Classical Masculinity and the Spectacular Body on Film

The Mighty Sons of Hercules

Daniel O'Brien

Classical Masculinity and the Spectacular Body on Film

Classical Masculinity and the Spectacular Body on Film

The Mighty Sons of Hercules

Daniel O'Brien
University of Southampton, UK

palgrave
macmillan

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2014 978-1-137-38470-6

First published 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN 978-1-349-48120-6 ISBN 978-1-137-38471-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137384713

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

O'Brien, Daniel, 1967–
Classical masculinity and the spectacular body on film : the mighty sons of Hercules / Daniel O'Brien, University of Southampton, UK.
pages cm
Summary: "The cinema has often showcased the muscular male body, most notably in genres invoking classical Greco-Roman culture, whether peplum, epic or sword-and-sorcery. This book reassesses the classically-inflected action film as a significant cinematic form, often marginalized in media studies, that transcends such reductive labels as camp or kitsch. The focus is on the depiction of heroic masculinity, often characterized as reactionary or fascist, yet far more varied and contradictory, especially in relation to femininity and non-whiteness. These diverse representations of masculinity offer a major contribution to debates on maleness within and beyond academia that has been largely unexplored. In particular, Hercules in his many incarnations is one of the most important mythopoetic figures, on a par with King Arthur, Robin Hood, Tarzan and James Bond, informing popular cultural interpretations of manliness and the exaggerated male form"— Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-1-349-48102-6 (hardback)
1. Masculinity in motion pictures. 2. Heroes in motion pictures. 3. Hercules (Roman mythological character)—In motion pictures. 4. Mythology, Classical in motion pictures. 5. Human body in motion pictures. I. Title.
PN1995.9.M34O27 2014
791.43'652—dc23
2014028975

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgements

I thank Professor Tim Bergfelder, Dr Michael Williams, Dan Hickin, Cecile Renaud, Matt Nichols, Aramchan Lee, Sherry Xu, Claudia Sandberg, Victoria Kearley, Elena Caoduro and Beth Carroll for their invaluable input. My fellow UKC veteran Gary Kramer cast an eye over the opening section and advised on the choice of illustrations.

Thanks to Felicity Plester and Chris Penfold at Palgrave Macmillan.

My gratitude to my parents for their support and understanding.

A final thanks to the late Steve Reeves, the man who was Hercules, Romulus and the son of Spartacus.

Introduction

The muscular male body has enjoyed a privileged, if contentious, status in mainstream Western cinema since the early days of the medium, most notably in forms linked to classical Greco-Roman culture. Examples include muscle-bound heroes of Italian silent film, the *peplum* cycle launched by *Le fatiche di Ercole / Hercules* (Pietro Francisci, 1958), Hollywood epics such as *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) and the 1980s sword-and-sorcery cycle and post-millennial epics such as *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004). Focusing on the *peplum* and its influence, I argue that these classically-inflected action films constitute a major cinematic form which has often been marginalised in the fields of media and cultural studies. Through a series of case studies, I provide an analysis and reassessment of their representations of heroic masculinity that, in my view, transcend such reductive labels as 'camp' or 'kitsch'. I also explore how previous scholarship has frequently characterised these heroic male bodies as endorsing the value of white male physical strength, invoking racist and fascist subtexts, in the context of a reactionary patriarchal status quo. I argue that the depiction of masculinity in these films is more varied, problematic and contradictory than this overgeneralised reading would suggest, especially in relation to femininity and non-whiteness. It is furthermore my contention that these diverse representations of masculinity offer a notable contribution to ongoing debates on maleness—both within and beyond academia—that has been largely unexplored and unappreciated. In particular, Hercules must be considered one of the most significant mythopoetic figures of all time, a name and story as broadly known as those of King Arthur, Count Dracula, Robin Hood, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan and James Bond. Hercules's mythopoesis has greatly informed both classical and popular cultural interpretations of masculinity, the male body and especially the exaggerated male form.

In this section, I outline the aims of the book, discussing the pivotal *peplum* genre and associated debates. I also outline major discourses around the concept of masculinity, both in general and in relation to the *peplum* and other cinematic depictions of heroic masculinity. The rest of the book is divided into three main sections, subdivided into

chapters on specific films, which address the areas of white masculinity, femininity and non-whiteness from a broad socio-cultural perspective.

The *Peplum* in Context

In *A Short History of the Movies*, first published in 1971, US scholar Gerald Mast claimed that American investment in the Italian film industry had stimulated not only 'art cinema' but also 'the cheap, trash films' (Mast, 1976, p. 364). For Mast, a prime example of the latter was the *peplum*, a series of mythological action films produced in Italy from 1957 to 1965, though he used the term '"spectacle" films', appearing to question even this attribute (Mast, 1976, p. 364). He argued that the *peplum* represented an abandonment of qualities associated with early post-World War II Italian cinema—in terms of ideas, social comment, realistic observation and poetic imagery—pandering instead to mainstream film conventions and practices (Mast, 1976, p. 365). In both form and content, the *peplum* revealed nothing of interest about the era of its production and reception, nor had it anything to offer subsequent debates in film and cultural studies.

This distinction between art and trash in Italian cinema is encapsulated by a scene from *Boccaccio '70* (1962), a portmanteau film with episodes by respected directors Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti. The Fellini segment, 'Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio', shows a cheap Hercules film being shot on the streets of Rome. The polyglot production features fake boulders, a star too weak to carry his leading lady and a one-eyed director in a wheelchair. From Mast's perspective, this parodic snapshot of *peplum* film-making illustrates clearly why the genre merits no serious consideration. Even Hercules's beard is false. Mast's views were perhaps not representative of 1970s English-language academic discourse on the *peplum*, but the absence of debate during this period reflects a dismissive attitude towards the genre that has altered only gradually. In 2011, US academic Frank Burke argued that the *peplum* has still not attracted much scholarly attention, an assessment I would class as only slight exaggeration (Burke, 2011, p. 17). In my estimation, the *peplum* is a significant cinematic form which has influenced both contemporaneous and subsequent US filmic depictions of mythical heroes. The genre that Hercules built merits reassessment, and my re-evaluation of the *peplum* also underlines the cultural value of Italian and indeed European genre cinema, fields still overshadowed in film studies by the dominant Hollywood models.

The *peplum* in the late 1950s spearheaded the resurgence of Italian popular cinema in the international market, achieving a level of exposure

and commercial success not experienced since the silent era. According to contemporary accounts, the most successful film at the British box office in 1960 was *Ercole e la regina di Lidia / Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959), an unprecedented achievement for a dubbed low-budget import (Anon, *Films and Filming*, 1961, p. 29). The UK film industry journal *Kine Weekly* listed three other *pepla* in its 1960 survey of domestic box-office hits: *La battaglia di Maratona* / *The Giant of Marathon* (Jacques Tourneur, 1959), *Il terrore dei barbari* / *Goliath and the Barbarians* (Carlo Campogalliani, 1959) and *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* / *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Mario Bonnard, Sergio Leone, 1959), along with the Italian-made classical epic *Nel segno di Roma* / *Sign of the Gladiator* (Guido Brignone, 1959) (Murphy, 1986, p. 189). The *pepla* highlighted the bodies of their leading men, cast as heroes from Greco-Roman legend or ancient history. The stars were usually bodybuilders, with little or no acting experience, dressed in minimal costumes that emphasised their physiques, their characters placed in narratives of contest, conflict and ordeal. Critics and academics such as Richard Whitehall (1963), Gianni Rondolino (1979) and Richard Dyer (1996, 1997) have noted that the cycle began with *Hercules*, starring champion US bodybuilder Steve Reeves. *Hercules* established the *peplum* ground rules, foregrounding the muscular male body as an instrument of self-reliance, liberation and moral authority.

