

# From Maciste to Maximus and Company

## *The Fragmented Hero in the New Epic*

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There is an old and well-worn adage that a given society will get the heroes it deserves. A society based on a culture of violence and iniquity, it suggests, will in turn see the rise to power of appropriately violent and iniquitous heroes; conversely, a culture based on fairness and justice will produce heroes of valor, righteousness, and what T. H. White famously refers to as “might for right.” Though — as with many such adages — there is undoubtedly a great deal of simplification, assumption, and normalization at work here, the recent spate of sword and sandal epics seem to confirm the rule far more regularly than they refute it. Despite the truisms on which the adage relies, an interesting further proposition presents itself, that reading backwards, “getting the hero we deserve” means that an examination of the heroes of a given culture ought to reveal some of the ideological constructs at work in the background. Over the course of the last decade epic heroes have been placed (with varying degrees of success) into an often vague, loosely-defined or wholly mythical Classical Antiquity, but this essay will argue that from *Gladiator* to *Centurion* one trend seems to hold true: among the heroes represented, the kind of hero which the New Epic presents to us is one which embodies a complex range of traits. The heroes provided for a twenty-first century audience must balance and assuage complicated gender debates, while simultaneously reconciling a fundamentally ambivalent attitude to violence and combining an uneasy sense of spectacle with a level of agency unknown to many of cinema’s earliest epic heroes.

I will begin this chapter by examining the role and function of the Italian *forzuto*, or muscleman, arguing that his representation in Italian pepla of the late 1950s (itself a reworking of earlier, often silent, epics from the 1914 version

of *Cabiria* onwards) was dependent on his physical strength which asserted his authority on the level of the body and which overtly rejected any wider political and ideological influence. This will lead in the second section of the paper to a consideration of the more complex range of heroic attributes on offer in the Hollywood epics of the same decade, which seek to present a sort of “tamed” *forzuto* figure, and one whose power lies not in his purely physical strength (though cases can of course be found which draw influence from these muscular *forzuti*) but on their authority and capacity to wield power on the politico-ideological level. Drawing these two disparate trends together, in my final section I propose that these various (and often mutually exclusive) demands have brought about a renegotiation of the nature and value of the epic hero, one who — rather than embodying all of these heroic virtues — has become fragmented into a heroic group.

Given the enormous scope which this hypothesis represents, however, this chapter will focus on one or two cases in particular — deemed symptomatic of the wider trends at work in each “genre cycle” — in order to bring to the surface a more general pattern in the construction of heroes in the New Epic.<sup>1</sup> This will lead me to propose a new understanding of the function of the hero which is drawn as much from reception theory and contemporary thought about gender and masculinity as it is from genre theory proper. While such an essay can only ever scratch the surface of what is patently a complex and multifaceted issue, my main hope is to at least open this area up to the sort of measured debate which recent scholarship in hero culture and reception theory has inaugurated.

### *The Forzuto in Italian Pepla*

The first hurdle, perhaps, in understanding the role of the peplum hero, is to understand what precisely is meant by the term peplum (and its plural pepla), since over time the terms have acquired a range of possible meanings, and even within single works it is possible to see it used in very different ways. Though a great deal of scholarship has rendered this term in and of itself problematic, the most precise and succinct definition for my purposes here is one which “restrict[s] the use of peplum to the group of films depicting the ancient world made in Italy by Italian directors in the period 1958–65” (Pomeroy 48).<sup>2</sup> Given that I am relying on the reception of a specific body of films rather than a genre, the benefit of this definition is that (in contrast to many other definitions which are reliant on costuming, time-frame, or even narrative intent) Pomeroy’s classification uses a specific time and place of production, allowing us to treat them relatively unproblematically as a *filone*, a loose strand of films made consciously and deliberately according to a common pattern.

Throughout this cycle of pepla, one of the most dominant features is the evolution of a stock character in the muscular hero, a character type which is

drawn whole-cloth from the earlier epics of the silent era. Despite a range of appearances and settings, from *Le Fatiche di Ercole / Hercules* (1958) through to the later *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus gli invincibili / Samson and the Mighty Challenge* (1964), it is fair to say that the *forzuto* hero varies very little other than in name. The ubiquity of the hero as a character type rather than an individual is demonstrated *ab initio* by the lack of distinction between individual heroes both within the *filone* and in their translation to other cultures. For example, what begins as a Maciste film to an Italian audience (such as *Maciste, l'eroe più grande del mondo*, 1964) might end up as a film about Goliath for an American audience (*Goliath and the Sins of Babylon*). Similarly, where Maciste becomes Hercules in *Maciste e la regina di Samar* (U.S. title: *Hercules against the Moon Men*, 1964), in the same year Hercules in *Ercole l'invincibile* (1964) becomes his own son in the translated title (*Son of Hercules in the Land of Darkness*). Countless other examples could easily be adduced here, but suffice to say that this interchangeability indicates perhaps more than anything else that the only stable element underpinning the peplum films of this period was the space which the ubiquitous hero filled in the cultural imagination: "Whether he was called Goliath, Ursus, Samson, Hercules or even Maciste, the hero is the same beefy warrior who fights injustice, villains and gruesome monsters" (Chapman 16).

