar himself gives a strong although indirect hint to the swineherd that a cloak
is what he needs (504–506). Now the swineherd responds promptly. He commends the tale as
a good story (508); he compliments the teller for the way in which his request was presented
(509–510); and he lends him a cloak for the night (510–512). What has impelled him to do so?
In pointing out that there are no extra cloaks for the swineherds Eumaeus makes it clear never-
thless that there has been something about this story that has moved him to make a concession.
The impetus, I suggest, is a sense of the presence of his master in the story itself, both in the
telling and in the quick thinking that is at its heart. It is in response to this authenticity, and in
honour of the absent Odysseus, that Eumaeus accedes to his visitor’s request. And in doing so
he passes the test that his master has set him.
So much for the internal audience. As we, the external audience, follow this tale we engage in two simultaneous processing activities. First, we hear and process the tale as it is told to Eumaeus by the ‘beggar’, who, on the one hand, creates a fake-Odysseus, distinct from himself, brilliantly evoking the hero’s resourcefulness and his agile mind. He brings him to life. At the same time, however, we know that the beggar is Odysseus: so, as a parallel activity, we process the tale as it is told by Odysseus himself to the swineherd, in which he (in beggar’s guise) tells a story about himself as a quick thinker and ‘fixer’ who comes to the aid of a completely fictitious character (the ‘beggar’/not-Odysseus) who had forgotten his cloak on a cold night not unlike the present.

But our processing activities do not stop there. How can we explain the motive for the poet’s remarkable inclusion of Odysseus as a player in the story the beggar tells? When Odysseus/the beggar includes the figure of Odysseus as the hero of this tale, we propose to ourselves, as I suggested above, that this choice has been made in order to increase the chance of a favourable response from Eumaeus. But what is happening in the story-realm, where the poet plays to his external audience? What are the implications, at this level, of the poet’s decision to represent Odysseus in multiple guises, as storyteller in disguise and as hero of his own story?

Some audience members might propose that the poet has his hero include himself in his tale because Odysseus enjoys playing with his own identity (he is, after all, πολύτροπος [Od. 1.1]); others might suggest that he takes the opportunity to sing his own praises and to compliment himself; it is possible too that the hero in disguise is anxious not to lose his identity. All these proposals are valid, and are supported by events elsewhere in the narrative. But I propose in addition a fourth motive, which feeds directly into the relationship of poet and audience: the poet himself, through his representation of his hero’s devices, aims to impress us with his ability to make agile shifts between parallel and all but intersecting stories, between ‘real’ and fictitious identities, and between ‘the real story’ and truthlike fiction. For us, the task is to keep pace with him as we handle these cognitive challenges. As to why the poet has included Odysseus as a player in this tale, there is, I think, no single ‘correct’ answer. But I come back to the notion that the poet’s desire to win the admiration of his audience represents, for him, a high-stakes situation: hence the complications that he builds into his tale.

**Odysseus tells a ‘Cretan lie’ to his wife**

At 19.104–105 Penelope asks the beggar the questions that are put to any stranger at the first encounter: who are you? where do you come from? who are your parents? Now that their meeting, which the beggar had deferred (17.561–573), has at last begun, he is again reluctant, unwilling to respond. He fends off her questions at first (115–120) but eventually yields, in apparent exasperation (165–166), promising to tell her what she wants to know. And yet he stalls, giving a long geographical account of Crete (172–180), which he claims is his home. His father, he says, is king Deucalion, grandson of Minos (178–181); he is the younger brother of Idomeneus, who went to Troy (181–184). His own name is Aethon (183). He had met Odysseus, he says, on his way to Troy (185). The hero, blown off course, had landed in Crete and had asked for Idomeneus, a guest-friend. Aethon claims to have entertained Odysseus for twelve days before sending him on his way to Troy (185–202).

The beggar recycles elements of the earlier false tales: the association with Crete, his relationship to Idomeneus, and news of Odysseus. In now claiming noble birth, he has adjusted his fictional status, as younger brother of Idomeneus, to match that of his addressee, Penelope, and to win her trust. And, for the first time in these lying tales, he gives himself a name, Aethon. The use of proper names normally enhances the authenticity of any narrative: indeed, the success of the tale that he is at present constructing depends more than ever on its plausibility.
Indeed, on passing on information that Odysseus had been driven off course as he passed Cape Malea, he refers to an acknowledged sailing risk in this world. In fact, he draws on his own experience, as the most accomplished liars do, of his return journey from Troy (9.80–81).