I have chosen the term *peplum* to identify and group these films rather than the alternative 'sword and sandal' label, which derives from US-led discourse, for several reasons. As discussed below, the *peplum* category originated with French critics during the early 1960s and predates the term 'sword and sandal'. Writing in the early 1990s, Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau employed the term *peplum* partly because 'no similar common term has emerged in theory or criticism written in English' and I argue this remains the case in 2014 (Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992, p. 179). *Peplum* is a relatively neutral label in that it does not invoke so readily the evaluative and often negative associations of 'sword and sandal', whether low-brow, high-camp or trash. For the purposes of this book, I define *peplum* as a mythological, historical-mythological or pseudo-mythological action movie, usually based on Greco-Roman legend, produced in Italy between 1957 and 1965, with the participation of at least one Italian production company, a predominantly Italian cast and crew and, with some exceptions, a bodybuilder cast in the starring role (cf. Dyer, 1997, p. 146). It should be noted that, as far as can be determined, the term *peplum* was not used by film-makers, distributors, exhibitors, the popular press or audiences in identifying, defining or promoting these films. Rather, a group of critics required a term that

identified and legitimised a collection of films they regarded as worthy of serious critical recognition and study. Thus, while the *peplum* employed a generic verisimilitude that was recognised, understood and appreciated by spectators, the majority of audiences did not know these films as *pepla*. I argue, however, that this group of mythological action films form, or at least participate in, a distinctive, if fluid, generic corpus. In terms of English-language commentary, the *peplum*'s status as a specific category can be traced back at least as far as 1963, when *Films and Filming* critic Ian Johnson expressed an appreciation for Italian spectaculars that offered 'musclemen and mythology' (Johnson, 1963, p. 29), characterising the genre in terms of its nationality, spectacle (body-centred or otherwise), stars and nominal source material.

The earliest significant debates on the *peplum* originated in the French critical journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. These were rooted in *auteur* theory, highlighting director Vittorio Cottafavi and *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* / *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961), and proved influential on British and Italian film criticism (cf. Moullet, 1962, pp. 39–42; Whitehall, 1963, p. 33; Rondolino, 1979, p. 186). While Cottafavi retained a measure of his 1960s currency in subsequent English-language critical and, to a lesser extent, academic discourse, he did not achieve a lasting *auteur* status outside France and Italy (cf. Milne, 1986, p. 19; Dyer, 1996, p. 39; Aprà et al., 2010). 1960s critics also discussed the genre in terms of its commercial success, domestic and international. British critic Richard Whitehall identified social and political factors at work, suggesting the *peplum*'s uncomplicated heroics and black-and-white moral certainties suited the public mood at a time of global Cold War tensions and nuclear anxiety (Whitehall, 1963, pp. 8–9). Italian critic Goffredo Fofi suggested in 1967 that the *peplum* benefited from fortuitous timing, arriving when several traditional genres highlighting heroic men of action were in decline, notably the Hollywood 'B' western, and, in Italy, the *cappa e spada* or 'cloak and sword' film (Fofi, 1967/79, p. i). For the most part, English-language critical commentary on the *peplum* declined along with the genre itself after the mid-1960s, and scholarly interest did not achieve significant momentum for another twenty-five years.

Academic debates on the *peplum* should be placed within the wider contexts of Italian and European cinema, though the latter remains a problematic area of study, not least in terms of ready definition (cf. Fowler, 2002, p. 1; Mathijs and Mendik, 2004, pp. 1–2). Until the 1980s, academic constructions of European film were based predominantly around notions of art cinema, emphasising high culture, elitism, significant movements (such as Italian neo-realism and French *nouvelle vague*)

and *auteurism* (Fowler, 2002, p. 4). David Bordwell's 1979 essay on art cinema characterised it as 'a distinct branch of the cinematic institution' that departed from the classical Hollywood narrative mode and promoted realism over the escapism associated with the latter (Bordwell, 2002, pp. 94, 95). This definition of European cinema was partly a reaction against the dominance of popular Hollywood cinema in terms of both film production (and distribution) and film studies (Fowler, 2002, p. 5). Writing in 1981, Steve Neale argued the term 'art cinema' had not been sufficiently defined, elaborated or analysed but recognised that it offered a space 'in which an indigenous cinema can develop and make its critical and economic mark' (Neale, 2002, pp. 103, 104). Low culture, in the form of popular and/or genre cinema, was invariably excluded. Jill Forbes and Sarah Street concur that while art cinema remains contentious as a category, it has proved useful as a marketing tool in terms of the international distribution and promotion of European cinema (Forbes and Street, 2000, p. 40).

Until the early 1990s, European films judged to fall outside the categories of art or *auteur* cinema received little attention in English-language film and cultural studies. One of the first attempts to counter this gap in scholarship was the 1989 Popular European Cinema Conference, an international event organised by Vincendeau and Dyer and held at the University of Warwick in England. The introduction to the conference catalogue noted the long-standing and deep-rooted tendency to equate Hollywood with popular film, and European cinema with avant-garde, art and *auteur* film, and proposed a radically different approach, declaring European popular film 'both culturally significant and fully as capable of high aesthetic achievement as Hollywood' (Vincendeau and Dyer, 1989, p. i). A selection of the papers presented formed the basis for a 1992 book which developed the argument that popular European film, long regarded as second-rate, must be re-evaluated as both art and social document (Vincendeau and Dyer, 1992, p. 11). Vincendeau and Dyer state that the term 'popular' can refer to commercial success and/or artefacts produced by or in tune with 'the people' (Vincendeau and Dyer, 1992, p. 2). While these market and anthropological approaches are by no means unproblematic, they offer viable alternatives to debates on European film confined to art cinema, which risk playing down or erasing stylistic and cultural differences between films from each country (Vincendeau and Dyer, 1992, p. 8). Around the same time, Pierre Sorlin's *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939–1990* offered a comparative social history which drew its primary material from the cinema, making no particular distinction between art film and popular film

(Sorlin, 1991, p. 5). Sorlin characterises cinema as a whole as 'a popular means of entertainment' (Sorlin, 191, p. 5), and it is arguable that in practice the art/popular categories overlap to such an extent that the validity—and usefulness—of this divide is open to question (cf. Ndalianis, 2007, p. 87). As Dimitris Eleftheriotis notes, art cinema rarely, if ever, occupies an idealised, non-commercial sphere, any more than popular film is lacking entirely in an aesthetic sense, sophistication or creativity (Eleftheriotis, 2001, p. 73).

