11 *The Hero in a Thousand Pieces: Antiheroes in Recent Epic Cinema*

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In memoriam Daniel J. Curley
(1934–2016), who dreamed of heroes.

INTRODUCTION

Heroism is one of the great preoccupations of Western, if not global culture, though standards for what heroes can or should do are ever-shifting. Because they are prone to antiheroic passions such as greed, lust, and vengeance, Greek and Roman heroes often become rehabilitated in modern screen texts. The opening narration of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–9) exemplifies this tendency: "Hercules possessed a strength the world had never seen – a strength surpassed only by the power of his heart. . . . But wherever there was evil, wherever an innocent would suffer, there would be Hercules." His mission is not quite Superman's "truth, justice, and the American way," but the show clearly reconfigures one of antiquity's most problematic characters as a superhero of the past.

This chapter focuses on three historic and mythical figures – Alexander the Great, Perseus, and Hercules – portrayed in screen epics as both heroes and antiheroes.[1] Their antiheroic status stems not so much from gestures toward ancient authenticity as from our own ambivalence toward heroism. Furthermore, antiheroism is depicted cinematically through the dissolution or fragmentation of conventional heroic storytelling, with its familiar plot patterns and filmmaking techniques. The later, antiheroic films play quite differently from their earlier, heroic counterparts – which in turn receive the relative status of classics.

SURROGATE CLASSICISM: FORMULATING ANTIHEROES

Antiheroes fulfill many cultural functions. Some of the more common include the following.

- *Failures*. The antihero is frequently defined in opposition to the traditionally successful hero: "A 'non-hero,' or the antithesis of a hero of the old-fashioned kind who was capable of heroic deeds, who was dashing, strong, brave and resourceful. . . . The antihero . . . is given the vocation of failure."[2] "Vocation of failure" is provocative and suggests that antiheroes do not achieve much – or, if they do, that their achievements are feeble or unworthy.
- *Modern mirrors*. "A fragmented society – torn by war, conflicting values, cultural crisis, and different aspects of modernity – produces its own heroic model: sick, anti-social, and introspective antiheroes whose salvation is individualistic in the midst of social and cultural disarray."[3] When not failing in and of themselves, antiheroes reflect the failure of society, which is often couched in terms of fragmentation. They are broken heroes for broken times, though perhaps not without hope of transcending their limitations.
- *Disruptors*. "The negative hero, more keenly perhaps than the traditional hero, challenges our assumptions, raising anew the question of how we see, or wish to see ourselves. The antihero is often a perturber and a disturber."[4] Beyond reflecting social fragmentation, antiheroes can be fragmenters in their own right. They destabilize heroic ideals, often through unconventional attitudes and actions.
- *Hesitators*. "The hero's hesitation or inhibition reflects crises inherent in the greater world. . . . These cultural crises, implicit or explicit within the texts, reflect in turn the stresses that the poets sense within their own societies."[5] Hesitation is a particularly enduring mode of disruption, one with classical antecedents. Aeneas and Orestes are two paradigms of the hero prone, at a critical juncture, to indecisiveness.

The preceding notions – failing, mirroring, disrupting, and hesitating – are helpful for interrogating antiheroes not only in their social contexts, but also in their narrative contexts. We are accustomed to conceptualize heroes in terms of narratives with particular "shapes": a character arc or a journey with persistent and redeeming tropes. Such narratives are the stock in trade of the motion-picture industry, whose devotion to formula is notorious, but they are demonstrably older than cinema and established in other modes of storytelling. Because antiheroic narratives have received nowhere near the same level of formalist scrutiny, theories about heroic narratives become our starting point, just as antiheroes are defined in opposition to heroes. If antiheroes fracture or otherwise disrupt the image of traditional heroes, their narratives will do the same vis-à-vis heroic narratives. Let us briefly consider two formal theorists, whose work on heroic narrative is both pervasive in popular media and synonymous with the classicism often at odds with antiheroism.

The godfather of formalist heroic narrative is Aristotle (384–322 BC), whose *Poetics* gives precepts for constructing tragic plots. Since tragedy traffics by and large in mythical characters and situations that, according to Aristotle, require a certain magnitude (*Poetics* 7), the *Poetics* is concerned with heroes by default. From this treatise come formative concepts such as unity of action and tripartite beginning–middle–end structure (*Poetics* 7), as well as devices such as recognition (*anagnorisis*), reversal (*peripeteia*), and suffering (*pathos*), which lend intricacy to plot (*Poetics* 11). Aristotle's formulations reflect the complications inherent in Greek heroism. The ideal subjects of tragedy, neither wholly good nor evil, suffer due to their own fallibility or *hamartia* (*Poetics* 13), a concept that has become essentialized as the "tragic flaw."[6] Whether taken in its entirety or mined here and there for helpful principles, the *Poetics* has left its mark on nearly every Western genre of storytelling – including, as we will see, screenwriting.