As the poet tells us at 203, ‘he knew how to tell many lies that were like the truth’ (ἵσκε ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγων ἑτύμοισιν ὁμοία). Penelope, at this point, takes in the story in the terms that it was told, and she weeps as she recalls her husband (204–209). But, ever-cautious, she seeks (215–217) to test the accuracy of that part of the tale that relates to Odysseus; that she will be able to verify. She asks what garments Odysseus was wearing when he arrived in Crete (218–219). Here is the advantage of using elements of the truth (and a plausible timeline) in the construction of a lie. Odysseus is, unsurprisingly, able to give a full and accurate account ‘as my heart imagines’ (ὡς μοι ἤναλλετα ἤτοι, 224)—after an appropriate disclaimer, in which he laments the lapse of time (221–223). Penelope confirms that he has spoken the truth (249–250); she declares that the beggar will be her friend in the palace (253–254). But at no point in this scene (257–260, 312–316) or in subsequent scenes (560–581) will she accept that Odysseus is still alive.

At the heart of the hero’s well-constructed tale are two important messages. The first is that, just as his alter ego Aethon had not forgotten Odysseus, neither should Penelope. After Aethon has won Penelope’s trust, at least to the extent that he persuades her that he met the hero twenty years before (the second part of this false tale, 221–248), he announces that the hero is at hand (the third element, 268–307). Aethon’s references to Odysseus are not idle. As in the cloak-tale, Odysseus has cast his real self as the hero of his false tale to catch Penelope’s attention and to engage her goodwill. But Penelope, in reply, denies that Odysseus will ever return to his home: she is unpersuaded (312–313). And yet, with respect to his internal audience, this is not his only motive for putting Odysseus at the centre of his tale. Recall the Odyssean qualities that I identified above: the hero who enjoys playing with the truth, the hero who is not reluctant to sing his own praises, and the hero who is struggling to maintain his sense of self. These qualities are in play again here and now, even when the hero is, at last, in his own palace in the company of his wife.

The second message lies in Aethon’s account of the hospitable treatment he had offered Odysseus years before (194–201). This account, I suggest, is designed to remind Penelope of the hospitality appropriate for a guest-friend or a stranger, such that Odysseus himself used to dispense in the palace. In his generation of this fictitious but plausible ‘memory’ we recognize another Odyssean characteristic: we see the same indirectness in these hints to his wife that we observed in his cloak-tale to Eumaeus. Indeed, responding to Aethon’s suggestion, Penelope will offer the hospitality that the stranger seeks (317–324), apologizing—ironically—for not being able to match Odysseus in what she can offer her guest (313–316).

As we, the external audience, process the narrative, we observe the tantalizing scenario devised by the poet: a distressed wife seeks information about her long-absent husband from that very man; and he is not yet prepared to reveal himself to her. By including the figure of Odysseus as a character in the story Aethon tells Penelope, the poet again requires us, his external audience, to acknowledge his skill in tracking the knowledge states of his characters (in this case, Penelope, Odysseus the hero, and Odysseus as Aethon)—and to recognize his readiness to challenge our own.

Conclusions

We have sampled the remarkable series of false tales told by a master-tale-teller, Odysseus, to a series of addressees on Ithaca. As a strategic measure in a potentially dangerous environment, Odysseus has refrained from revealing his identity. Repressing the ‘real story’ at each encounter, he has created an appropriate false tale for each of his addressees. Some scholars have discussed the remarkable plausibility of these tales; others have argued that these false tales suggest
alternative oral traditions of Odysseus' return to his homeland; yet others have discussed the place of the lie in the value system of the ancient Greeks. What I am interested in at this point is the authenticity of the poet's representation of both the process of telling a false tale, from the moment the hero decides to repress the truth, and the mental responses he attributes to each of the hero's addressees.

I have tracked these so-called serious lies from a cognitive perspective—following the often simultaneous operations of ToM, working memory, and the central executive. The consistent threads we observe in Odysseus' string of Cretan tales speak to any serious liar's efforts to reduce the consequent cognitive load; and the variation we note in those lies is his ToM-led response to the expectations of his respective audiences. But, in fact, it is not Odysseus who is actually drawing on these mechanisms or labouring under these cognitive burdens. It is the poet, not Odysseus, who, like any teller of false tales in the everyday world, represses the 'real story' in order to construct a string of plausible lies for the hero's internal audience.

The poet's activities are not limited, however, to interactions in the storyworld. He is concerned also about his relationship with his external audience. Unlike the teller of false tales within the *Odyssey*, the poet is not using this string of lies to deceive his listeners; his aim is to achieve their commendation for his inventiveness. Think back to Athena's response to Odysseus' first lying tale: she had smiled in pleasure, complimenting her protégé and delighting in her own cunning intelligence. So, even as the lies Odysseus tells must be plausible and persuasive in the world of the story, the poet's representation of a liar at work and of the lies he tells must be plausible, persuasive, and involving in the eyes of his real-world audiences.