As with European cinema, for a long time English-language discourses on Italian cinema defined it in narrow and highly selective terms. US scholar Sergio J. Pacifici, in his 1956 essay 'Notes toward a Definition of Neo-Realism', argued the movement had contributed towards the formation of a genuine Italian cinema (Pacifici, 1965, p. 45), and over the ensuing decades neo-realism remained a keystone for academic debates on Italian film. In *How to Read a Film*, first published in 1977, James Monaco characterised neo-realism as depicting ordinary, often working-class, lives and employing non-professional actors, unpolished technique (whether by aesthetic choice or financial necessity), a socio-political message and focusing on ideas rather than entertainment (Monaco, 1981, p. 253). The movement also marked the emergence of major film-makers such as De Sica, Visconti and Roberto Rossellini, an *auteur* canon supplemented by figures such as Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni and Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose early work had links, direct or otherwise, to neo-realism. Writing in 1981, Neale identified neo-realism as 'the very paradigm of Art Cinema' (Neale, 2002, p. 113), linking both to Mast's conception of innovative, socially relevant Italian cinema and the wider debates on European film in relation to art and popular cinema. While neo-realism's status as a coherent movement distinct from mainstream Italian cinema has been much debated (cf. Dyer, 2007, pp. 232, 234), its associated style, such as location-based filming, and narrative devices, including ellipses and open endings, were perceived to have 'influenced the emergence of an international modernist cinema' (Thompson and Bordwell, 1994, p. 423). As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith notes, if few neo-realist films were commercially successful, their international critical reputation and development of what was perceived as a distinctively Italian subject matter meant that 'for many years "Italian cinema" was synonymous with the neo-realist production' (Nowell-Smith, 2007, p. 233).

With English-language studies of Italian cinema anchored around neo-realism and its associated *auteurs*, popular Italian film was for many years relegated to the periphery of debates on Italian art cinema or

simply not mentioned at all. Pierre Leprohon proposed then dismissed a Golden Age of Italian silent film, notable for historical epics and other popular genres, such as comedy and melodrama, which were, in his view, insignificant technically and aesthetically (Leprohon, 1972, pp. 16, 30, 61). Subsequent studies made reference to the classical epics of the early twentieth century and their commercial success in both the domestic and foreign markets (cf. Bondanella, 2002, pp. 3–6; Neale, 2002, p. 111). There were few detailed studies of Italian popular film, with rare exceptions such as Christopher Frayling's 1981 book on spaghetti westerns, which prompted, in part at least, a gradual re-evaluation of the genre and, in particular, made a case for director Sergio Leone as an *auteur* (Frayling, 2006). By the mid-1990s, the growth of scholarship on European popular cinema was reflected in debates on Italian film. For example, Sorlin's *Italian National Cinema 1896–1996* examines the shifting relationship between Italian society and Italian cinema, referencing both art and popular film (Sorlin, 1996); Christopher Wagstaff argues in *Hollywood and Europe* that as early as the late 1940s the US dominance of Italian cinemas was countered by a resurgence of popular genres, including melodrama, musical, comedy and adventure (Wagstaff, 1998, pp. 75–6). As with popular European film in general, the emergence of Italian popular cinema as a recognised subject within film studies has proved a gradual process (cf. Brizio-Skov, 2011; Bayman, 2011; Bayman and Rigoletto, 2013).

Michèle Lagny notes how, prior to the early 1990s, the handful of scholarly debates on the *peplum* were either entirely dismissive or focused on the genre's perceived ideological unsoundness (Lagny, 1992, p. 163). Leprohon saw the *peplum* as a commercially successful but otherwise unremarkable revival of the costume-adventure film, 'a perennial feature of the Italian cinema' (Leprohon, 1972, p. 174). Angela Dalle Vacche concurs with Mast that the *peplum* is a regressive and reactionary form of film-making, in marked contrast to neo-realism and the recognised Italian *auteurs* (Dalle Vacche, 1992, p. 52; cf. Burke, 2011, p. 27). These attitudes have persisted into the twenty-first century. Maggie Günsberg, discussing gender and genre in Italian popular cinema, also characterises the *peplum* as an intrinsically reactionary form that promotes traditional gender, race and class values (Günsberg, 2005, p. 7). Film historian Mira Liehm argued in the mid-1980s that the *peplum* refracts and embodies economic, social and ideological realities of its era, a point I address below, but this more measured assessment of the genre is a brief digression from an agenda still based around the neo-realist movement (Liehm, 1984, p. 183; cf. Burke, 2011, p. 18).

Despite the rise of scholarly interest in Italian popular film, in terms of *peplum*-specific discourses, no particular school of thought has dominated the field at any given time. The mid-1990s saw one of the first book-length English-language works on the genre: Patrick Lucanio's *With Fire and Sword*, published in 1994. A US academic, Lucanio emphasised the *peplum*'s status as a neglected genre and discussed its US promotion, box-office success and the casting of bodybuilders (Lucanio, 1994, pp. vii, 22). Most of the book, however, consists of a catalogue of *pepla* (and related titles) released in the US, and his approach offers little in the way of sustained critical or theoretical discussion. The genre's use of bodybuilders has been debated further (Cohan, 1997; Wyke, 2002; Burke, 2011; D'Amelio, 2011) in a wider historical-political context that links the *peplum* to the post-World War II Americanisation of Italy. Elsewhere, academic histories of Italian cinema, among other texts, follow Leprohon's lead in noting the genre's commercial success at home and abroad, especially in the crucial US market (Bondanella, 1983/2002, p. 159; Bondanella, 2009, p. 167; cf. Thompson and Bordwell, 1994, p. 423). There are debates over the local audience profile, in terms of class, education and literacy, though the scant extant documentary evidence is reflected in the polarised conclusions (Lagny, 1992, p. 163; Sorlin, 1996, p. 125; Burke, 2011, p. 31). The *peplum* has also been placed in its local industrial context and identified by Peter Bondanella (1983), among others, as characteristic of the industry at the time, a 'faddish' genre created by numerous and rapid imitations of a popular original, in this instance *Hercules* (Bondanella, 2002, p. 161; cf. Wood, 2005, p. 11). Tim Bergfelder locates the *peplum* in a broader context of European co-productions which enabled film-makers to 'boost productivity, to share production costs and to increase the number of cinema-goers' (Bergfelder, 2000, p. 141). Sheldon Hall examines the US promotion and distribution of the *peplum* in terms of the aggressive mass marketing and saturation release of product perceived as second-rate that exploited public curiosity and gullibility for rapid commercial gain (Hall, 2002, p. 14).

As the above examples demonstrate, there are various strands of academic discourse relating to the *peplum*. I feel, however, that this genre has not been mapped comprehensively, especially in regard to its representation of masculinity. Lagny reads the *peplum* as a valorisation of the male body (Lagny, 1992, p. 170), and fellow academics such as Dyer and Günsberg have developed this aspect of *peplum* scholarship in terms of gender, race and fascism, the last of these linked with then-recent Italian history (Dyer, 1997; Günsberg, 2005). Dyer's book *White*

(1997) examines depictions of whiteness in Western visual culture and the chapter 'The white man's muscles' discusses the various factors that contributed to the *peplum*'s construction of 'the idealised white man' (Dyer, 1997, p. 165). As noted, Günsberg argues that gender representation in Italian popular cinema is informed to a large extent by conservative patriarchal ideology (a situation by no means exclusive to Italy) and discusses the *peplum* body in terms of an idealised masculine physicality (Günsberg, 2005, pp. 1, 110). Thus the genre is read as a valorisation of white male strength, physical and moral, set in contrast and opposition to femininity and non-whiteness, qualities marked as fundamentally different and, by their nature, inherently inferior.