Equally importantly, a part of this re-negotiation of cultural ideals was deeply concerned with the masculinity of the *forzuto*, since "the most striking recurring feature is the way the male body is valorized" (Lagny 170). Whatever the hero's name, one prerequisite which the films demanded was an extraordinarily built body that would be on permanent display throughout the film. The hero's musculature extended far beyond the capacity for power through violence, but became a defining characteristic of the films themselves, meaning that "the peplum can take place almost anywhere, but one ingredient of the formula is immutable: the film must have a shirtless, muscular hero" (Chapman 34). The exposed male body works as a perfect example of masculinity as spectacle not action, which explains in part the prevalence of the short skirts which were to give the peplum its name (from the Greek *peplos*) and ultimately which were to characterize their approach to the body, since they expose the most, or cover the least, amount of flesh on both men and women.

What is particularly striking about these exposed bodies is how little they were eroticized. Despite the vast array of nubile, scantily-clad, lithe bodies of both sexes put on display, and despite the endless series of dancing girls, attempted seductions, and the tendency to clasp the vulnerable young heroine to the hero's oversized chest, there is almost no overt sexuality — and certainly nothing that would worry an age-advisory board. The same, broadly speaking, can be said for the films' approach to violence, both explicit and implicit within the films. In general, scant examples exist of either the objective "systemic" violence which for Slavoj Žižek sustains "relations of domination and exploita-

tion," or the more direct, "subjective" battles and confrontations which pervade the pepla (8–10). For a series of films which promise so much sex and violence in their manly men and delicate nymphs, there is a curious absence of both, an absence which leads Domenico Paoella to term the pepla as "a poor man's psycho-analysis," owing to the level to which the violence is only suggested and vicariously purged (qtd. Lagny 172).

Given such restrictions in formula, narrative, and the narrow characterization of gender roles in the persistent appeal to imagined expectations of audiences, it becomes clear that very little variation can be established within the peplum framework, engendering a great deal of resemblance from one film to another. As the peplum phenomenon grew towards the late 1950s, and despite minor variations in location and incidental detail, the limited number of situations which demanded such superhuman strength (coupled with the inexhaustible flow coming from Cinecittà) meant that this simple resemblance began to descend into outright repetition. Nervous producers whose fortunes rode on the success or failure of the latest feature began to fear any divergences from the stock characters and plots, to the extent that, by the early 1960s, the peplum film in many cases became simple variations on a well-worn theme:

A majority of these films follow the same basic pattern. Set during some generic period of ancient Roman or Greek history, our hero discovers a "wrong" (usually an evil dictator who has usurped the throne of a kingdom) and in setting out to right it will upset the villain who will sent [sic] waves of cannon fodder soldiers at the hero, all building up to a climactic confrontation with a nice happy ending [Young].

What emerges from this repetition, then, is that regardless of the name, or even the narrative situation, the pattern of the pepla produces an archetypal Maciste, who represents a man of the people, and one who is able to use his strength to right wrongs, fight injustice, and overpower all threats to the law (which in Steve Neale's terms is largely synonymous with the ruling ideology). It quickly becomes apparent that despite the avowedly "lowbrow" quality of the films, an ideological dimension is added to the light tone of the piece which

is most notable when comparing the Pepla to many of the later Euro-cult genres, from the Western to the Giallo, in which nihilism and tragic endings were all too common — the Traditional Peplums [sic] were almost invariably light in tone and although rarely resorting to all-out comedy, comic relief characters were often a feature of the genre ... [Young].

While representing a cheery affront to all enemies of freedom, the ur-Maciste nevertheless takes it upon himself, however unwittingly, to uphold the law, which requires a clear conception of right and wrong, and an unblinking acceptance of the prevalent ruling ideology. Simultaneously, and more problematically, the violence of the films begins to adopt a more sinister dimension in order to avoid becoming pure spectacle with no meaning. Given that "violence becomes spectacle when there is no narrative function," the films' insistence on Maciste's physical strength condemns them to concoct plot points

which *require* a highly visual display of power while avoiding violence wherever possible, because “a display of the male body needs to be compensated for by the suggestion of action” (Hark 154–5, Tasker 75). As Claude Aziza comments, “These exposed bodies, in order to be valued, must deliver tours-de-force which the actors struggle to achieve: to lift up blocks of stone, break down doors or walls” (39). Consequently, while the hero’s muscles are there to be admired as synonymous with “real” masculinity, they must not be simply ornamental: they must instead be put to work to avoid becoming pure spectacle. Fusing these two strands together, we see that the *forzuto* is required to use his muscles to fight against “enemies of freedom” and uphold the law, precisely to avoid spectacle, and to show that his strength is being placed in the service of a higher power.