Let me turn now to the ways in which the poet engages his listeners—and where this engagement leads. As members of his audience follow the story of Odysseus' arrival on Ithaca and as they observe his negotiations with Eumaeus and Penelope, they, like the poet, are aware that the hero is in disguise; they do not forget that the beggar is, in fact, Odysseus; they are aware that he is the son of Laertes, and that Ithaca, not Crete, is his homeland; and they know him as a schemer. So, as they listen to the hero's fabrications, addressed to Athena, to Eumaeus, or to Penelope, this other bundle of information is at call in working memory. The task before them is to follow the story that the beggar presents, comparing it with his 'real story', identifying points of correspondence (the expedition to Troy, for example, or his association with Idomeneus) and points of difference (his relationship to Idomeneus; Crete as his homeland). This, as I noted above, is a dual-processing task, as the listener switches his attention back and forth, almost automatically, between the false tale and the 'real story'. But the poet has added a further complication: the inclusion of Odysseus as a player in two of these tales. It is this complication, which Martin West describes as a 'bamboozling', which forces us, his audience, to work quite hard at this point of the story, in order to resolve the impossible relationship between the teller of the false tale and a particular member of his cast, and, relying on ToM, to guess at the motives of the poet in creating this tangle.

By concentrating on this problem, overlaying the disguised Odysseus on the real Odysseus, and separating both figures from the Odysseus of the false tales, we are able to unravel the poet’s ‘brain-twister’. As we work through this conundrum, we become acutely aware, fully conscious, of our own processing mechanisms. On resolving this puzzle, and on identifying, at least to our own satisfaction, the poet’s motivations for including it, we have a flush of pleasure. This pleasure, Reuven Tsur argues, arises from the confirmation, the reassurance, that these mechanisms of ours are working efficiently.

So, to return to the point at which I began: we now have a working hypothesis from cognitive studies that illuminates the mental activities not only of characters engaging in ‘mind-reading’...
within one of the earliest tales to have survived to us but also of the poem’s audience members, as they too rely on ToM to fill ‘gaps’ and process this complex narrative. In the account above of the work that audience members must undertake to resolve the problem-solving exercises that the narrative poses, we find support for the claim that such creative ‘work’ leads to greater engagement with the narrative and, ultimately, greater pleasure and greater confidence.68 In trying to identify the poet’s aims as he creates each false tale, I suggest that his goal is not, as West describes it, to bamboozle—to baffle and confuse—his external audience. Indeed, it is vital for the success of his performance that we keep up with his tale. But as I, on behalf of all the Odyssey-poet’s audiences over the centuries, model a response in cognitive terms to the poet’s string of false tales in all their complexity, I conclude that his long-term goal is to leave his listeners and readers deeply impressed, even occasionally dazzled, with the brilliance of his storytelling prowess—and with the agility of his mind.69

Notes

1 I offer my thanks to audiences in Canberra and Leiden, and to the reviewers of this written version, for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.
2 See, for example, Schank (1979) 278–291; Polanyi (1979) 211–213.
3 I have adapted these ‘maxims’ from Grice’s ‘cooperative principle’: on this see Grice (1975) 45–50. Although developed for conversational situations, these maxims—quantity, quality, relation, and manner—might also describe effective storytelling, whatever the medium.
4 A principal contributor to this discussion has been Wolfgang Iser, who insisted that we should analyse our own involvement with a text if we are to understand what it is about. For a valuable summary of Iser’s thinking, see Holub (1984) 82–106, at 106.
6 For early work of this kind, see, for example, Schank and Abelson (1977); and, more recently, Gerrig and Egidi (2003).
8 By inferring motives and intentions we come to understand the chain of cause and effect that underpins any sequence of events: see Schank and Abelson (1977), ch. 2.
9 The classic account of this distinctive motif and of its contribution to the plot of the Odyssey is Murnaghan (1987); see also Bowie (2013) 6–15.
10 Walczyk, Harris, Duck, and Mulay (2014); and, for background, see Gombos (2006) 198–199.
13 For an important early study on working memory see Baddeley (1986); see now Smith and Kosslyn (2007) chs 5 (‘Encoding and Retrieval from Long-Term Memory’) and 6 (‘Working Memory’). On working memory as a short-term storage site in which ‘complex cognitive activities that require the integration, coordination, and manipulation of multiple bits of mentally represented information’ are made possible, see 249. For these activities in the context of serious lies, see Walczyk et al. (2014) 24.
14 For functions of ToM in the context of lying, see Walczyk et al. (2014) 30.
16 Walczyk et al. (2014) 30; Debey, De Houwer, and Verschueren (2014) 325.
17 On everyday deception, see Walczyk et al. (2014) 32–33. On cognitive load, see also Debey et al. (2014) 326. The heaviest load occurs when speakers find themselves in unfamiliar, surprising, or complex social contexts: having made the decision that a lie is the appropriate response, they are obliged to work harder to infer what their audiences might expect or wish to hear (Walczyk et al. [2014] 31–33).
18 Walczyk et al. (2014) 31.
20 I suggest that the lie Odysseus tells to Alcinous at 7.303–307 is, by contrast, a white lie. But the external audience, in this case too, must engage in dual-processing in order to detect the lie and observe its construction.
Elizabeth Minchin