Aspects of this representation remain insufficiently addressed, reflecting too restrictive an approach that reiterates key points without developing or challenging them. The depiction of heroic manliness in these films is more varied than previous readings suggest, undermining the concept of a singular, mono-faceted *peplum* masculinity that is readily identified and categorised (cf. Elliott, 2011, pp. 60, 61). The casting of bodybuilders undercuts the presentation of masculinity as an ostensibly natural, fixed and unchanging essence, emphasising instead its status as a cultural construction perpetuated and performed in accordance with and furtherance of the dictates of a dominant ideology. Representing manliness in terms of the displayed male body also invokes undercurrents of passivity and homoeroticism that the *peplum* attempts to counter through various methods (cf. Lagny, 1992, p. 171; Cohan, 1997, p. 182). Subsequent cinematic representations of heroic masculinity are marked by similar contradictions and the resultant tensions are reflected in both the variation and continuation in evidence from Steve Reeves's Hercules to Gerard Butler's Leonidas in *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007).

Theorising Masculinity

Masculinity, whether in terms of ideology, gender politics or sheer spectacle, is central to discussions of the *peplum*. Any analysis of the genre needs to be placed in the context of wider debates on representations of masculinity in the cinema and the mass culture or cultures it refracts. Conceptions of masculinity are sometimes assumed to constitute a homogenous, universal phenomenon with no significant, let alone problematic or contradictory, variations. In fact, debates on what it means to be a man form a series of multifaceted national, historical, social and cultural constructs. As my case studies will demonstrate, the representation of heroic masculinity differs significantly even between

films produced in similar contexts and characterised as belonging to the same genre. The *peplum* label may evoke a particular idea of masculinity, centred on the exposed body, yet counter representations can be found both within the genre and in non-*peplum* films depicting ostensibly the same setting and subject matter.

While 'masculinity' is by no means an academic discipline in and of itself, studies of masculinities form what social historian R. W. Connell terms 'a comprehensible field of knowledge' (Connell, 2005, p. xiii). Sociologist Peter F. Murphy dates academic debates on masculinity back to the late 1970s, partly as a response to feminist theory, and drawing on fields such as sociology, anthropology and psychology (Murphy, 1994, p. 3; cf. Hoch, 1979). Anthropologist David D. Gilmore notes how most societies have ideas, however vague or notional, about 'true' manhood and, moreover, that this quality is not the same as simple anatomical maleness but is rather a state or status achieved by boys against powerful odds (Gilmore, 1990, pp. xi-ii, 11). Sociologist Christopher E. Forth sees enduring Western notions of an essential masculinity as a reaction against modernity, that is, 'the more sedentary conditions of modern life that have emerged since the sixteenth century' (Forth, 2008, pp. 5–6). This masculinity may be less restrained, highly physical and even aggressive (Forth, 2008, p. 6). Fellow sociologist Arthur Brittan also notes in Western culture—whether art, literature or other media—a tendency to depict and celebrate masculinity in terms of the hero, hunter, competitor and conqueror (Brittan, 1989, p. 77). In other words, being biologically male does not automatically bestow the status of manhood, and the latter quality, while found in various forms across different societies and cultures, often appeals to ideas of an essential, pre-modern masculinity that must be attained rather than granted and which emphasises action over intellect. There are, of course, other conceptions of and approaches to masculinity, yet the ideas sketched above serve to illuminate notions of heroic maleness that are central to the classically-inflected action film.

Connell also identifies a general assumption that 'there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life. We hear of "real men", "natural man"' (Connell, 1995, p. 45). This 'true masculinity' is located in and inherent to the male body. Historian George L. Mosse suggests this corporeal concept or stereotype of true manliness 'was so powerful precisely because unlike abstract ideas or ideals it could be seen, touched' (Mosse, 1996, p. 6). Western European concepts of masculine perfection can be dated back to the eighteenth century, drawing inspiration, like the *peplum*, from the classical world centred on Ancient

Greece (Mosse, 1996, p. 28) or rather surviving artefacts of this culture (or copies thereof) and what they were taken to represent. Mosse cites the pioneering and influential work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, such as *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755) and *History of Ancient Art* (1764) (Mosse, 1996, p. 29). It is worth noting here that, as Miriam Hansen states, the term 'classical', ostensibly a historical category, also implies the transcendence of history, claiming a 'transcultural appeal and universality' associated with 'a timeless sense of beauty, proportion, harmony, and balance derived from *nature*' (Hansen, 2000, p. 338). Thus the classical masculine ideal is also the true masculinity.

While the body is a crucial component in constructing ideas of masculinity, the process of construction is open to question and challenge (cf. Whitehead, 2002, p. 203). Far from being a fixed, gender-defined quality, 'masculinity' and its representation cannot be maintained, or even comprehended, in isolation from the culture that produces it. The very notion of acting like a man, in order to comply with accepted notions of masculinity, should underline its status as an act. This book is based on the assumption that the presentation or representation of masculinity always carries an element of performance or display, rather than being mere biological or genetic programming that simply 'comes naturally'. This performance is usually in compliance with—and furtherance of—the prevailing norms determined, upheld and perpetuated by patriarchal societies. In terms of cinematic performance, Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim identify a fundamental paradox, whereby a male star representing a masculine ideal of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency cedes control of his body on two levels, 'by passively submitting himself firstly to the grooming processes and then to the look of the camera' (Kirkham and Thumim, 1993, p. 25).

In the cinema, depictions of heterosexual or 'straight' masculinity are employed as 'a structuring norm' which is not intended to be questioned, let alone analysed, criticised or subverted (Neale, 1993, p. 9). Writing in the 1980s, Neale noted a lack of detailed study of 'how heterosexual masculinity is inscribed and the mechanisms, pressures, and contradictions that inscription may involve' (Neale, 1993, p. 9). Promoting fantasies of power and omnipotence, mainstream depictions of masculinity are intended to be read only in accordance with culturally-ordained constructions of maleness (Neale, 1993, p. 12). Yet the very act of representing masculinity in terms of the male body is inherently problematic and unstable. Neale argues, 'the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema is implicitly male' (Neale, 1993, p. 19). The female body is presented on screen as a legitimate object of contemplation and

desire, often defining femininity solely in terms of the body. The male body should not, and cannot, be presented in the same way. For a man to look at an image of masculinity without disturbing the prevailing notions of maleness and male sexuality, the relationship between spectator and image must be contained and regulated. Neale suggests that 'in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed' (Neale, 1993, p. 14). Steven Cohan concurs that 'an open acknowledgment of the male body's erotic appeal confuses the gender orthodoxy of who looks as opposed to who is looked at' (Cohan, 1997, p. 179). Michael G. Cornelius argues that when the cinematic gaze is *homogendered*, men looking at men, the object becomes an image of attainment, both societal and personal, as opposed to the *heterogendered* gaze where the object is sexually desirable (Cornelius, 2011, p. 159). Thus while Hollywood 'beefcake' stars such as Victor Mature were marketed to female viewers as objects of desire, male viewers were supposed to admire Mature's masculine virility and physical prowess in strictly non-sexual terms, their erotic contemplation focused solely on 'cheesecake' starlets.

Neale has documented a classic cinematic strategy for eliminating, or at least suppressing, the 'threat' of inappropriately eroticised masculinity. Images of violence directed against the male body 'are marks both of the repression involved and of a means by which the male body may be disqualified as an object of erotic contemplation and desire' (Neale, 1993, p. 14). The male body subjected to violence, marked by cuts, bruises and puncture wounds, has any erotic traces literally beaten out of it. While the success of this strategy is open to debate, its repeated and indeed formulaic deployment in mainstream cinema is beyond question. Scenarios of conflict serve also to present masculinity as active, aggressive performance. The male body at rest risks being evaluated solely in terms of its physical attractiveness; the male body in action undercuts the connotations of passive display associated with femininity. Discussing *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), Susan Jeffords argues that 'by representing Rambo's body as performance, the otherwise erotically suggestive display of his bare chest throughout the film is diverted as an object of military training, "a fighting machine"'(Jeffords, 1989, p. 13). The longer, fiercer and more spectacular is the combat, the greater the diversion away from unacceptable eroticism. Presenting the male body as a primary source of spectacle, both in action and at rest, the *peplum* genre highlights also the strategies, tensions and contradictions involved in this display.