Jump ahead twenty-three centuries to Joseph Campbell (1904–87) and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (first published in 1949, now in its third edition (2008)). In contrast to the literary typologies of Aristotle (or Northrop Frye, the twentieth century's *other* eminent heroic theorist),[7] Campbell's anthropological and psychological approach occupies a single construct: the *monomyth*, a cycle prescribing the universal journey of archetypal heroes in myth and legend. Here is Campbell's epoch-making summary of the monomyth, the single most-quoted passage from his work:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.[8]

The stages of this three-part cycle are (1) separation/departure, in which heroes receive (and often refuse) a "Call to Adventure" and

enter the "Belly of the Whale," a literal or figurative underworld; (2) initiation, in which they are tested and acquire boons; and (3) return, in which they re-enter the world above and become engines of cosmic change. Along the way heroes encounter other archetypes – mentors, tricksters, allies, monsters, and villains – who either help or hinder their progress. The impact of Campbell's work on print and screen texts from the 1960s onward cannot be overstated, with *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (1977) and its sequels the best-known examples of cinematic monomyth.[9]

Given the entertainment industry's highly competitive and comparative culture, it is not surprising that Aristotle and Campbell have become ensconced within the studio system. The *Poetics*, long considered a seminal screenwriting text, has found greater currency in summaries such as writer-director Michael Tierno's *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters* (2002). Tierno, sidestepping "that translation-from-ancient-Greek issue," highlights "timeless universal truths about dramatic storytelling" in films as diverse as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Gladiator* (2000), *Rocky* (1976), and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Meanwhile, Christopher Vogler, a former story analyst turned independent consultant, has done for Campbell what Tierno did for Aristotle. In 1985, after recognizing the monomyth at work in the *Star Wars* trilogy, Vogler distilled *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* into a seven-page memo for Walt Disney Studios. The memo was also distributed outside Disney, and its popularity inspired Vogler to expand it into a screenwriting manual, *The Writer's Journey* (first published 1995, now in its third edition (2007)).[10]

The work of Aristotle and Campbell is classicizing in the radical sense (Latin *classicus*, "belonging to a class or rank"). Both isolate exemplars of classical myth and, by applying (neo)classical ideals of order and symmetry, bring them into system. The *Poetics* is concerned with sorting out a vast tragic corpus and, in commending some plays above others, with the formation of a dramatic canon. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is focused perhaps less on canon-formation, though Greco-Roman case studies are prominent, than on fitting diverse traditions into a timeless and tidy pattern. Their classicism is all the more conspicuous by way of Tierno and Vogler, whose exemplars of Aristotelian and monomythic films constitute canons unto themselves. Screen texts that partake of these systems – *as systems* – are engaged in a kind of surrogate classicism, the self-conscious creation of timeless heroic classics. If these texts are set in antiquity, the systemization becomes hyper-classicizing, imparting classically derived authenticity or authority writ large – especially where deviations from ancient sources are steep.

Antiheroic films will work to disrupt these systems. This is not to say that the outcomes are never heroic from the standpoint of achieving victories or accomplishing great tasks. Instead, the traditional heroic arcs or journeys, which are generally neat, focused, and linear, become random, diffuse, and otherwise fragmented. Our case studies begin with a pair of screen epics about Alexander the Great. The following discussion, which pits the heroic classicism of the one against the antiheroic fragmentation of the other, will inform our eventual consideration of Perseus and Hercules.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT (1956) AND *ALEXANDER* (2004)

Tasked with labeling writer-producer-director Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great*, one could do worse than "Aristotelian." The film is above all a classical tragedy in the vein of the *Poetics*,[11] a cradle-to-grave biopic in three acts: Alexander's birth and upbringing; his rise to power, first in Macedonia and then globally; his decline and death. Plutarch long before set the bar for associating Alexander with tragedy, inflecting his biography with "sustained tragic patterning and imagery."[12] And Rossen, whose background was in theater, likewise swathed his movie in thespian staginess, from his script's allusions to Euripides, Sophocles, and Shakespeare, to his principal cast of British theater veterans, who take Received Pronunciation to new heights of artifice – even by that era's already inflated standards.

In addition to these classicizing flourishes, the film presents Alexander (Richard Burton) as the Aristotelian ideal: a man not overly virtuous, whose inherent sense of superiority renders him fallible, nowhere more so than the impetuous slaying of his companion Cleitus (Gustavo Rojo). Alexander hero-worships Achilles, but the Freudian archetype of Oedipus, whose Sophoclean incarnation bulks rather large in the *Poetics*, haunts him.[13] His mistress, Barsine (Claire Bloom), pointedly summarizes his complex: "No other woman is my rival, except your mother, and your frenzied desire to outdo your father." Much earlier in the picture, at a banquet celebrating the marriage of Philip (Fredric March) to the young Eurydice (Marisa de Leza), the hero not only defends his mother's honor and nearly comes to blows with his father, but also endures a drunken Attalus (Stanley Baker) calling his legitimacy into question. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, a similar incident sets Oedipus on the road to Delphi to inquire

about his past: "There was a dinner" (he tells Jocasta) "and at it was a man, who was drunk; he accused me in his drink of being a bastard" (779–80). The contentious wedding is the first step in Alexander's rapid ascension. Soon he witnesses Philip's murder, is acclaimed king under the watchful eye of Olympias (Danielle Darrieux), and launches his invasion of Persia.