21 For discussions of Odysseus’ lies, see Trahman (1952); Walcot (1977); Haft (1984); Emlyn-Jones (1986); Pratt (1993) ch. 2.
22 Herman’s italics: Herman (2003) 169. Zunshine goes further: she argues, in her discussion of fiction, that narratives not only ‘rely on our readiness to keep track of individuals’ thoughts, desires, and feelings (that is, we are expected to work) but also ‘manipulate’ and ‘titillate’ it; and that it is our ToM that makes literature as we know it possible: Zunshine (2006) 3–10, at 5.
23 For an important application of ToM to the action within the storyworld of the Homeric epics, see Scodel (2014) 55–74. Scodel describes ToM as ‘a distinct and significant topic in narrative studies’ (56).
26 The other point of the narrative at which Odysseus loses his self-control, again critically, is at 23.181–204, in response to being tested by his wife. In reading this later scene we conclude that the force of Odysseus’ indignation is too immediate and too strong for the inhibitory processes of his central executive.

Note how the poet conceives of this operation of mental restraint: the hero, as it were, snatches at the truth before it escapes his lips.
28 See also Pratt (1993) 90–91.
29 On this point see Trahman (1952) 35–36.
30 The audience will be predisposed to accepting and even admiring Odysseus’ claimed identity: see Haft (1984) 294. On the link with Idomeneus, Haft (at 292–299) argues that the poet has used the Iliadic bond between Idomeneus and Meriones as a framework for the Cretan lies he composes for Odysseus; and that Meriones therefore serves as the model for the first-person hero of Odysseus’ Cretan tales.
31 The Phoenicians have a bad reputation: cf. Eumaeus’ story at 15.415–484. But, on this occasion, these ‘Phoenicians’ have, uncharacteristically, respected Odysseus’ property.
33 This is not an isolated instance in the epics of ‘modelling’: see Wyatt (1988) 289–297; Pratt (1993) 72.
35 Turner (2003); see also Fauconnier and Turner (1998). For useful background on dual attention, especially when the two tasks involved overlap in significant details (as in this case), see Neisser (1976) ch. 5 (‘Attention and the Problem of Capacity’), Smith and Kosslyn (2007) 42.
36 The processing of a joke requires us to shift our ‘mental set’ from perspective to perspective, from plane to plane, in order to ‘read’ a given narrative from the point of view of different participants, or in different contexts. On shifting mental sets, essential, for example, to the interpretation of jokes, see Tsur (1989) 247–248; for a slightly different account of the role of blending, see Fludernik (2015) 155–175.
37 Indeed, as Joshua Landy comments, ‘[i]n a way . . . all fictions put us in a divided state of mind’. He refers to our awareness that what we are hearing or what we are reading is not real: Landy (2015) 572.

The first tale to Eumaeus includes elements from Odysseus’ false tale to Athena: association with Cretan status as the son of a wealthy man; participation in the Troy-expedition, having been asked by the Cretans to lead their contingent along with Idomeneus; and involvement with a tricky Phoenician. He mentions his arrival in Thesprotia, where he heard news of the Odysseus who had been there also and that he was about to set off for home. It is this element only that Eumaeus doubts: see, for example, 14.378–387.
39 For background to the tale see Bowie (2013) 223.
41 And, indeed, he reduces the cognitive load on his external audience as well.
42 Indeed, Eumaeus at 508 describes the story; the αἶνος, as an excellent ‘story with a hidden meaning’ (de Jong [2001] 360).
43 The cloak-tale qualifies as a ‘serious lie’; it was ‘devised’ by Odysseus/the beggar as a test of Eumaeus’ loyalty to his master; it was not, however, intended to cheat him of his possessions: cf. Pratt (1993) 89.
44 Despite the fact that Eumaeus is said to be loyal to his master (13.404–406), Odysseus proceeds as Athena had instructed him, testing him also, and cautiously maintaining his disguise in the palace until the time is right to punish the suitors.
46 Cf. Odysseus’ other Cretan lies, especially his elaborate lie to Penelope, discussed below.
47 That is, we use ToM to read Odysseus’ words as mock exasperation: the hero knows that it is proper to ask about a stranger’s identity; and, we guess, he knows from experience that his wife is cautious: she will not be satisfied with a superficial or dismissive reply. As we shall see, Penelope will demonstrate this
The cognition of deception