Underpinning the heroic redemption narrative, then, the *forzuto*’s heroics come to represent a confluence of two distinct trends; on the one hand, his muscles and intertextual reputation reinforce his unique position as one who is able to uphold the law, while on the other his support of the law constructs him as an ideologically charged hero (but one without political agency)—what Louis Althusser might otherwise term a function of the Ideological State Apparatus. In other words, because he is in a position to subjugate others with violence, yet he only uses that violence in the service of the status quo without actually playing a part in the political process of governance, the musclemans hero is liable to be harnessed as an agent of the ruling state ideology.

A useful example of this seeming paradox occurs in one of the more able offerings from the peplum cycle, *La Battaglia di Maratona* (directed by Jacques Tourneur and an uncredited Mario Bava, 1959). The opening credits use a montage of various well-built, male athletes engaged in suitably ancient Greek sports to introduce our hero, Philippides (played by Steve Reeves, the Hercules *per antonomasia* of the peplum cycle), as a muscular, dashing, and powerful hero of the Olympic Games (it is no coincidence that the film was made the year before the Olympic Games were to be held in Rome) who is offered as a prize the position of Commander of the Sacred Guard of Athens. Thus, within only a few minutes of the film’s opening, and with a bare minimum of dialogue, a democratic drive is put in place; the winner of the games (that is, the strongest) becomes in turn the visible symbol of state strength. His role as Commander, however, is somewhat paradoxically not a political one, but rather reflects a desire by the Athenian Senate to harness the power of the “strongest man in the world” in support of the political elite—despite his elevation, the film takes great pains to stress his roots as a man of the people, showing him working in the fields as the archetypal hero of popular extraction.

With Philippides safely bound to the soil, the politico-ideological level of the film is confined wholly to the Senate, a world deprived of the exposed male body (wrapped in the ubiquitous—and, in the world of Hollywood, androgynous—toga). The politico-ideological sphere is a world characterized by a power

struggle between Callimaco and Teocrito (Philippe Hersent and Sergio Fantoni), representing the *weakness* of the law and *traitor* to the law respectively. Callimaco embodies the familiar trope of a weak figure of authority being led astray by an ambitious and ruthless villain (Teocrito), placing him in direct opposition to Philippides, who emerges as an unequivocal hero and whose strength and unshakable moral compass align the fortune of the state with the strength of the common man. Having thus polarized the characters along two axes (defined unambiguously as hero and villain), the remaining chips are left to fall as they may, with the various plot twists and complications serving only to underscore this central opposition. Philippides meets and falls in love with Callimaco’s beautiful daughter Andromeda (Mylène Demongeot), who fills the stock role of the meek, innocent love interest (the pure), and who is in turn contrasted with “the seemingly perverse yet maternal seductiveness of the courtesan Charis [Daniela Rocca], who has been told by the evil Theocritus to betray Philippides” (Lagny 165). By the end of the first act of the film, the principal characters have been reduced to players along two groups arranged around the central figure of Callimaco, with those seeking to pervert the law on one side, and those seeking to uphold it on the other.

### *The Hollywood Epic Hero*

On a purely narrative level, the above outline of *La Battaglia di Maratona* may sound suspiciously familiar to viewers of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, made five years later in 1964. In the absence of a just and wise representative of the Law (here Marcus Aurelius), a treacherous and power-hungry young usurper (Commodus) tries to seize control of the state. The only barrier to his ambitions comes in the form of a Commander of his army (Livius), whose official function draws him, albeit reluctantly, into the political and dynastic power-struggle, and whose involvement with the innocent daughter of the ruler (Lucilla) unites his desires—both on the political and the emotional level—to create one single objective: to use his power to overthrow the usurper and restore the Law.

This is not to say that they are essentially the same film, of course; far from it. Nor does it imply that there is a level of influence, intertextuality, or borrowing from one film to another, since it is clear that there is a great deal more to a film than can be gleaned from the reduction of its plot to a series of key structures, and in any case there is no evidence to suggest that the makers of the later film had ever even heard of *Battaglia*. Rather, my point here is that, for one reason or another, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* expounds a very similar narrative situation which calls for a very similar kind of hero; one who would—in Neale’s terms—negotiate the contradiction “between narcissism and the Law, between an image of *narcissistic* authority on the one hand and an image of



social authority on the other" (9). This is achieved, according to Ina Rae Hark, through a process as a result of which "the narcissistic ego-ideal, given more to action than words, undermines the tyrant's hold on political power through physical rebellion until a proper enunciator of the law of the father can replace him" (163).

