A COURSE ON CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN FILM

In the twentieth century, as has often been observed, film has taken the place that narrative and dramatic poetry once had in the ancient world. The availability of movies, whether in the theater or at home, is such that more films are being seen by more people than ever before. While we might easily bemoan the havoc that current tastes in entertainment have wreaked on our reading habits, movies can—and often do—move audiences to tears, to laughter, to relief, to despair, or to raised levels of consciousness more effectively than the written word. We cannot—nor should we necessarily want to—break free of our common celluloid bonds. Although Classical scholarship and teaching focuses primarily on the book, there does exist a body of films that takes up Classical themes, mythological in particular, and these films (or at least a discreet selection of them) can be exploited to speak effectively to our students in the medium with which they, as much as ourselves, are very much at home.

In the winter quarter of 1992, I instituted a new course at the University of Washington called "Classical Mythology in Film." At first, I taught the class through the UW Extension, a continuing education program, and 26 enrolled. In the summer of 1994, the course became a regular offering for UW undergraduates (19 students). This past winter, the class not only filled up (55 students, 10 over the limit), but there were well over 90 students who tried—unsuccessfully—to get into the class; if we opened the class up to 150 students, it seems likely that it would fill up. In short, interest in studying mythology through film would appear to be strong. Perhaps the recent television series, *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys*, starring Kevin Sorbo, has something to do with this interest.[1]

My approach to the subject is straightforward: I treat the films we view as texts that are to be set alongside select ancient versions of the myths. In comparing the two versions, lectures and discussions concentrate on several points: (1) the universality of the individual myths and myth in general, something that becomes even more

[1] Information regarding the series is available on the World Wide Web at http://www.mca.com/tv/hercules/.

evident when the plots have been recast in modern settings; (2) the artistry of the ancient and modern versions (in particular, themes and symbols employed by the artists and comparison of the various directors' approaches toward their stories); and (3) the *Weltanschauung* of the ancient writer and the director and/or screen writer(s) and its articulation in their works. Since we are on the quarter system—and thus have only ten weeks of class—we are limited to nine films; classes alternate between discussion and viewing. Grades are based on a mid-term, a final, and a creative writing project. Regarding the latter, students are asked to select a myth, not necessarily one studied in class, and to describe in five to seven pages how they would film the story. This last feature of the course is, I believe, essential in getting across the notion that directors and screen writers, like ancient poets and logographers, can use myth to articulate something deeply personal, to reflect on contemporary issues, to inform, or to entertain. Here are two examples of what I have received for the final project. One student set her story in an African-American community, casting a Baptist preacher in the role of Hippolytus, with whom a married woman, bewitched through a voodoo spell cast by a jealous rival, fell in love with tragic consequences. Another student presented a filmed version of her story, a rendition of the Apollo-Daphne tale in which Daphne, trying to avoid the unwanted advances of the persistent Sonny, finally sets her would-be lover straight (so to speak) by revealing that she is a lesbian. The character's decision to reveal her sexual orientation was inspired by several hours of drinking beer and by the host of MTV, who spoke directly from the television set to the exasperated heroine. In general, the majority of students appreciated the opportunity to exercise their creativity.

The matchup of myths and films I last used was as follows:

Perseus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
Clash of the Titans (starring Harry Hamlin, Lawrence Olivier, and many other well-known stars, with special effects by Ray Harryhausen,[2] 1981)

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus*
Edipo Re (directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1967)

Euripides, *Heracles*
Hercules Unchained (starring Steve Reeves, 1959)

[2] Harryhausen also created the special effects for an earlier cinematic rendition of another Greek myth, *Jason and the Argonauts*, 1963.

Euripides, *Medea*
Medea (directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, starring Maria Callas, 1970)

Euripides, *Hippolytus*
Desire Under the Elms (based on Eugene O'Neill's play, starring Burl Ives, Anthony Perkins and Sophia Loren, 1957)

Euripides, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*
Iphigeneia (directed by Michael Cacoyannis, starring Irene Pappas, 1977)

Vergil, *Aeneid* (Books 7–9, 12)
The Avengers (another Steve Reeves vehicle, 1962)

Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Vergil's *Georgics*
Orphée (directed by Jean Cocteau, starring Jean Marais, 1950)

The Searchers (directed by John Ford, starring John Wayne, 1956)