same trait again, as she refuses to recognize the stranger as her husband until she is thoroughly persuaded (23.205–230).

48 For some discussion of some of these features see de Jong (2001) 468–469. When the beggar spoke with Eumaeus he concocted a ‘mixed career’ that was not dissimilar to Eumaeus’ own. Now, in speaking with Penelope, he claims a royal lineage that will win her confidence: Russo in Russo, Fernández-Galiano, and Heubeck (1992) 85–86.


50 The beggar must tell a story that will convince Penelope that he is a reliable witness, someone whom she might take into her confidence.

51 As experienced also by Menelaus, who was driven to Crete (3.286–303) at this same point. Odysseus is, however, unaware of the Menelaus-story. But we, the audience, recognize the parallel.

52 A skill much admired by Aristotle, Poetics 1460a18–26.

53 See also Heitman (2008) 43–49, esp. at 48.

54 Note the hero’s use of the adverb ἑμικράτησες (269), truly, infallibly, as he introduces his claims about Odysseus: this term has appeared as a thread through the Ithaca-narrative: see especially 17.549, 556, 561.

55 This false tale, like an exemplary false tale, includes elements of the truth: the loss of his men, his encounter with the Phaeacians, the gifts that they gave him (273–282).

56 Rutherford (1992) 163 suggests that the hero stresses Aethon’s hospitality in order to emphasize his own virtue and the obligation on Penelope to befriend her visitor as her husband would have done (315–316).

57 On the exquisite irony of the scene, as Penelope weeps for her husband, who was seated beside her, in the careful precision of ἐκ νοῦ σωματικοῦ, at 209, and the pathos of Odysseus, who felt pity for his wife, ἐβαθέας γυναῖκα, at 210, to whom he could not betray his identity; see de Jong (2001) 470; Russo (1992) 87–88.

58 After the lesson he learned as he left the Cyclops’ cave, Odysseus’ central executive continues to maintain careful control of his responses.

59 One omission from the false tales under discussion above is the lie Odysseus tells his father Laertes, at 24.258–279, 303–314. Although the hero is sorely tempted, when he encounters his father, to embrace him and identify himself, he falls back on his earlier strategy of the false tale. This lie is not told in a high-stakes context, although Odysseus nevertheless forms a plan to test him (232–240). How to interpret this? On the one hand, Odysseus’ behaviour may be an example of ‘duping delight’: the pleasurable anticipation of lying successfully: on the positive feelings that lying can arouse, see Ekman and Frank (1993) 184–200, at 194–195. But, as soon as Odysseus sees the misery his false tale has caused (315–317), he experiences a harsh moment of shock (ὥσιν μένος, 319) and abandons his disguise (321–322). On the other hand, we may be observing a learned response. It may be that as an outcome of the unhappy finale of the Polyphemus-episode of Od. 9, the hero has schooled himself to deceive; even in the presence of his father he feels that he cannot betray himself.


61 See especially Tsagalis (2012).


64 It is clear that the poet intends that comparison should take place concurrently, since there is no time in an oral performance for any other option. For commentary on dual attention, see above.

65 There is a cognitive burden associated with this task: see Smith and Koslyn (2007) 303–308, at 304 on switching cost. This dual-processing exercise is, I suggest, possible thanks to our ‘training’ in everyday cognitive processing. In the real world, for example, we are almost unfailingly able to follow what is happening when we are aware that a friend or a partner is telling a lie.


67 Tsur (1989) 247. Tsur refers here specifically to the ‘adaptation mechanisms’ that allow a listener to find humour in a joke. I suggest that, for a knowing audience, the processing of a complex lie requires a similar ability; See also Zunshine (2006) 16–22.

68 On this, see Zunshine (2006) 20.

69 This too the poet models for us in the responses of the Phaeacians to Odysseus’ own tale: his listeners were ‘held in enchantment’ (κηληθμῷ, 11.334, 13.2) by his telling.
Elizabeth Minchin

References


The cognition of deception