Nevertheless, despite the various plot similarities, even a cursory glance at the film in relation to the Hollywood epics which dominated the 1950s and early 1960s is sufficient to demonstrate that the heroes on display differ markedly from those of the Italian pepla. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, for example, the hero Livius is played neither by Victor Mature nor Kirk Douglas, two of the most prominent muscular heroes, nor even by Richard Egan, whose earlier *The 300 Spartans* had demonstrated a grandeur and leadership which went far beyond his shirtless role in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (discussed below); instead the role went to Stephen Boyd, the powerful (but neither muscular nor exposed) Marcellus of *Ben-Hur*, just as the role of Judah Ben-Hur had itself gone to Charlton Heston, a chiseled and imposing—but not overly burly—leading man. What this suggests, then, is that even in a similar narrative situation to that of *La Battaglia di Maratona*, it was no longer sufficient for a hero of the Hollywood epic to wield a purely physical power, but that he must also play an active role on the politico-ideological level, too. Boyd, then, must possess not simply muscular power to confront an oppressive regime, but the sort of dignity and rectitude of characters like Ben-Hur, Spartacus, and his Biblico-Greco-Roman forebears. A similar case occurs in a film made two years earlier, Rudolph Maté's 1962 *The 300 Spartans*, in which the characterization of King Leonidas must negotiate this fine balance between power and spectacle, all the while satisfying stringent censorship requirements. Like Stephen Boyd in his role as Livius, *The 300 Spartans* conceives of the epic hero as a similarly powerful hero, but one which is conceived as a man of valor, not of brawn. Egan's heroic exploits as King Leonidas place him in direct contrast to his role in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, in which he is exposed as pure spectacle, driving the plot along—as so many later pepla would do—by simply lifting, carrying, and throwing things while flexing his pectorals in a display of to-be-looked-at-ness.<sup>4</sup>

Taking two revealing scenes from Maté's film in particular, the implications of this form of heroic representation become clear: where Egan's power is foregrounded in his initial construction as a beefy warrior in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, his transmutation into epic hero in *The 300 Spartans* adds a second ideological layer to the characterization. In the first film, Egan appears as the ruthless gladiator Dardanius who, in an effort to provoke Demetrius, seizes the latter's beloved Lucia and tries to force himself on her in full view of our hero. Holding her aloft in his arms, a low camera angle coupled with harsh key lighting paints Dardanius in a strikingly similar pose to that of the peplum heroes discussed above. His exposed, muscular torso, coupled with the sub-

missive position of the female lead, serves to underscore the simplified gender roles characteristic of the peplum, transforming the scene into an archetypal snapshot which could just as easily be taken from a Sergio Corbucci film as from Hollywood's pageantry. What is particularly interesting about Egan's role in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* is that the shot which would later be synonymous with buff heroism in the peplum genre is in fact designed to show the polar opposite: that Dardanius is a barely civilized bully whose overly masculine display of power is symptomatic of precisely the kind of barbarism which the state sought to contain, as his later violence both in and out of the arena would reveal.

On the surface, however, Egan's later characterization in *The 300 Spartans* works hard to reverse the outward signs so as to remove any question of legitimacy or unchecked power. As the noble King Leonidas, he must be seen to embody the nobility and civilization of an urbane, restrained, and ideologically-neutral hero. Accordingly, he is loaded with the outward signs which would come to be familiar to all fans of the sword and sandal genre; gone is the exposed, muscular torso and bare-chested aggression of Dardanius. Instead Leonidas becomes a dignified soldier, decked in the "the red war cloaks [which] are so becoming to men," as one character defines the Spartan uniform (*The 300 Spartans*). Clad in the helmet and breastplate which belong to Hollywood's ancient worlds (if not the historical Sparta), Egan as Leonidas, through a direct reversal of his earlier characterization, comes to represent the sort of ideologically-approved, just warrior who would be infinitely more palatable to a middle-American audience in the wake of a series of external threats. It is of course not enough simply to deck the warrior in the signs and regalia of state-sanctioned violence; yet the visual construction of the character clearly speaks volumes about what kind of hero is being imagined here. Equally at home on the senate floor as on the battlefield, both Egan and Boyd embody a wholly new kind of hero who reflects—in terms of both narrative construction and of visual attributes—the kind of righteousness and legitimacy which the peplum hero's spectacular masculinity never quite managed to attain. Nevertheless, even this construction of heroism is subject to a range of audience expectations which are tied far more to the period of production than to the period being represented.

### *The New Epic Hero*

So far, then, what emerges is that the typology of the epic hero is not developed necessarily as a response to narrative requirements, nor even according to the socio-demographic gradations of the audiences sought, but according to perceived audience expectations. On the one hand, the sculpted muscle of the peplum's *forzuto* courted a gaze which celebrated the male body's potential as



a means of upholding the law but without interference in the political sphere, serving as a vindication of manual labor in the face of rapid industrialization in post-war Italy. On the other hand, the Hollywood epics of the 1950s saw the evolution of a very different kind of hero, one whose strength was more ideologically rooted in his moral courage and integrity, feeding audiences' preoccupations with freedom and the extirpation of the "enemy within."<sup>5</sup> In the latter group of films, far more important than the physical strength of the hero was his political power, which demanded the courage to stand up and fight against a corrupt state, against the threat of hostile regimes (be they Communist infiltrations in *The Robe* or a denunciation of McCarthyite witch hunts in *Spartacus*). In this regard, a greater importance comes to be attached to the mastery of the weapon rather than to physical, muscular force, a borrowing from the Western genre (see Cawelti 58–60) which functions both as a visual demonstration of controlled, "pure" violence as well as an exculpation of the hero's moral guilt by placing him at a distance from the villain. Where both use their power to protect against clear, identifiable threats (gender equality and industrialization, political enemies/Cold War), it was the nature of those threats which dictated to some extent what kind of hero was required.