The progression is arranged thematically; I juxtapose contrasting pairs, while also focussing on transitional elements that link one pair to the next. Perseus (hero of brawn) is set alongside Oedipus (hero of brain); this pairing is facilitated by the fact that the *Clash of the Titans* evokes the Oedipus story in several ways; most obviously, Perseus wins Andromeda by solving a riddle. If the viewing of *Clash of the Titans* suggests that the course is not going to be serious, students are soon disabused of this notion with Pasolini's unrelenting *Edipo Re;* the music alone, an ethnomusicologist's treasure trove, sets everyone's nerves on edge.[3] Transition to *Hercules Unchained* from the Oedipus tale is made easier by the fact that this sequel to *Hercules* (1957, also starring Steve Reeves) begins with the hero meeting up with Oedipus as he concludes his final conversation with Polynices and is about to enter the underworld (for which reason I have the students read *Oedipus at Colonus*); also Hercules has to discover who he is in the course of this clever *contaminatio* of *Oedipus at Colonus* and the *Seven Against Thebes*, complete with Theban citizens being thrown to the wild animals in a private arena by the Caligula-wannabe, Eteocles.[4] Hercules, the most powerful mortal man of Greek myth,

[3] Pasolini provides insights on (and stills of) his own film, in which he plays a cameo role, in *Oedipus Rex. A Film*, J. Mathews (tr.) (New York 1971).

[4] There is even more "contamination" to observe and admire in this delightful film. The story begins at the conclusion of the Argonautic quest—the subject of the earlier Hercules film—and Hercules' sidekick is none other than the young Ulysses, hero in training, whom his childhood sweetheart, Penelope, awaits in Ithaca. The

who kills his children in a fit of madness (the focus of Euripides' play), is thereafter paired with Medea, the most powerful mortal woman who kills her children in a fit of revenge. Comparison of these two sharply contrasting figures is enhanced by the fact that both films featuring them are Italian productions as different in overall tone (light humor versus grim tragedy) as in setting (Cinecittà versus on-site locations in the Near East and Italy).[5]

As we move from Medea to Phaedra, transition to the following pair is clear enough: women who take vengeance on the men they love. The following juxtaposition of Phaedra and Iphigeneia contrasts guile with guilelessness, guilt with innocence, and destructive lies with youthful patriotism. Again, the difference between the films taking up these stories is striking: nineteenth-century New England versus Bronze Age Greece; steamy passion relieved by lighthearted railing at a curmudgeonly patriarch versus lust for power and war relieved by the honest but misguided allegiances of a thoroughly captivating young woman; a glimmer of hope versus unmitigated despair.[6] The Trojan War constitutes the transition to the final pair: the story of Iphigeneia and the second half of the *Aeneid*, subject of *The Avengers*, frame the expedition to Troy.[7] Hereafter, we return to a contrast between a man of brawn (Aeneas, another mythic role played by muscleman Steve Reeves) and a man of brain (Orpheus, played by the boyish Jean Marais), and again the style of each film differs sharply: spaghetti epic set in post-Trojan War Italy versus impressionistic romance set in post-WWII France. The series concludes with an American Western, *The Searchers*, which leads into a discussion of the American hero. Surprisingly, *Orphée* possesses a thematic link with *The Searchers* that may not be immediately apparent: both heroes, Orpheus and Ethan (the latter accompanied by his sidekick Martin), must cross boundaries—rivers (figurative and literal)—to

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hero's capture by Omphale is clearly reminiscent of the Circe episode in the *Odyssey*, as Omphale turns her lovers, not into beasts, but into statues. Other scenes of Greek mythology, as well as cinematic allusions, are wittily incorporated throughout the film.

[5] On the *Medea*, see Pasolini's *Medea. Un Film di Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Milan 1970).

[6] I would add that both films, based on plays, experience surprisingly opposite results in their screen versions, one for better and one for worse: Eugene O'Neill's Freudian exploration of the Hippolytus story in *Desire Under the Elms* took an undignified turn toward the comedic in the hands of Delbert Mann, while Cacoyannis, in his version of the *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, transformed one of Euripides' less read plays into what is perhaps the finest rendition of any Greek tragedy in film.