More Aristotelian than tropes from the *Poetics* is the presence of Aristotle himself (Barry Jones) as Alexander's tutor. Cultivating in Alexander appreciation for science, mathematics, history, and other disciplines, Aristotle makes him a paragon of Greek learning – quite unlike his so-called barbarian father. Moreover, Aristotle instills a sense of Greek nationalism, declaiming against the Persians, whose way of life (he tells a rapt Alexander and his companions) "has the seed of death and fear in it." It is the "moral duty" of Greeks to subjugate and even destroy such peoples. Aristotle envisions for his pupil a certain heroic arc, long-lived, kingly, and decidedly un-tragic, provided Alexander be kept from premature misfortune. Such concern causes conflict, not only with Alexander, but also with Philip, who offers his son command of Pella against Aristotle's advice. Alexander, however, astonishes his tutor by revealing his decision to emulate Achilles – to live a glorious life but die young – an arc antithetical to Aristotle's. Nevertheless, the philosopher's influence on Alexander, and therefore on the biopic itself, is profound. Aristotle even has the film's last words: "Wonders are many, but none is more wonderful than man himself." This sentiment, an excerpt from the famous "Ode to Man" in Sophocles' *Antigone*, was originally uttered in the gymnasium at Mieza. Here, repeated in voiceover moments after Alexander's death, it is a commentary on his life story, the eulogy of a hero who reached the summit of human achievement.

The theatrical release of Oliver Stone's *Alexander* might in turn be labeled "pseudo-Aristotelian" for its warts-and-all approach. In fact, this label applies to many of Stone's films, especially his historical biopics, which humanize or nuance "larger-than-life heroes . . . by emphasizing one or more conspicuous flaws or failures."[14] *Alexander* seems founded on a scattershot reading of the *Poetics*, its engagement with the treatise less sustained than in *Alexander the Great*. Taking *hamartia* as a tragic flaw, for instance, the movie pursues a precipitous "arc of rise and fall" wherein the protagonist "pushes too far, attempts too much."[15] Moreover, this arc incorporates an Oedipus complex whose shock value, especially in the tempestuous mother–son relationship, handily outstrips anything in Rossen's film. Even Stone's singular focus on Alexander seems to contravene Aristotelian

practice: "The ideal narrative of an epic or a tragedy should be constructed around a single *action*, not a single hero."[16] *Alexander the Great*, however tightly focused on its hero, nonetheless gives him the motive of revenge to unite his actions. Yet *Alexander* is hard-pressed to adduce coherent motives for its protagonist's words and deeds. Overall, the Aristotelian machinery of Stone's biopic, operating at an even further remove from the *Poetics* than its 1956 precursor, sometimes veers toward parody.

Appropriately, perhaps, Aristotle himself plays a less formative role in the 2004 release. Although the philosopher (Christopher Plummer) has a scene in which he shapes the world-view of Alexander, the task of shaping Alexander's life belongs to another old man: Ptolemy (Anthony Hopkins), whose dictated history is the film's narrative framework. This device prompts much of the fragmentation in *Alexander*, for Ptolemy is an unreliable narrator, his account subject to self-contradiction and vagaries of memory.[17] He calls Alexander "a god, or as close as anything I've seen," yet acknowledges the tendency to idolize Alexander, to "make him better than he was." After condemning Alexander's dream of unifying East and West, he orders his scribe to strike such vitriol: "Throw all that away. . . . It's an old fool's rubbish." Ptolemy's offscreen narration often clashes with the action on screen,[18] most notably after the battle of Gaugamela: "The Persian Empire, the greatest the world had yet known, was destroyed. And Alexander, at twenty-five, was now king of all." This victory declaration is undercut by the sight and sound of a bloodied Alexander (Colin Farrell) weeping profusely for his Macedonians, their corpses and those of the Persians littering the battlefield in the thousands (Figure 11.1). Stone's decision to present his biopic as the memoirs

Figure 11.1 Alexander (Colin Farrell) weeps antiheroically after his victory at Gaugamela in *Alexander* (2004). Warner Bros.

of Ptolemy, although proof against "accusations of anachronism and historical inaccuracy,"[19] impugns Alexander's heroism.

Even without Ptolemy, Farrell's performance is patently antiheroic. "Never hesitate," instructs Olympias (Angelina Jolie), apropos of handling serpents. Yet hesitating is what this Alexander does best, whether torn between pursuing the Persian king and aiding his own troops at Gaugamela, or earnestly asking Hephaestion (Jared Leto), "Which am I . . . weak or divine?" When not beset by rage or grief, he appears tentative or diffident, his eyebrows raised in obvious concern, even fear.[20] Such emotional displays undermine Alexander's masculinity, as does his manner of dress, from the boyishly short, white tunics he wears into adulthood, to his effeminate, Orientalizing costumes (complete with long hair and eyeliner).[21] Alexander not only looks different from manly screen heroes such as Maximus (Russell Crowe) in *Gladiator* or Achilles (Brad Pitt) in *Troy* (2004),[22] he also loves differently, forging intense unions with Hephaestion and the Persian eunuch Bagoas (Francisco Bosch). In a genre that privileges heteronormative heroes, Stone's historicizing attention to Greek homoeroticism is remarkable, if not admirable.[23] However, his Alexander was too queer for straight viewers, and for gay viewers, frustrated with the tepid Hephaestion "bromance," not queer enough.[24] Nevertheless, Stone's protagonist, as embodied by Farrell, shatters the established image of Greco-Roman screen heroes as strong, straight men – the very image of Burton's Alexander, with his cool gaze, steely demeanor, and incontestable heterosexuality.[25]