Peplum Masculinity

Discussing Italian cinema during the fascist era (1922–1943), Giorgio Bertellini argues that the filmic celebration of the powerful male physique dates back to the Maciste series, centred on a giant-sized yet chivalrous strongman, produced from 1915 to 1926 (Bertellini, 2002, pp. 34–5). Classicist Maria Wyke's exploration of the links between body culture and the classical tradition cites *Quo Vadis?* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1912) as an earlier example: 'A sense of honourable purpose was restored to the strongman [Ursus] whose body shape and associated virtuous acts were pitted against the decadence and languor of a grotesquely shapeless oppressor' (Wyke, 2002, p. 361). Mere physical strength, however extraordinary, was insufficient. The male body had to be honed and shaped into an instrument of heroic action, further defined by its opposition to an antagonist whose physical inadequacy and unattractiveness were matched by their immoral character. This links with bodybuilding and, in particular, German showman Eugene Sandow, a star of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and probably the first celebrity strongman to emphasise muscular definition over sheer size or bulk (Blanshard, 2005, p. 153). The strong male body, and its classical associations, was later promoted by the Mussolini government, evoking a fascist aspect which I discuss below. As noted, the post-World War II Americanisation of Italy is also relevant to *peplum* masculinity, and I address this connection in my analysis of *Hercules*. At this point I will focus on more immediate factors in 1950s Italian society at the time of the film's release.

As Liehm suggests, the overt escapism of the *peplum* genre can be seen as veiling a comment on harsh reality that links with issues relating to male physical strength (Liehm, 1984, p. 183). From the mid-1950s onwards, there were major structural transformations in Italian society, resulting from a greater applied scientific knowledge, a market-based industrial economy and the rise of the urban society (Sorlin, 1996, p. 115). This led to a period of mass internal migration in Italy, from the rural south to the industrial north. There was also a shift from labour based on physical strength—previously a source of economic value—to labour based on skill with machines (Dyer, 1997, p. 169). This change in labour requirements brought more women into the workplace, transforming their economic and social status, while men who offered only unskilled manual labour found their economic worth diminished.

This picture, though broadly accurate, requires qualification to avoid being overly schematic or simplistic. Social historians David Forgacs

and Stephen Gundle argue that the popular perception of the period of economic miracle (1958–1963) tends to exaggerate the extent of the changes that took place during this time and downplays the fact that economic migration dated back to the late nineteenth century, both to other parts of Italy and abroad, especially the US (Forgacs and Gundle, 2007, pp. 4, 7). In discussing Milan, a major industrial centre, historians Robert Lumley and John Foot state that the influx of internal migrants during the 1950s and 1960s was largely harmonious, owing to a multi-faceted socio-economic structure and effective social organisations, such as trade unions, political parties and the church (Lumley and Foot, 2004, p. 4). While Milan's example may not be typical, it does suggest the immigrant experience at this time was not invariably harsh or traumatic.

The Catholic Church, which exercised considerable political and social influence within Italy, regarded gender relations in terms of what feminist historian Lesley Caldwell calls 'complementarity rather than equality' (Caldwell, 1991, p. 27). Italian women did not have the right to vote until 1946, and the country's civil code, which remained unchanged until 1975, emphasised paternal rather than parental authority (Treveri Gennari, 2009, p. 118; Caldwell, 1991, pp. 70, 74). In terms of gainful employment, there was a decline in the female workforce during the immediate post-war period (1945–51), when they represented only 25% of the working population (Caldwell, 1991, p. 111). While the 1950s saw a rise in women's employment, 'they were predominantly located in low-paid jobs, often with little protection and the threat of dismissal' (Caldwell, 1991, p. 116). Nevertheless, industrialisation, urbanisation and migration were all major factors in Italian society during this period that served to question traditional gender roles and status. Fofi states that between 1958 and 1962 the tension and upheaval created by this transformation was reflected in Italian cinema, especially the feelings of discontent and isolation (Fofi, 1979, pp. ii–iii). It can be argued that the *peplum*'s celebration of the strong male body offered a temporary salve to male audiences whose own physical prowess no longer held much currency in the labour market.

The Heroic Body

As noted, academic studies of the *peplum*'s constructions of masculinity usually focus on gender, race and fascism. Dyer has argued that the 'peplum affirmed the worth of male physical strength in a rapidly industrialising society' (Dyer, 1996, pp. 94–5; cf. Günsberg, 2005, p. 97; Lagny, 1992, p. 170). Scenes where the hero fights and destroys

machines—often instruments of war or torture—represent for audiences 'a fantasy of triumph over their new conditions of labour in terms of their traditional resources' (Dyer, 1997, p. 169). The exposed male body, supposedly built and tanned through years of manual labour in the open air, cannot be defeated by inhuman, man-made constructions. Dyer's reading suggests such scenes are a common feature, or generic dominant, of the *peplum*, which I argue is not necessarily the case. In *Hercules*, for example, the hero battles wild animals, ape men and enemy soldiers, but nothing that could be construed as a machine-like object. Moreover, a significant number of *peplum* heroes are demigods and therefore only part human themselves. Heroes such as Hercules may serve common humanity but they stand apart from it. On a different level, the bodybuilders cast in these films were themselves 'man-made', developing their physiques with techniques that could be described as artificial. Paul Willemen offers a counterargument to Dyer, regarding the *peplum* hero as an embodiment of industrialisation rather than a reaction against it: 'the Hercules-body is a modernised, machinic version of the equally bulky but undefined mass of the pre-modern wrestler or fairground strongman' (Willemen, 2010, p. 275; cf. Kasson, 2001, p. 75). Willemen appears to suppose that *peplum* bodies are indistinguishable and interchangeable, underlining their 'machinic' construction, yet while bodybuilder stars may have aspired to common ideals of physical perfection, no two bodies could be identical. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the *peplum* bodies are, to whatever degree, industrial products that deny or ignore the circumstances of their production in order to appeal to pre-industrial attitudes towards male physical strength and its associated value(s).

Dyer also notes that the naked or partially clothed body is vulnerable, in both physical and social senses (Dyer, 1997, p. 146). Clothing or costume can offer protection and signify status, whether social, economic or political. The *pepla* erase—or at least disguise—this vulnerability, representing the built male body as an incontestable source of strength. In *The Giant of Marathon*, Philippides (Steve Reeves), clad only in a loincloth, defeats his heavily armoured opponent, despite the weaponry, troops and technology at the latter's disposal (cf. Dyer, 1997, p. 164). Characterising the naked body in terms of vulnerability is, however, open to debate, especially in relation to representations of the classical world. Classicist and art historian Robin Osborne suggests that in Greek art the exposure of male flesh can also be read as an act of heroisation or idealisation (Osborne, 1998, p. 81). In some traditions, gender difference—and the associated masculine power and potency—requires the exposure

of the body. Osborne cites eighth century BC geometric art, where 'to be a man is to be unclothed' (Osborne, 1998, p. 83). Being nude, rather than naked, can be viewed as an empowering costume.