[7] *The Avengers*, sequel to *The Trojan Horse* (1961), was originally released in Italian as *La Leggenda di Enea* and in English as *The Last Glories of Troy*.

enter into the strange world where the women they are searching for have been taken by figures representing death (Mort and Scar).[8]

This summary, while only adumbrating the possibilities inherent in such comparisons, should at least provide a hint of what can be achieved in a study of myth and film. Not surprisingly, students respond more viscerally to the combination of myth and film than to a reading of the myths themselves, no doubt, *pace* Aristotle, owing to music (μελοποιία) and spectacle (ὄψις).

I have found the following books very helpful in preparing the course: J. Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (New York 1978); M. McDonald, *Euripides in Cinema: The Heart Made Visible* (Philadelphia 1983); K. McKinnon, *Greek Tragedy into Film* (Rutherford 1986); and M. M. Winkler (ed.), *Classics and Cinema* (Lewisburg 1991). M. P. O. Morford and R. J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*[5] (White Plains, NY 1995) 608–609 also provide some useful information on myth in film.[9]

I list below a selection of titles of films on (or inspired by) mythological topics that I either saw or found mentioned in various sources. In the interest of space, I have left this list unannotated (and for many of the items, I would have little or nothing to say); for further information the reader should consult Solomon's *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (cited above) and, especially for more recent films, Leonard Maltin's constantly updated guides to movies and videos. Titles with asterisks are, as far as I have been able to ascertain, available on video cassette.[10]

[8] Music plays a subtle role in both films as well: in the background of *Orphée*, we hear music from Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, while in *The Searchers* the venerable hymn "Shall We Gather at the River" is sung at the funeral and wedding that frame the search beyond the river for Debbie. On Cocteau and the Orpheus myth, cf. A. B. Evans, *Jean Cocteau and His Films of Orphic Identity* (Philadelphia 1977).

[9] Marianne McDonald, at the Department of Theater, University of California (San Diego), has been teaching a course entitled "Modern Performances of Ancient Classical Drama in Modern Films, Plays and Opera" since 1978. Those interested in adding a dramatic component to a film course should consult her book *Ancient Sun, Modern Light* (New York 1992). I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Professor McDonald for her helpful comments on this essay.

[10] In making these determinations, I have consulted Leonard Maltin's *TV Movies and Video Guide* (New York 1991) and Microsoft's *Cinemania 95*. A few films, like *The Avengers*, *The Bacchantes*, and *Romulus and the Sabines* (starring Roger Moore), I stumbled on in video stores. Other useful resources include N. Thomas (ed.), *International Dictionary of Film and Filmmakers*, 4 Vols. (Chicago–London 1990) and T. Costello (ed.), *International Guide to Literature in Film* (London 1994). See most recently J. Solomon, "In the Wake of *Cleopatra:* The Ancient World in the Cinema since 1963," *CJ* 91 (1995) 113–40 and M. M. Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," *TAPA* 125 (1995) 135–54.

1903	Le Tonnerre de Jupiter
1905	L'Ile de Calypso
1908	In Cupid's Realm
	The Return of Ulysses
1909	Hercules in the Regiment
	Goddess of the Sea
1910	Les Douze Travaux d'Hercule
	Hercules and the Big Stick
	Jupiter Smitten
	The Minotaur
	Edipo Re
	La Caduta di Troia
1911	L'Odissea
1912	Neptune's Daughter
1914	The Story of Venus
1916	The Centaurs
1918	The Golden Fleece
	The Triumph of Venus
1919	Fedra
1927	Prometheus in Chains
1938	Pygmalion*
1947	Mourning Becomes Electra*
1948	One Touch of Venus*
1950	Orphée*
1954	Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*
1955	Ulysses*
	Helen of Troy
1957	Oedipus Rex*
	Hercules*
	Desire under the Elms*
1959	Black Orpheus*
	The Fugitive Kind*
	Le Testament d'Orphée*
	Hercules Unchained*
1960	The Minotaur
	Hercules of the Desert
	The Giants of Thessaly*
	Hercules against the Mongols
	Gli Amori di Ercole
	La Vendetta di Ercole

Hercules against Rome
Atlantis: the Lost Continent
Testament of Orpheus*

1961 Atlas against the Cyclops
Hercules in the Haunted World*
Atlas*
Fury of Hercules*
Ulysses against Hercules
Duel of the Titans*
Romulus and the Sabines*
Antigone
The Trojan Horse