Alexander also challenges a core construct of classicizing theory: the mythical heroic archetype. As we have seen, Rossen's hero consciously emulates Achilles, the epitome of short-lived valor, and unconsciously follows in the footsteps of Oedipus, the nadir of fraught familial relationships – two overlapping archetypes that nonetheless illuminate Alexander's epic aspirations and tragic demise. Stone, however, offers an overwhelming array of conflicting models. In a programmatic scene Philip, walking with young Alexander (Connor Paolo) through a dank underground cavern, points out legends painted on its walls: Prometheus, Oedipus, Jason (by way of Medea), and Heracles; not pictured, but mentioned at the beginning of the sequence, is Alexander's favorite, Achilles. Each in himself inspires emulation – "One day I'll be on walls like these!" cries the boy – whether for his cleverness, benevolence, great deeds, or prowess in battle. Yet in their sheer multiplicity they splinter Alexander's heroic identity and reduce him to a set of disparate influences. Furthermore,

each archetype poses an equally negative exemplar liable to retribution from the gods, other mortals, or his own hand. (Even Achilles, praiseworthy for loving Patroclus and avenging his death, receives criticism from Aristotle for lacking restraint and being "a deeply selfish man.") The paintings themselves are visually fractured, shown through "flickering light, shifting camera angles, and choppy editing,"[26] and later reappearing in montage at key moments. These images, the fragments of myth, challenge viewers to piece together Alexander's complex persona.

Emerging from this discussion is a sense of how (1) antiheroism exists in synergy with cinematic strategies of fragmentation, and vice versa; and (2) a film invested in these processes colors the reception of a prior film. *Alexander* projects onto *Alexander the Great* the status of a stately, mannered classic – and the preferred classic, to judge from the reactions of audiences and critics to Stone's film.[27] Such a dynamic is to be expected between movies made in adjoining millennia. Certainly, it applies to our next case study: two Perseus films from 1981 and 2010. There, however, the dynamic intensifies, since the latter is an avowed remake of the former.

CLASH OF THE TITANS (1981 AND 2010)

Although the Perseus legend receives minimal attention from Campbell, it is reconfigured as a full-fledged monomyth for the original *Clash of the Titans* (1981). Beverley Cross' script prioritizes the romance between Perseus (Harry Hamlin) and Andromeda (Judi Bowker); this change not only raises the stakes for Andromeda's eventual sacrifice to the Kraken (a.k.a. *ketos*), but also makes Medusa's head a boon in the noblest sense, a weapon capable of saving Perseus' betrothed. Acting as mentor to Perseus is Ammon the poet (Burgess Meredith), who sets him on the path to Medusa. What was traditionally a figurative *katabasis* (descent), with the hero scouring the corners of the earth, becomes literal when Perseus encounters the Gorgon in the Underworld by way of Charon's skiff.[28] Investing a Greek myth with classicizing structure is only part of Cross' hyper-classicizing agenda, for his entire script is rife with motifs from antiquity onward. Examples include the machinations of Thetis (Maggie Smith) on behalf of her son, Calibos (Neil McCarthy), which recall the goddess' interventions in the *Iliad*; Perseus' Oedipus-like solution to Calibos' riddle; and echoes of Shakespeare throughout.[29] Like Rossen's *Alexander the Great*, the 1981 film leverages its classical intertextuality toward authenticity of the highest order.

Louis Leterrier's remake (2010) also repeats and innovates, but to decidedly un-classical effect.[30] Due to its very nature, the movie is concerned not with classical tradition at large, but with the tradition established in the 1981 original. Within this narrow intertextual remit, the 2010 *Clash* seeks to dismantle its predecessor on every possible level and to implicate the audience, whose familiarity with the 1981 *Clash* is presumed, in the process. While the original arc remains intact – Perseus (Sam Worthington) must still retrieve Medusa's head from the Underworld to stop the Kraken and save Andromeda (Alexa Davalos) – most of the particulars have been altered: Perseus and Andromeda are no longer star-crossed lovers; Hades (Ralph Fiennes), not Thetis, is Perseus' divine antagonist; Acrisius (Jason Flemyng) is both husband of Danaë and the monstrous Calibos; the Olympian gods themselves face imminent extinction. Amid these changes are entirely new additions: Io (Gemma Arterton) as a love-interest, and the Djinn sorcerers as uncertain allies. On the one hand, these audacious inventions by writers Travis Beacham, Phil Hay, and Matt Manfredi are worthy successors to Beverley Cross' equally audacious Kraken and Calibos. On the other hand, as insertions into a closed tradition, they exacerbate the fragmentation already at work.