As a result of this, in the New Epic subgenre (characterized — if not inaugurated — by Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*) the muscular epic hero stands at the end of a complex evolution of the hero and his relationship through violence. Filtered through an entire generation's ambivalent (and sometimes contradictory) attitudes towards violence, political hostilities, and an increasingly complex relationship with masculinity, the New Epic hero found himself instantly on difficult grounds. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, as the muscular hero became hijacked by the action genre (with box-office stars like Stallone and Schwarzenegger epitomizing the shirtless muscleman), the body became harnessed once again as an ideological construct, who is in equal parts passive spectacle and active aggressor against corrupt regimes (see Arroyo and Takser, *Bodies*). In an article discussing the shift in representations of the action body over two decades, Christina Lee observes that "in the 1970s and 1980s the residual after-shocks of the Cold War and Vietnam paved the way for a generation of hulking heroes whose bodies seemed as indomitable as their spirits" (560). This emphasis on spectacular bodies and their political significance was to lead to films like *Rocky* and *The Terminator*, which proposed an ideal body "iconic of brute strength, industrialisation and the colonisation of public space" (Lee 560). In the wake of these films, and along with the long-overdue backlash against male domination of the genre, Lee notes that "within the last decade, there has been a shift away from the bulky towards the lithe and compact action figure," which places *Gladiator*'s Maximus, like Livius of the *Fall of the Roman Empire*, at a critical point in the evolution of the hero figure (560).

Taking into account the general dissatisfaction with overly and overtly

masculine heroes through the action genre, it became clear that the New Epic must turn its attention elsewhere for a new heroic ideal. Harking back to the historical epics of the 1950s and 1960s was no longer an option, since the centrality of the political concerns of the 1950s which infused these earlier epics led eventually to an ideological overdetermination of the hero; placing too much emphasis on the prevailing ideology had (somewhat paradoxically) fixed the hero not in Ancient Rome or Greece, but firmly within the confines of the mid-twentieth century and its political concerns. Nevertheless, to claim that the New Epic hero was to be free from ideology altogether would be a naïve — if not outright misleading — proposition, since the parallels which director Ridley Scott would later draw between the Crusades and the Gulf War (in *Kingdom of Heaven*), along with the clear influence of modern ideals of freedom incorporated into the apolitical hero, set Maximus firmly into the same mold as his Hollywood forebears.

Re-framing the issue in the terms of ego-ideals and narcissism outlined above, the problem emerges more clearly. With the demise of the muscular hero and audiences' general ambivalence toward unchecked aggression, Scott was no longer able to rely on an automatic narcissistic identification with the *forzuto*, since the kind of innocent, apolitical strongman so popular in the pop-culture was no longer the ideal to which a given spectator would aspire. In fact, over-emphasizing the hero's musculature or physical power would risk a return to the increasingly niche subgenres of violent 1990s action films of sculpted martial artists like Jean-Claude Van Damme, or else recall certain ultra-violent cult films like *Chopper* (2000) or Crowe's former skinhead in *Romper Stomper* (1992). This was precisely the kind of characterization Scott was obliged to avoid if he was to court sufficient audience numbers to recoup the huge production budget. The narrative necessity for action rather than spectacle (exemplified by Maximus' intra-diegetic rejection of his role as pure spectacle in his famous cry of "Are you not entertained?") equally precludes the use of built body as spectacle, obliging the hero instead to earn his place as a hero by his moral leadership (*Gladiator*). This leadership, however, must not be so prominent as to make of him an ideal ruler, since it embodies precisely the kind of narcissistic ego-ideal which, to repeat Hark, "undermines the tyrant's hold on political power through physical rebellion until a proper enunciator of the law of the father can replace him" (163). This dual evolution means that Maximus emerges as a new kind of epic hero at a critical juncture in which he must embody a wide range of *contradictory* values: he must be hard but forgiving, built but agile, exposed but impermeably armored, sensitive but hard-hearted, violent but not aggressive.