The Fascist Body

Just as the *peplum*'s promotion of 'natural' masculine strength is open to question, so the genre's link to fascism is more complex and problematic than some previous studies would suggest. Noting Italy's historical association with fascism, Dyer states: 'The appeal of this body type, especially with renewed force in a period of class upheaval, remains throughout the *peplum* in tension with the memory of its exaltation in the disgraceful recent past' (Dyer, 1997, p. 176; cf. Dalle Vacche, 1992, p. 53). The casting of Americans as *peplum* heroes, who thereby become Americanised, is cited by Dyer as one strategy to purge the *peplum* body of any fascist connotations (Dyer, 1997, p. 174). While the tension Dyer identifies is undeniably a factor in the genre's representation of heroic masculinity, I argue its significance has been overstated or at least not sufficiently addressed. I engage with debates on fascism and the *peplum* in relation to *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. At this point I will note that the term 'fascism' requires greater definition and contextualisation than Dyer provides. As political historian Robert O. Paxton states, the term 'fascist' can denote a populist party of militant nationalists, in collaboration with entrenched conservative elites, which pursues through often violent means goals of 'internal cleansing and external expansion', disregarding democratic liberties and ethical or legal restraints (Paxton, 2005, p. 15). Edward R. Tannenbaum characterises Italian fascism as 'the post-war [World War I] political expression of anti-intellectual mass movements that began to appear at the end of the nineteenth century' (Tannenbaum, 1973, p. 12). In terms of political agendas, Paxton sees Italian fascism as a nationalist movement against socialism, couched in terms of conflict, in line with his more general definition of fascism (Paxton, 2005, p. 5). While Italian fascism valorised the strong male body as an instrument of discipline and authority, not to mention a symbol of the revitalised post-World War I Italian character, the Mussolini regime displayed little interest in the cinema as a medium for direct propaganda (cf. Tannenbaum, 1973, pp. 269–70, 280; Bondanella, 2002, p. 13). On the other hand, fascism's promotion of sport, arguably its major contribution to the national popular culture (cf. Forgacs and Gundle, 2007, p. 240), invoked Greco-Roman mythology, and the Mussolini stadium, Foro di Mussolini, featured classical statues, including

the figure of Hercules. Dalle Vacche notes how these images associated with Roman mythology and, by extension, the Roman Empire were part of a wider scheme to link the new fascist order with a militaristic and imperialistic past promoted as the historical and cultural heritage common to all Italian people (Dalle Vacche, 1992, p. 24). However, the appropriation of classical iconography by Mussolini's government does not necessarily mean that all subsequent Italian-produced representations of Greco-Roman mythical heroes—cinematic or otherwise—were tinged by association with the fascist regime, especially in terms of their international reception. Even at the time, Mussolini's carefully-honed Herculean image was not always successful outside Italy. Classicist Alastair Blanshard notes how he 'was ridiculed by other European leaders for looking like a "side-show strongman" in his propaganda', reducing the heroic male body to a cheap fairground attraction devoid of classical resonance (Blanshard, 2005, p. xvii).

The Colonial Body

The *peplum*'s promotion of heroic masculinity as an intrinsically white quality links with what Dyer terms 'colonial adventures', where the *peplum* hero, invariably a male Caucasian, arrives in a foreign land where he delivers the helpless natives from the forces of oppression (Dyer, 1997, p. 147). While the genre's overt message may seem positive and progressive—the overthrow of totalitarian regimes and the (re)establishment of benign government—the *peplum* is based on racial and ethnic difference and disunity which invariably favours the male Caucasian. Günsberg echoes Dyer's observations on this construction of racial difference, noting the presence of 'non-white, non-western masculinity coded as inferior' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 118). Sociologist Ellis Cashmore characterises the colonial mentality as 'a mode of thinking which follows the attempts of colonial Europeans to explain and justify their supposed superiority over groups falling under their domination' (Cashmore, 1987, p. 8). Jonathan Rutherford likewise notes how this attitude 'produced a meaning of blackness, of an Other, that constructs a sense of white supremacy' (Rutherford, 1996, p. 60). Oppressive or benevolent, this domination would not be desirable, sustainable or even feasible if the white Europeans were not naturally superior to the subjugated natives.

Dyer argues that 'Hercules and the rest show us ideal, hard, achieved, wealthy, hairless and tanned white male bodies set in a colonialist relation, of aid as much as antagonism, to lands and peoples that are other to them' (Dyer, 1997, p. 161). I agree that the concept of difference is

central to the *peplum* genre's representations of masculinity. On the most obvious levels, the hero is bigger and stronger than his allies and most of his opponents, as were heroes in classical art. I do not feel, however, that this difference can be characterised or contained by such categories as race or ethnicity. Dyer's prime example is *Il figlio di Spartacus* / *Son of Spartacus* (Sergio Corbucci, 1962), where oppressed North Africans can be saved only by Randus (Steve Reeves), a Roman centurion, and his blonde German sidekick (Dyer, 1997, p. 176). I argue that this preoccupation with what Dyer terms 'enlightened colonialism' (Dyer, 1997, p. 176) is not typical of Reeves's *peplum* films or the genre as a whole. The hero's actions do not evoke the elements of occupation, control and exploitation suggested by the term 'colonialism'. The superior heroic masculinity on display is differentiated from *all* other forms of masculinity, regardless of class, status, race or ethnicity. It is just as legitimate to argue that 'ordinary' masculinity is presented as a structuring norm in relation to the images of super-masculinity around which the *peplum* films are based.

Femininity

The *peplum*'s affirmation of white male strength is also linked to a conservative patriarchal view of gender relations. Günsberg states that patriarchy ideologises gender as 'a biologically determined inner essence shaping a stable, unified identity' (Günsberg, 2005, pp. 1–2). Based on biological programming that precedes and transcends social and cultural factors, gender identity is thus fixed and indisputable. This ideology is reflected in the *peplum*, where masculine strength, potency and power are set in opposition to feminine vulnerability, dependency and powerlessness. (In *Hercules*, the hero's first act is to rescue Princess Iole when the horses pulling her chariot run wild.) This approach seems to me reductive when applied to the *peplum*, as several of my case studies will demonstrate. Even in the case of *Hercules*, the apparently straightforward depiction of gender difference is revealed as highly problematic. Günsberg argues further that 'the main agenda of these films is to reaffirm patriarchy's baseline of homosocial relations…in the face of fear of a gynosocial alternative' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 130). (The all-female Amazon society in *Hercules* is explicitly depicted as unnatural and dangerous, threatening the all-male Argonaut crew with treachery, betrayal and murder under the guise of seduction.) Gynosociality is associated with what Günsberg terms illicit heterosexual activity, recreational and extra-domestic, as opposed to the licit form, which is procreational and

domestic (Günsberg, 2005, p. 107). Challenging homosociality, gynosociality enables an empowered, sexual femininity unacceptable to patriarchy, which requires a non-threatening asexual femininity contained within the domestic sphere (Günsberg, 2005, pp. 120, 122). I argue that this is a limited reading of the genre, not least because the homosocial relations depicted in these films can exhibit little unity or harmony. All-male groupings are shown to be unstable and unsustainable, held together only by the leadership and superhuman strength of the hero.