The 1981 *Clash* had been conceived as a showcase for Dynamation, the trademark stop-motion animation of Ray Harryhausen. If any fragments of the original film are preserved in the 2010 *Clash*, they are Harryhausen's creatures: Medusa, the Kraken, Pegasus, Calibos, and the scorpions – but not Bubo the owl, whose cameo sees him unceremoniously discarded.[31] Their presence in the remake, although intended as homage, verges on iconoclasm, due in part to their rendering as CGI. Beyond the realistic detail of the creatures' design and their fluid movements, their integration into the movie's hectic cinematography and editing is the most obvious contrast with Harryhausen's methods. Because Dynamation generally relies on a static camera with limited setups, the easier to animate models against back-projected footage or within mattes, its sequences leave a rather grounded, if not stolid impression. Leterrier's CGI sequences, with their constantly moving camera, seemingly limitless angles, and rapid cutting, are jarring and disjointed.[32] These postmodern practices both push Harryhausen's classic techniques to the breaking point and ultimately fragment the (meta-)monomyth of his career: the special effects *auteur*,[33] who typically worked alone, is supplanted by scores of digital specialists-for-hire.

Worthington's antiheroic portrayal of Perseus is well suited to the fragmented ethos of the 2010 *Clash*, right down to his character's appearance. Hamlin's Perseus "looked the part"[34] in a classical sense: a curly-haired, toned youth evoking the famous Cellini bronze. Worthington's Perseus, however, sports the closely cropped hair of both Maximus in *Gladiator*[35] and a modern soldier. His body is usually encased in dark armor, unlike the revealing tunics of the 1981 *Clash*. This Perseus even rides a black Pegasus, just as antiheroes in latter-day Westerns wear black hats. Behind his combative exterior lurks a staunch opposition to the divine, his most antiheroic quality. Whereas Hamlin's wide-eyed Perseus willingly receives assistance from the gods, as the monomyth dictates, Worthington's incarnation resists their aid at almost every turn. He denies his birthright as the son of Zeus (Liam Neeson) and refuses to utilize his father's gifts – Pegasus and a magical sword – except in times of dire need. Perseus' reticence goes well beyond the monomythic hero's refusal of the "Call to Adventure." Rather, his quest is to hasten the demise of immortal supremacy, especially that of Hades, the destroyer of his adoptive family; rescuing Andromeda is the means to this end. Nor does his story conclude heroically: having spurned both the throne of Argos and immortality, Perseus elects to live (in Zeus' words) a "mundane human existence" – albeit with a divinely resurrected Io.

The dynamic of heroic classic versus antiheroic upstart is manifest in the tension between original and remake, especially where the two are separated by technology and time. Nevertheless, this dynamic can also obtain between films conceived independently and released virtually simultaneously. Our final case study, therefore, involves a pair of movies from 2014, which proved to be a banner year for Hercules.

THE LEGEND OF HERCULES (2014) AND *HERCULES* (2014)

Whatever else it is – and it tries to be many things – *The Legend of Hercules* (2014) is nothing if not a monomythic film.[36] Directed by Renny Harlin, the movie delves into Hercules' backstory and thus breaks with the cinematic norm of the fully formed and seasoned hero. The audience witnesses Hercules' divine birth and coming of age as Alcides (Kellan Lutz), a prince of Tiryns. After his mortal father, Amphitryon (Scott Adkins), and his brother, Iphicles (Liam Garrigan), exile him from the city, Alcides is captured in Egypt and endures many trials as a slave, all the while honing his heroic mettle. His eventual escape and return to Tiryns are embittered by the death of his mother, Alcmene (Roxanne McKee), and his mentor, Chiron (Rade Serbedzija). Yet Alcides eventually embraces his birthright as

Hercules and son of Zeus, defeats Iphicles and Amphitryon, and is reunited with his lost love, Hebe (Gaia Weiss). All told, the movie delivers a hero's journey of self-discovery, on a par with Disney's *Hercules* (1997) and its introspective musical numbers.

The Legend of Hercules is also legible within the tradition of the peplum genre: the long line of Italian B-movies exported overseas in the 1950s and 1960s, beginning with *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1958; English title: *Hercules*), which starred American bodybuilder Steve Reeves.[37] Most traditional, and conspicuous, is the display of Lutz's muscled body to gratify heterosexual and homoerotic gazes. In fact, *Legend* pays tribute to *Le fatiche* with Hercules chained between two pillars à la Reeves, his straining arms and torso exposed to view, and later wielding the same chains with deadly force.[38] Also traditional is a heteronormative love-interest, Hebe, who matches the hero in bravery and beauty, and whose body is likewise put on display. A third tradition is the understated but palpable presence of the divine. Though the Olympian gods rarely grace the screen in classic peplum,[39] they nevertheless have cosmic authority, which typically manifests itself in subtle fashion. In *Le fatiche* Reeves' Hercules asks Jupiter to rescind his immortality and receives a gentle but ominous rainstorm as affirmation. Similarly, *Legend* features Zeus' cyclone of clouds swirling above his shackled son, and Hera speaking through her oracle (Mariah Gale). Finally, the movie's uncomplicated conception of heroism locates it squarely within the realm of Hercules peplum, where monsters need slaying, tyrants expelling, and the downtrodden uplifting.