Given this exhaustive, and at times mutually exclusive, laundry list of conflicting values required from the New Epic hero in order to appeal to a wide audience base, these fissiparous demands have led, I argue, to a fundamental fragmentation of the heroic role. Rather than attempt to make one hero demon-

strate this impossible mix in its entirety, my argument here is that the hero tends to be judged less by his ability to conform to such (contradictory) values, and more by the company he keeps, forging new character types into a loose-knit group designed to appeal to this broad spectrum of audience expectations. To some extent, this fragmentation is already visible in the characterization of *Spartacus*, in which Spartacus' role as rebel is supported by the traditional musclemen of the gladiator school; yet in Kubrick's film the protagonist nevertheless bears a clear resemblance to the muscular hero in his exposed torso and visualized capacity for violence, as Hark has demonstrated. What is interesting about a film like *Gladiator*, then, is the extent to which these supporting character typologies assume many of the characteristics traditionally expected of the *forzuto* (if not his Hollywood equivalent). The secondary roles of Draba and Crixus (Woody Strode and John Ireland) in *Spartacus* contribute to generic convention by providing a loose framework for Scott's film in which Maximus' "heavies," Juba and Hagen (Djimon Hounsou and Ralf Moeller), rework the legacy of the exposed male body so prominent in the peplum. Traces of the muscular *forzuto* can, in fact, be discerned in the characterization of the "gentle giant" Hagen. His function within the narrative of the film seems predominantly to provide heavyweight back-up to Maximus and foreground his leadership skills (the insinuation here is that if a captured Teutonic warrior can become a devoted follower of Maximus, anyone can).

By invoking a split in the characterization of the epic hero, Scott is able to have his cake and eat it, too: with subsidiary characters absorbing the spectacle which is "required" of the genre, Maximus is free to play a more active role in fighting tyranny on the politico-ideological level. *Gladiator*'s hero accordingly embodies the requisite elements of leadership and the promulgation of the law in the absence of an ideal ruler, yet without the fundamentally violent aspect which mars the action hero to such a great extent. Since he is clearly no weakling, the covered-up body raises new questions for masculinity, since it represents the *potential* for violent action without necessarily foregrounding those capabilities (in some respects it is a visual representation of the "kind words and a gun" diplomacy). Such a conception of the New Epic hero, alongside new masculine ideals which call into question the reign of the musclebound heroes of the previous decade, inaugurates a new kind of hero, one who is no longer the lone warrior of *Conan the Barbarian*, *Rambo*, or *Terminator*, but is instead the head of a heroic unit, assembled ad-hoc to depose tyrannous regimes. As a whole, the team comes to embody an ideal balance of qualities which negotiates the disparate and conflicting requirements of the New Epic hero.

A more obvious instance of this fragmentation occurs in the recent adaptation to the screen of *The Last Legion* (2007), based on Valerio Massimo Manfredi's novel *L'Ultima Legione*. With the accession and immediate downfall of the emperor Romulus in the late fifth century A.D., the remnants of the destroyed

Ninth Legion, led by deposed general Aurelius, must shepherd the young emperor to safety in Britain.<sup>6</sup> The "army," therefore, rather than embodying the State with its concomitant legitimacy, is instead relegated to the status of outsider, placing the hero into the position of narcissistic ego-ideal. Yet the film takes a rather different turn, combining a group of disparate character types (drawn, like the Alamo-style plot itself, from the Western and Vietnam War film genres) into the collective hero. The various issues facing the New Epic outlined above—gender theory, the politico-ideological framework, and the civilization of the violent *forzuto*—are resolved by precisely this fragmentation in which a range of perceived audience expectations are met by a variety of character types. Gender debates and the problems of occidental bias are met by the inclusion of exotic Other in the form of an Indian princess, Mira; the exposed male body comes in the form of Nonso Anozie's Batiatus, a heavily-built warrior who fulfills a remarkably similar role to *Gladiator*'s Hagen; the problem of politico-ideological legitimacy is countered by the druid/priest Ambrosinus, who lends the team the otherworldly wisdom and counsel which, as a representative of a venerable and "worthy" institution, replaces the questionable legitimacy of the state. As a result, the heroic group is able to uphold the law of the father (by protecting the boy-emperor Romulus) and defending against the tyrant's hold on power by physical rebellion without seizing power itself.

In one particularly revealing scene, the spatial compositions of the frame reflect precisely this loss of legitimacy, when Aurelius (Colin Firth) shields the young emperor from the attacking "barbarians" who are, quite literally, at the gate. Standing in the foreground of the shot, Aurelius stands in front of a wall of shields formed by the emperor's guard with only his sword to protect himself; the defenseless Romulus stands behind the row of shields, in the doorway of the palace. Such an arrangement places both Romulus and Aurelius outside of the security of the imperial guard (state protection), recreating precisely the narrative situation seen in *Battaglia di Maratona* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which the weakened state (Callimaco, Lucilla, Romulus) is defended by a narcissistic ego-ideal who undermines the tyrant in order to restore power to the legitimate ruler (Philippides, Livius, Aurelius). In the sequence which follows, as Romulus tries to escape the barbarian invasion, he drops the crown to the floor. When his pursuer arrives on the scene, instead of seizing the crown (in other words, usurping rightful power), he instead crushes it underfoot. If the crown— as traditionally metonymic symbol of rightful authority and just law—is destroyed, then the legitimacy of the status quo can only be restored by an assimilation of its various constituent parts: Romulus (dynastic ruler), Aurelius (democratic leader), Batiatus (armed force), Ambrosinus (wisdom and statecraft), Mira (Otherness), and so on. Given that *individually* each of these character types is flawed, the film seems to suggest that they can only function *collectively* to undermine the tyrant's hold on the throne. In the case of *The Last Legion*, then, the sum of the parts is far greater than the whole.