From *Hercules* onwards, the *peplum*'s construction of heroic masculinity is riven with contradictions and ambiguities on multiple levels. For example, it can be argued that the idealised masculinity constructed by the *peplum* is shown to be beyond the reach of ordinary men and therefore serves ultimately to underline their powerlessness, whether in purely physical terms or on a social, economic or political level. Dyer touches on this issue, acknowledging that 'the oddness of the cycle is that it simultaneously offers figures with whom the imputed audience may identify—the validated strong male body—and takes this away by placing them above the common man' (Dyer, 1997, p. 180). As with the silent-era Maciste, Hercules and his successors may serve as inspirational figures but cannot function so readily as practical role models. Cohan notes how the casting of bodybuilders undercuts the presentation of masculinity as a natural, fixed and unchanging essence: 'Strictly speaking, bulging, well-articulated muscles are not a natural condition of bodies but the result of repeated labour and discipline and, in a lot of cases, a careful regimen of diet and steroids' (Cohan, 1997, p. 185). Günsberg concurs that the male bodies on display in the *peplum* films are marked by 'their sheer excess, artificiality and unnaturalness' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 183). If the *peplum* body is excessive and unnatural and these qualities cannot be legitimised, contained or at least disguised, the hero becomes a problematic and potentially threatening figure rather than the ultimate manifestation of masculine potency.

I argue that the *peplum* genre has never offered a straightforward, unambiguous endorsement of either male physical strength or a reactionary, patriarchal status quo. The heroic masculinity of the *peplum* hero can signify his status as marginalised 'other' rather than man of the people. The qualities that make him exceptional may not ultimately be reconciled with the cultural, social, hierarchical and gender orthodoxies constructed by the films' narratives. In the case of *Hercules*, this rupture of 'perfect' masculinity appears to be unintentional, the closing scene endorsing a benevolent patriarchal order previously shown as unsustainable. Later *peplum* or *peplum*-inspired films are more conscious

attempts to subvert or challenge the genre and therefore the prescribed notions of masculinity. The post-*peplum* films evoke the genre in their emphasis on the displayed muscular male body in a mythical or classical setting, yet their representations of this body depart significantly from the *peplum* 'blueprint' established in *Hercules*.

In 2007, feminist writer Lynne Segal, noting the progress of what she termed Men's Studies, saw little resolution or even consensus in the various arguments: 'after so much ink has been spilt on men and masculinities, the questions in the popular domain have only intensified' (Segal, 2007, p. xvii). With debates on masculinity still current within academic discourses, it is pertinent to continue the exploration of what film studies can bring to this expanding field. Discussing the Hollywood detective film, Philippa Gates argues that, given popular cinema's preoccupation with constructing ideal images of femininity and masculinity, film studies offers 'a logical perspective from which to address the question of masculinity in the contemporary era' (Gates, 2006, p. 6). While I question the extent to which cinematic representations of femininity and masculinity are constructed and received as ideal—a subjective term in itself—I concur that issues of masculinity as refracted through the cinema have much to contribute to current debates. This book reaffirms the value, cultural and otherwise, of popular genre cinema above and beyond the well-established fields of classical and post-classical Hollywood. Hercules, standard-bearer of the *peplum*, stands alongside James Bond and Tarzan in the 'spectrum of heroic male types' identified by Forth (2008, p. 219). The cinematic depictions of Hercules and other heroes have a cultural resonance and significance comparable to that of Bond and Tarzan—the tensions, contradictions, variations and transformations of the wider culture written on their heroic bodies.

Part I
Men as Men Should Be

1
Hercules Unchained

The Hercules embodied by Steve Reeves forms part of a long and varied history of representation. Jaimee Pugliese Uhlenbrock suggests artistic depictions of Hercules, or Herakles, may date back to the eighth century BC, with more permutations than any other mythological figure, characterised variously as both tragic and comic, a lecher, a glutton, a romantic, a symbol of virtue, an intellectual and an embodiment of extraordinary physical strength (Uhlenbrock, 1986, pp. 7, 19). For example, as G. Karl Galinsky notes, Hercules is cited as a tragic hero in Chaucer's 'The Monk's Tale', from *The Canterbury Tales* (late fourteenth century), 'a worthy, mighty man being overthrown by the caprice of Fortune' (Galinsky, 1972, p. 200). Galinsky suggests Hercules's evolving characterisation in Greek mythology and culture reflects the history of the country, progressing through primitivism and violence, rudimentary civilisation, individualism and humanism, and intellectual prowess: 'Every age in Greece recast Herakles in its own image, and he thus became the incarnation of her history and aspirations' (Galinsky, 1972, pp. 148–9). While this parallel may be criticised as simplistic, the progression outlined by Galinsky is evidenced in key myths, dramatic works and philosophical debates.

Early depictions of Hercules emphasised his sheer size and power. Alastair Blanshard argues that in Ancient Greece 'people believed that size and heroism went together' (Blanshard, 2005, p. 92). To be large was to be heroic, regardless of personal morality or conduct. As Galinsky notes, 'physical strength is ambivalent. It can be used for a bad purpose' (Galinsky, 1972, p. 3). Uhlenbrock concurs that many early depictions of Hercules highlight an 'expansive and rather defiant character and his propensity for fits of rage and almost unbridled violence' (Uhlenbrock, 1986, p. 10). Over time, representations of Hercules reflected 'the transformation of the morally objectionable strong-man into an ethical ideal' (Galinsky, 1972, p. 29). Hesiod's *Theogony* offers an early glimpse of this process and in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Unbound* (c480–410 BC) Hercules

'had changed from the arbitrary perpetrator of excessive force to an ideally motivated and awesome advocate of justice' (Galinsky, 1972, pp. 16, 42). In both Greek and Roman culture, he assumed at different times religious functions akin to those of a patron saint 'who would help one overcome all imaginable difficulties of life' (Galinsky, 1972, p. 127). The late fifth century BC saw the rise of an intellectualised Hercules, exemplified in Prodicus's 'The Choice of Herakles', where the demigod opts for a life of toil and duty over ease and pleasure (Galinsky, 1972, p. 101). Galinsky notes: 'The process of choosing…was an intellectual effort and intelligence thus became one of the hero's attributes' (Galinsky, 1972, p. 102). Blanshard offers an alternative reading of this fable that reflects less favourably on Hercules: 'The pursuit of undying glory, rather than any abstract notion of goodness, is what ultimately drives the story of Prodicus' (Blanshard, 2005, p. 38). However, the Prodican Hercules is generally associated with morality, duty, intellect and endeavour, while the adjective 'Herculean' is defined in similarly positive terms. For example, *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines Herculean as 'requiring the strength of a Hercules; very hard to perform'; 'having enormous strength, courage, or size' (1989, p. 664). It is this interpretation of the character that informs the Steve Reeves incarnation.

While *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958) is the first of the *peplum* cycle, the origins of the genre can be traced back to the silent era. Italian cinema produced a number of classical epics during this period, including *Quo Vadis?* (Guazzoni, 1912) and *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914) (Bondanella, 2002, p. 3). As Jon Solomon notes, classical antiquity was a popular fixture in late nineteenth century theatre, literature and education in Europe, Britain and the United States (Solomon, 2001, p. 3). Film producers looking for 'respectable' source material were quick to see the potential of the ancient Greco-Roman world. This strategy proved effective, as *Quo Vadis?* and *Cabiria* were successful both in Italy and overseas, including the US market (Bondanella, 2002, p. 4). Several of these films included a muscle-bound man of action, often as a sidekick to the romantic hero. *Quo Vadis?* features Ursus (Latin for 'bear'), who protects the heroine from various perils, including a rampaging bull. Maria Wyke cites *Spartaco* (Giovanni Enrico Vidali, 1913) for its muscular hero, who bends prison bars and 'even stops momentarily to gaze on the taut bicep with which he effects his escape' (Wyke, 1997, p. 44). *Cabiria* introduced Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano), a freed Nubian slave of exceptional strength who aids his Roman friend and former master in rescuing the title character. Maciste proved popular with audiences,

and Pagano reprised the character in a series of spin-off films. Peter Bondanella cites Maciste as an undoubted forerunner of the *peplum* genre (Bondanella, 2002, p. 6).