Even as *Legend* partakes of twentieth-century peplum traditions, it also pays tribute to neo-peplum cinema of the new millennium. The film opens with Amphitryon dueling a certain King Galenus (Dimiter Doichinov) for the right to rule Argos, which recalls the opening of *Troy* and the duel between Achilles and Boagrius (Nathan Jones) for supremacy of Thessaly. After being exiled from Tiryns, Hercules and company battle superior numbers of Egyptian soldiers within narrow caverns, a seeming homage to *300*, in which Leonidas and his Spartans fend off the Persians at Thermopylae. Next, Hercules is sold into slavery, forced to fight to the death in the arena, and hailed a celebrity; this, of course, is a nod to Maximus and his amphitheatrical success in *Gladiator*. Hercules also recalls something of Perseus from the 2010 *Clash*, from his short hair, to his initial denial of his immortal parentage, to his lightning-infused sword, with which he defeats Amphitryon's army. Although these tributes might seem fragmentary gestures, mere pastiche, they constitute a bid for authenticity under which the archetypal Hercules-strain of sword-and-sandal film recuperates later strains to their genre of origin. Just as Heracles was a Panhellenic hero, with labors and cult sites throughout Greece, so *Legend* posits a "Pan-peplum" Hercules, whose proving ground is the classical cinematic landscape c. 2000–14.

Released in July of the same year, a mere seven months after *Legend*, the simply titled *Hercules* (Paramount Pictures) is narratively and heroically poles apart. Directed by Brett Ratner and starring Dwayne ("The Rock") Johnson, the film depicts Hercules as an unmistakable antihero: the leader of a mercenary band; an exile from his Athenian homeland, haunted by the false memory of having murdered his wife and sons; a brooding and reticent adventurer inclined to minimize his reputation to all who would admire him; a muscular man who nevertheless confounds peplum convention by wearing armor. Like Lutz's Hercules, Johnson's antihero falls victim to political conspiracy: his cousin, Eurystheus (Joseph Fiennes), has struck a secret alliance with Lord Cotys of Thrace (John Hurt), whose troops Hercules and his companions ostensibly have been hired to train. As discussed above, Lutz's Hercules uncovers the conspiracy against him and embarks on a monomythic journey to Tiryns to set matters right, embracing his divine heritage along the way. Johnson's Hercules, conversely, remains ignorant for most of the picture, and the cause he believes he has undertaken is proven false. His redemption is earned not by restoring social order, but by overturning it – with his bare hands, as it happens.

Hercules inherits and fully develops two strategies of fragmentation from the 2010 *Clash of the Titans*. First is the heroic collective, which has precedent in antiquity (e.g. Jason and the Argonauts) but speaks to modern principles of collaboration and coalition. Whereas Farrell's Alexander alternately cajoles and terrorizes his Macedonian compatriots, Perseus spends much of the 2010 *Clash* working closely with a diverse team: Io, Suleiman the Djinn (Ian Whyte), two desert scavengers (Hans Matheson, Mouloud Achour), and Argive soldiers (among them Mads Mikkelsen, Liam Cunningham, and Nicholas Hoult). Though he ultimately stands alone against the Kraken, Perseus' success is predicated on a fragmentary notion of heroism, which prizes strength in numbers, multiplicity of identities, and complementary skill sets.[40]

Hercules, in turn, takes the heroic collective to a new level. Even if companions desert him or fall in battle, Johnson's protagonist, unlike Perseus, is never truly alone – not even when imprisoned and in chains (yet another echo of Steve Reeves in *Le fatiche*). "Team

Hercules," as it was styled for social media,[41] is also better defined than "Team Perseus," its members having distinct types, personalities, and backstories: an impious seer, Amphiaraus (Ian McShane); Atalanta, an Amazon (Ingrid Bolsø Berdal); a black-hearted rogue, Autolycus (Rufus Sewell); a clever storyteller, Iolaus (Reece Ritchie); a traumatized berserker, Tydeus (Aksel Hennie); and, by the film's end, Ergenia, daughter of Cotys (Rebecca Ferguson), and her son, Arius (Isaac Andrews). Such a roster seems almost focus-group tested to appeal to different niches of fandom. Nevertheless, within the milieu of the movie, these outsiders jointly perform and maintain the Hercules legend – or, perhaps, "brand." Outwardly, the hero's labors seem the work of a singular demigod. Behind the scenes, as revealed in the prologue's skirmish with pirates, the work is evenly and efficiently divided. From its very beginning *Hercules* fractures heroic glory, transferring it from individuals to the collective.[42]