A similar reflection of the fragmented hero can be found in the 2010 television series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, in which the hero works from the very outset to renounce the mantle of Kubrick's intertextual legacy. In some cases, this renunciation takes place quite literally, such as when the Thracian hero rejects his Latinized name by repeating, more and more forcefully, "My name is *not* Spartacus"; elsewhere, his total disregard for the political ideal of freedom is underscored by his nonchalance and refusal to form bonds with his fellow warriors, a direct reversal of Douglas' ideological drive for freedom (*Spartacus: Blood and Sand*). Nevertheless, even by the close of the first episode of the series, it becomes patently clear that Spartacus is by no means an amiable, inspirational hero, and the producers of the show make few attempts to disguise his outright misanthropy; he is no leader, he is apolitical, and — aside from his unchecked aggression when provoked — he is not much of a warrior either. One of the critical moments for the series occurs at the end of episode two, in which Spartacus realizes that there is only one way to guarantee his survival: by banding together with the other gladiators of the school, even pledging allegiance to the owner, Batiatus (again), in order to guarantee his freedom. In this respect, the secondary characters of the school embody the various values required to overthrow the corrupt rulers of Rome: Crixus (Manu Bennett) represents the perfect warrior; the Doctore (played by 300's messenger, Peter Mensah), imparts the requisite sense of leadership and authority over the gladiators; and Varro (Jai Courtney) serves an ideological function as a free man voluntarily entering the arena to clear his debts and return to his family, leaving the entire political domain to Batiatus (played by John Hannah, in a role reprised from *The Last Legion*). It is, as Varro consistently reminds the audience, only by uniting under the same banner that their individual agendas may adequately be served.

A final example to be adduced here in support of the fragmented hero theory comes in the form of the 2010 remake of *Clash of the Titans*, which allows for a direct comparison with the earlier version. Given that very little of the original plot has been revised, the team's relationship with the hero intimates that a sea change has taken place over the course of the three decades which separate the two films. In the 1981 version, the narrative focus is on Perseus and his quest to win the hand of Andromeda (of which main plot point the secondary quests form a part); though he initially sets out with a handful of soldiers who might be identified as a fragmented heroic grouping, as the film draws on it becomes clear where our sympathies are designed to lie. As each quest is completed, one by one the group is thinned down by circumstances (climbing the mountain, entering Medusa's lair, fighting the giant scorpions, etc.) which force the hero to carry on without any support. In the final showdown, Perseus is unambiguously constructed as a solitary hero, who alone possesses the courage and skill to complete the quest, and to whose muscular arms alone Andromeda's safety is indebted. The ad-hoc group of soldiers in the 2010 remake, however, reflects a distinctly different grouping, one which recognizes the value of diver-

sity, embraces the Other, and from whom Perseus draws the courage to stand against the dark forces of the gods that are pitted against him. While it is again Perseus alone who stands to face the Kraken in the final showdown, the earlier quests of the film draw influence from such a range of other New Epics (*Lord of the Rings*, *Gladiator*, and most of all *Kingdom of Heaven*) that the film can be seen as a kind of mythological road movie, whose power comes from the support of the team, a team which was all but invisible in the 1981 original. To allow one example to speak for many, it is noteworthy that it is only the later version which tries to accommodate any of the monsters — the Djinn warriors who play an integral part in the heroes' journey. The space of only thirty years, then, has been enough to testify to a sea change in audience expectations and generic conventions of the epic hero.

## Conclusions

Is this fragmentation, then, symptomatic of a wider pattern in recent invocations of the Epic hero? Certainly it is insufficient to speculate on the basis of a handful of examples drawn from the genre, and especially when these examples have been consciously chosen as the most obvious demonstrations of this fragmentary style. Much more difficult questions are raised, for example, by the adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, whose filmic influences can to some degree be traced both vertically in time to the sword and sorcery genre (itself a spin-off from the sword and sandal) and horizontally in context to generic conventions of the road movie/buddy movie, literary adaptations, and the evolution of New Zealand's national cinema. However, the motley group who form the focus of Peter Jackson's film does allow for a similar range of character archetypes (the sagacious elder, the powerful "heavy," the lightning fast weapons expert, etc.), which could easily be seen as a strong influence on recent recreations of Classical Antiquity. On a similar level, it must be conceded that the notion of a group rather than the solitary hero is by no means new to the genre, traceable back as far as the beginnings of the sword and sandal film in the silent era, where in a film like *Cabiria* the *forzuto* Ursus is backed up by a group which collectively aims to depose the unjust and tyrannical rule.