1962 Hercules and the Black Pirate
Hercules and the Three Stooges*
Electra
Phaedra
The Fury of Achilles
Perseus the Invincible
The Avengers*

1963 My Son, the Hero
Ercole contro Moloch
Hercules and the Captive Women*
Kingdom in the Sand
Jason and the Argonauts*
Hercules against the Sons of the Sun
Hercules and the Masked Raider

1964 Hercules against the Barbarian
Hercules and the Giant Warriors
Hercules, Prisoner of Evil
Hercules against the Moon Men*
Hercules and the Tyrants of Babylon
The Triumph of Hercules*
Hercules, Maciste, Samson, and Ursus vs. the Universe
Colossus and the Amazon Queen
Acteon
The Gorgon*
The Bacchantes*
My Fair Lady*

1965 The Challenge of the Giants
Hercules, Samson, and Ulysses

1966 Hercules and the Princess of Troy

1967 Oedipus the King
Edipo Re*

1968 Phèdre

1970 Hercules in New York*
Medea*

	I Cannibali
1971	The Trojan Women*
1972	Electre
1975	Prometheus Second Person Singular
1977	Iphigeneia*
1978	A Dream of Passion*
	Elektreia
	Travelling Players (O Thiasos)
1981	Clash of the Titans*
1983	Hercules*
	Gospel at Colonus*
1985	Hercules II*
1989	New York Stories (Oedipus Wrecks)*
1990	Antigone: Rites of Passion
1992	Un Coeur en Hiver*
1994–95	Hercules: The Legendary Journeys[11]

I hope that this description of "Classical Mythology in Film" and the list of films and books on the topic will be useful to those interested in offering such a course elsewhere. I would add that there are other film courses that could well be offered in place of—or in addition to—a course dedicated to myth. For instance, one might change the focus from myth to literature and offer "Classical Literature in Film," which would employ many of the same films as those in the myth course (and to which I would add Fellini's *Satyricon* [1970]); or there is always "Greek and Roman History in Film" (though, unfortunately, more Roman than Greek titles exist). Here are some possibilities for the latter in chronological order: *The 300 Spartans* (1961), *Alexander the Great* (1956), *Colossus of Rhodes* (1960, film debut of Sergio Leone, famous for creating the "spaghetti western"), *Cabiria* (1914, celebrated silent film set during the Second Punic War), *Spartacus* (1960), Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1946), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1973) or *Cleopatra* (1934 or 1963), *Julius Caesar* (1953), *Ben Hur* (1926 or 1959), *Caligula* (1980), *The Sign of the Cross* (1932, featuring Charles Laughton as Nero), *The Last Days of Pompeii*

[11] As one can easily observe in this list, the decade of the sixties was especially prolific in films on mythological topics. An issue that would be interesting to address, something I have not had the time or background to do, is the fascination that such films exerted on directors and audiences in those years. In particular, what inspired all those quirky Hercules films and even a cartoon series—that is, apart from the success of the first two Steve Reeves movies of the late fifties? Similarly, what *Zeitgeist* has brought about the reincarnation of Hercules as a TV star in the nineties?

(1935 or 1960), *Constantine and the Cross* (1962), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), and *The Sign of the Pagan* (1954, the story of Attila's threat on Rome). A comparison between the accounts of ancient historians and modern filmmakers might elucidate the fictional nature of the former better than the more traditional, analytical *Quellenforschung*.

On a lighter note, I conclude with two recommendations for those who might like to include one or two camp productions in a film course on historical themes: *Caesar, Conqueror of Gaul* (exact date unknown, probably early 60's) and *Jupiter's Darling* (1955). The first film I happened to discover on late night television. The opening credits claim that the plot is based on Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*, which one is encouraged to believe because of a particular scene: Caesar, surrounded by three scribes, addresses each in turn. To one he dictates a letter for his wife; another writes out his request for more troops; to the third scribe Caesar utters the famous words, "All Gaul is divided into three parts . . . " The second film is truly bizarre: a *musical*, based on Robert Sherwood's *Road to Rome* (1927), starring Howard Keel and Esther Williams, that immortalizes Hannibal's march on Rome. Yes, Esther does swim, this time with Greek statues that come to life under water. One forgettable scene, however, would suggest a more appropriate title: *Dances with Elephants*.

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