Second, *Hercules* follows the 2010 *Clash* in displacing the "region of supernatural wonder" that underpins the monomyth. Of course, Perseus faces fantastic creatures aplenty; but the gods, though powerful, face the existential crisis of mortal disdain. *Hercules* goes further and adopts the atheistic approach of *Troy*, not only keeping divinities off screen, but also obscuring all evidence of their being. Both gods and monsters are confined to the world of mere stories, such as Iolaus relates to the pirates, and Ergenia derides as myths in the sense of falsehoods. The sequence comprising Iolaus' story provides a stark contrast with the fragmented heroism of the film proper. The storyteller relates what most moviegoers would recognize as an orthodox Hercules legend: son of Zeus and Alcmene; survivor of Hera's serpents; performer of twelve labors, including killing the Hydra, hunting the Erymanthian boar, and bringing back the skin of the Nemean lion. The visuals accompanying this summary are likewise orthodox screen heroics: a lone warrior, his semi-nude body sculpted to perfection, battling CGI beasts (rendered and choreographed with admirable restraint in comparison to the 2010 *Clash*). By revealing Iolaus' story as fiction, *Hercules* programmatically sunders itself from conventional cinematic monomyth in favor of antiheroic "reality." That said, shots of the monsters figure prominently in the trailers, perhaps to attract viewers expecting fantasy in the Harryhausen mode.

All of which brings us to the movie's climax. Hercules, with encouragement from Amphiaraus, assumes the heroic identity heretofore kept at arm's length ("I am Hercules!") and rescues his friends from certain death. The team fights its way to the steps of Hera's temple, where Hercules repels Cotys' soldiers by toppling the goddess' colossal statue, whose rolling head dispatches Cotys himself. This feat is worthy of *Le fatiche di Ercole*, at the culmination of which Reeves' Hercules tears down the palace at Iolcus to ward off the soldiers of Pelias (Ivo Garrani). While edifices of social and political power are physically demolished in each film, *Le fatiche* brings closure by installing Jason (Fabrizio Mioni) as rightful ruler, and shipping Hercules off to his next adventure via the *Argo*. Ratner's film, however, offers no such tidy resolution. As the dust settles, the surviving troops acclaim Hercules, who appears bare-chested and brandishing his club, looking his traditional peplum self. Yet his companions quickly join him to share in the soldiers' adulation. The camera, in a final shot, cranes left to right over Team Hercules and comes to rest not on Johnson, but on McShane's Amphiaraus, whose voiceover calls his own prophetic powers into question: "What the hell do I know? I'm supposed to be dead by now." Much like the film that bears his name, Hercules has proven adept at pulling down traditional structures. Whether they can be put back together is anyone's guess – or at least beyond the scope of the present film.

CONCLUSION

Greco-Roman antiheroes, and the fragmented films in which they appear, are symptomatic of the new millennium, which has inherited and amplified the cultural and political crises of the 1960s and beyond. *Alexander*, the 2010 *Clash of the Titans*, and *Hercules* all feature volatile, recalcitrant protagonists. Their non-conformity to social mores, religious authority, and the greater good, not to mention established cinematic modes of conveying these values, reflects genuine ambivalence toward normativity in the face of turmoil. The movies that precede them, consequently, are received as models of conformity to traditional systems, whether those of the Hollywood studio, the rules of genre, or antiquated cinematic technique. *Alexander the Great*, the 1981 *Clash of the Titans*, and even *The Legend of Hercules* are classics in the sense of not only having primacy – temporal, artistic, or both – but also belonging to an era that is, or ought to be, beyond recovery. As such, these movies, promulgating outmoded strains of heroism, run the risk of becoming irrelevant, if they have not already become so.

It was not always thus. Campbell, for one, believed in heroic continuity: "The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of

Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change."[43] This sentiment, conceived in an era of Western hegemony that perhaps never existed, presupposes the persistence of classicism from antiquity to modernity. Yet Vogler, Campbell's greatest promoter, concedes that the postmodern world is ill-suited to order and symmetry:

> Young people now come to awareness in a high-intensity bombardment of random images and brief story segments torn from all the previous styles of art and literature. The bits may have an internal consistency and obey some rules of the old story world, but they assault the consciousness of the young in no apparent order.[44]

Perhaps Vogler would have us reimagine Campbell's law-abiding New Yorkers as street-level antiheroes, crossing against traffic and texting at the same time. I exaggerate, but only a little. The classicizing heroism of Campbell and Aristotle persists – not because of, but rather despite, the myriad anxieties and demands of the twenty-first century. In such an environment our work as scholars of antiquity and its reception, our marking the path between classics old and new, is more necessary than ever.

NOTES

My thanks to the editors and to my co-presenters at the New Heroes conference in Delphi for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1 On antiheroism, see also McAuley and Tomasso in this volume.
2 Cuddon (2013: 41), with some healthy skepticism toward the "dashing, strong, brave and resourceful" type: "It is a little doubtful whether such heroes have ever existed in any quantity in fiction."
3 Neimneh (2013: 78).
4 Brombert (1999: 2).
5 Ziolkowski (2004: 4).
6 Heroic fallibility: Halliwell (1987: 127–31).
7 Frye (1957). On Frye's eminence, obsolescence, and putative renascence see Denham (2009).
8 Campbell (2008: 23). It is customary to refer to Campbell's construct as the "classical monomyth": thus Jewett and Lawrence (1977) for purposes of defining and differentiating their "American monomyth."
9 The monomyth in speculative fiction and film: Palumbo (2014); in comics: Rogers (2011). The debt of *Star Wars* to Campbell is one of the best-known facts about the series' production: see Deyneka (2012); Seastrom (2015) adds that Lucas referred to Campbell as "my Yoda." Monomythic patterning in *Star Wars* was noticed early on by Gordon (1978), a classic study.