Yet, even taking into account such objections, there is clear evidence that there has been a fundamental change in the ways in which we imagine and characterize the epic hero in the last decade. Films like *Gladiator*, *The Last Legion*, and *Clash of the Titans*, three of the more successful films of the New Epic cycle, demonstrate to great effect that the role of the epic hero has been subject to a fundamental change in the wake of post-classical cinema, the changing tastes of audiences, and developments in masculinity studies in the perception of the ideal-ego. These later offerings try to establish an ideal hero not by a potentially limiting return to male ideals (which are not only outmoded,



but also complex and at times contradictory), but instead by demonstrating a much greater and far more democratic fragmentation of heroic virtues. What remains to be seen, however, is the effect that such fragmentary heroes will have on the accuracy (or authenticity) of these historical films, for although it may be necessary to court the much more democratic modern audiences (to whom feudal hierarchies are distinctly unpalatable), there can be no doubt that these groups fundamentally alter the social structures of the past. By devolving the muscular, politico-ideological and gender roles to a group of followers, for instance, these subordinates are being elevated to a broadly equal footing with the hero, which erodes the hierarchy of governance that properly belongs to the Late Roman era, and most certainly would be out of place in a general's relationship with/to his emperor. *Beowulf* alone, for example, would present an interesting opportunity to explore the recreation of these hierarchical relationships over the course of time, and even a surface comparison between *Beowulf* (2007) and *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005) would reveal a strikingly different relationship between the group and the hero; neither, it scarcely needs to be said, bears any real relationship with the strictly vertical feudalism of the original poem.

Even so, these instances of the fragmented hero are sufficient to show, at the very least, that the New Epic hero has returned to the fray to find a very different battle playing out compared to the ones left behind in the 1960s. Where once in *The Robe* the "enemy within" would suffice to allow a patriotic, morally upright leader to vanquish all to the eternal gratitude of his compatriots, the degree of difference among ideological beliefs in the twenty-first century places insurmountable barriers against our heroes—barriers which no amount of Herculean muscle could tear down. In the introductory chapter to his book *Heroes*, Paul Johnson offers an appealing definition of the hero, drawn from Homer, as "a name given to men of superhuman strength, courage or ability" (xii). Where once this might have held true for the Homeric hero, one of the solutions employed by recent epics is to interpret the plural "men" of Johnson's quotation as a very real plurality. These "men" reflect a fragmentation of the heroic role into a loose grouping of individuals who each embody one or more of the qualities demanded of our hero, rather than adopting strict categories of heroic values. By incorporating *all* of these values, the New Epic has offered us a new type of hero motif, one who is no longer superhuman but is, Leviathan-like, merely the sum of the best in each of us. To return to our adage of a society getting the heroes it deserves, perhaps this kind of loose-knit grouping, whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts, might well turn out to be precisely the kind of hero the twenty-first century will need.

#### NOTES

1. By the term New Epic, I mean to indicate the renaissance of films released between 2000 and the present which deal to a greater or lesser extent with classical, ancient, or

mythological topics, and whose emergence is traditionally accredited to Scott's *Gladiator*. One of the most persuasive arguments for this comes in Jeffrey Richards' *Hollywood's Ancient Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2008), in which he argues, "The astonishing worldwide success of Ridley Scott's Roman epic *Gladiator* in 2000 single-handedly revived a cinematic genre that had been moribund for 35 years" (1).

2. For an excellent overview of the problems of the use of this term, see Pomeroy 29–59.

3. This is certainly the argument proposed by David Chapman in his interesting study of the peplum posters and lobby cards of the era, which allow a great deal of speculation on the audiences sought for the films.

4. It is interesting, and somewhat ironic, to note that in *300* (2006, a loose remake of *The 300 Spartans*), King Leonidas should find himself reinvented as a kind of *neoforzuto* figure, whose exposed body serves as an index of virility, power, and male spectacle. The major difference, however, between *300*'s muscleman and his predecessor in the peplum is that the potency and virility serves as a kind of synecdoche which implies that the whole state of Sparta is cut from the same cloth; in this case, then, the exposed male body serves a politico-ideological function in and of itself.

5. For more on the encoding of agendas in late 1950s and early 1960s Hollywood epics, see Kevin J. Harty, "Agenda Layered Upon Agenda: Anthony Mann's 1961 Film *El Cid*," *Hollywood and the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 161–68; Andrew Elliott, "Chapter One: History, Historiography and Film," *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010); and Alan Lupack, "An Enemy in Our Midst: *The Black Knight* and The American Dream," *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 64–70.

6. Here I am referring to the "history" offered by the film. The historical Romulus did last a little longer than a day, though his reign was indeed over in a matter of mere months.

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# Of Muscles and Men

## *Essays on the Sword and Sandal Film*

*Edited by* MICHAEL G. CORNELIUS



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On the cover: Reg Park in the title role of *Hercules in the Haunted  
World*, 1961; details from poster art of the films (top) *Atlas*, 1961  
and (bottom) *Samson and the Seven Miracles of the World*, 1961

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