10 Tierno (2002: xviii, xix). Vogler (2007), origin story (xxvii–xxxii). See also Hiltunen (2002), who not only traces the reception of the *Poetics* from Shakespeare to the modern entertainment industry under the rubric "proper pleasure," but also builds bridges with the theories of Vladimir Propp, Campbell (especially via Vogler), and others.
11 In the vein of the *Poetics* – and by way of the Bard: "Rossen's idea of Shakespeare's idea" of a Greek tragedy (Nisbet 2008: 93).
12 Mossman (1988: 85). See also Petrovic (2008).
13 On the film's father–son conflict and its Freudian overtones see Wieber (2008: 149–53).
14 Apostol (2016: 360–1), applying "pseudo-Aristotelian" to *Alexander* as well as *Nixon* (1995), *The Doors* (1991), and *JFK* (1991).
15 Apostol (2016: 361, both quotations).
16 Paul (2010: 28), original italics. Paul adds, "We might wonder what would have been done differently had [Stone] listened to Aristotle as carefully as his Alexander did."
17 Ptolemy as unreliable narrator: Chaniotis (2008: 185–7), Shahabudin (2010: 107–8).
18 Compare Cyrino (2010: 180): "More often than not, the heroic Alexander described by the laudatory narration is at odds with the moody, drunk, and even cruel Alexander the audience actually sees onscreen."
19 Chaniotis (2008: 186).
20 On Farrell's lack of gravitas see Cyrino (2010: 172); on his character's emasculating "emotional instability" see Pierce (2013: 138).
21 Pierce (2013: 132–3).
22 Pierce (2013: 130–2) compares Alexander with the extravagant, non-normative villains of these films: Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) and Agamemnon (Brian Cox), as well as Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro) from *300* (2007).
23 Skinner (2010) discusses the ways in which the sexualities of Alexander are, and are not, historically accurate.
24 Nikoloutsos (2009: 229–30, 236–43).
25 Burton's gaze and demeanor: Cyrino (2010: 172–3) notes the "rehabilitation" of Burton's performance in the wake of Farrell's. Heterosexuality in *Alexander the Great*: Nikoloutsos (2009: 224–8).
26 Platt (2010: 298), who discusses the significance of the "primitive" wall paintings and other visual archetypes in the film. See also Solomon (2010: 47–9).
27 Solomon (2010) and Cyrino (2010: 172–80) survey reactions to *Alexander*.
28 Figurative *katabasis* in the Perseus legend: Ogden (2008: 47–50). Literal *katabasis* in the 1981 *Clash*: Clauss (forthcoming).
29 Clauss (forthcoming) discusses these and other examples of intertextuality between the 1981 *Clash* and classical or classicizing models.

30 On the 2010 *Clash*, see further Tomasso in this volume.
31 Unceremoniously discarded: Curley (2015: 214–15).
32 Jarring and disjointed: a complaint among reviewers (along with derision for the theatrical release's hasty 2D to 3D transfer). See, for example, Lowry (2010): "The effects are too frequently muddied by the pace at which they flash by"; Darghis (2010): "The frenetic editing at times pitches the movie into near visual incoherence."
33 Harryhausen as *auteur*: Wells (2002: 90–4).
34 Harryhausen and Dalton (2004: 262).
35 Perseus as Maximus: Raucci (2015: 164), after Darghis (2010). Worthington sports a more lustrous coiffure in the sequel, *Wrath of the Titans* (2012).
36 On the new Hercules movies, see further Blanshard, Chiu, Solomon, and Stafford in this volume.
37 This paragraph is indebted to Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011: 58–76), a discussion of the peplum genre with *Le fatiche* as its focus; and D'Amelio (2011), who places the uncomplicated peplum heroics in their native political context. O'Brien (2014: 174) cuts to the chase: "*The Legend of Hercules* . . . is in essence an old-school peplum with added cut-cost digital effects." See also Solomon in this volume.
38 O'Brien (2014: 99) compares both "Hercules chained" sequences. See also Blanshard in this volume.
39 The thesis is that of Tomasso (2016). A notable exception is *Ulysses Against Hercules* (*Ulisse contro Ercole*, 1962), which initially features most of the Greco-Roman pantheon.
40 Elliott (2011: 70–1) traces the heroic fragmentation of the 2010 *Clash* back to *Gladiator*, and duly notes that Perseus in the 1981 *Clash* likewise has a band of helpers, albeit an "all but invisible" one.
41 The movie's Facebook page, still active as of this writing, highlights individual companions and offers fans opportunities to join #TeamHercules themselves.
42 For a fuller discussion of the companions in *Hercules*, see Chiu in this volume.
43 Campbell (2008: 2).
44 Vogler (2007: 268).

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