Few classical epics were made in Italy after World War I, when the industry was hit by an economic crisis (Bondanella, 2002, p. 6). By the end of World War II, the Italian film industry was in a moribund state. The domestic market had been flooded with US imports and there was, as Daniela Treveri Gennari notes, minimal demand for locally-produced films outside Italy (Treveri Gennari, 2009, p. 7). During the late 1940s and early 1950s, attempts were made to relaunch popular forms of genre cinema that emphasised production values, international stars, exotic locations and spectacle, anticipating aspects of the *peplum* formula (Treveri Gennari, 2009, p. 56). *Fabiola* (Alessandro Blasetti, 1949), an Italian-French co-production based on a novel by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, marked the return of the classical epic, and Wyke credits the film as a significant local hit for an otherwise depressed film industry (Wyke, 1997, p. 49). Wyke also suggests its commercial success in Italy launched a trend for remakes of popular silent epics (an earlier Italian film of *Fabiola* appeared in 1918), while conceding there were other factors at work (Wyke, 1997, p. 49). The late 1940s and early 1950s saw two developments in the American film industry that proved significant for the Italian cinema: the revival of the biblical epic and the relaunch of Hollywood production in Italy (*Ben-Hur* [Fred Niblo, 1925] began filming in Rome in 1923, though the troubled production relocated to the United States [see Bondanella, 2002, pp. 11–2]). Faced with a post-war decline in domestic audiences and the growing threat of television, US studios needed to rethink their production strategies. The success of *Samson and Delilah* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1949), both at home and abroad, suggested there was a market for large-scale epics that offered a level of opulence and spectacle impossible on the small screen (cf. Hall and Neale, 2010, p. 136). Around the same time, American studios looked for a way of reclaiming 'frozen' revenue from the Italian market which could not be repatriated under currency control laws (Nowell-Smith and Ricci, 1998, pp. 8–9). The solution was to shoot films in Italy, starting with *Prince of Foxes* (Henry King, 1949), a Renaissance-era melodrama that emphasised spectacle, followed by a remake of *Quo Vadis* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), which proved hugely successful.

Italian-produced epics of this period include *Ulisse* / *Ulysses* (Mario Camerini, 1954), a relatively rare pre-*peplum* adaptation of Greco-Roman mythology, which arguably anticipated some of the 'ground rules' for the *peplum* cycle that followed the success of *Hercules*.

Importing an American lead, Kirk Douglas, the film reworked its classical source material, Homer's *Odyssey*, into a series of spectacular set-pieces linked by the narrative thread of Ulysses's long voyage home to his kingdom, wife and son. While *Quo Vadis* and *Helen of Troy* (Robert Wise, 1956) were American productions filmed in Italy, drawing on local resources and labour, *Ulysses* was an Italian-American co-production between Lux Film, Ponti-De Laurentiis and Paramount. The American stars, writers and head cameraman worked alongside an otherwise Italian cast and crew. If Hollywood had primacy over the Italian film industry in the production of classical epics, the latter could claim to have originated the genre and helped sustain it, albeit on an irregular basis. *Hercules* originated in the context of a cross-cultural cinematic tradition located principally within the Italian and American film industries, though neither existed independently of wider historical, social and economic contexts. While there is no definitive motivating factor in the creation of *Hercules*, a combination of elements in the mid-1950s made its production both viable and desirable. It should be noted that, while the film had clear antecedents in both Italian and American cinema, there had been relatively few features based around the character of Hercules. It is generally believed that the first Hercules film was the French-produced animated short *Les douze travaux d'Hercule* (Emile Cohl, 1910), released in the US as *Hercules and the Big Stick* (Solomon, 2001, p. 102). The character reappeared in animated form in the US-made *Popeye Meets Hercules* (Bill Tytla, 1948) and *Greek Mirthology* (Seymour Kneital, 1954), which casts Popeye as Hercules. One of the first Italian films to use the name is *Il trionfo di Ercole* (Francesco Bertolini, 1922), starring wrestler Giovanni Raicevich. Hercules would not (re)appear in an Italian-made film for thirty-six years, so it can be said with certainty that the Italian cinema had no tradition of Hercules films prior to 1958.

Hercules was shot at Cinecittá Studios, in Rome, from June to August 1957 (Lucas, 2007, p. 192). In some respects, it marked the continuation in modified form of an existing cycle of films rather than the start of a new genre. The director and co-writer Pietro Francisci had a background in historical adventure films that emphasised spectacle and action, including *Il leone di Amalfi* / *The Lion of Amalfi* (1950), *La regina di Saba* / *The Queen of Sheba* (1952), *Attila* (1954) and *Orlando e i paladini di Francia* / *Roland the Mighty* (1956). From an industrial and economic perspective, *Hercules* was a logical extension of the adventure film, incorporating a mythological element that *Ulysses* had shown to be commercially viable in the international marketplace.

A key component in the success of *Hercules* was the casting of bodybuilder Steve Reeves, winner of Mr. Pacific Coast (1946), Mr. Western America (1947), Mr. America (1947), Mr. World (1948) and Mr. Universe (1950). Anne Bolin defines bodybuilding as 'working out with weights to reshape the physique by adding muscle mass and increasing separation and definition of the various muscle groups', and the first major bodybuilding contest was held in 1901 in the UK (Bolin, 1996, pp. 50–4). This casting raises a number of questions, two of which I will address here. Firstly, to what extent is it significant that the role was played by an American rather than an Italian? Secondly, why was a bodybuilder cast as Hercules, rather than, say, an established actor, a promising newcomer or even a star name, as when Kirk Douglas played Ulysses in the 1954 film? The reasons may be reducible to expedience: the producers required a tall, good-looking and heavily muscled star to fit their conception—and anticipated audience expectations—of a heroic demigod. I suggest that, whatever the intentions, the casting of Reeves enabled a projection or performance of heroic masculinity while simultaneously contributing to its inherent instability.

The presence of an American film or bodybuilding star in an Italian production can be related to a wider context, namely the post-war Americanisation of Italy. The relationship between the two countries in the late 1940s and 1950s may be characterised as one-sided dependency. G. Warner argues: 'the most important factor which determined the way in which Italy developed—politically, economically and socially—in the decade following the Second World War was her inclusion in the American sphere of influence as opposed to that of the Soviet Union' (Warner, 1972, p. 30). As a defeated country with a struggling economy and infrastructure, Italy was both dependent on and vulnerable to the foreign policies of the dominant nations. In terms of Soviet influence, the US regarded Italy as being in a particularly exposed position, geographically and militarily (Warner, 1972, p. 55). As Treveri Gennari notes, there was a strong US presence in Italy, both economic and military, from 1943, and Italy became a signatory to the US-led North Atlantic Treaty on 4 April 1949, completing its integration into the Western camp (Treveri Gennari, 2009, p. 3; Warner, 1972, pp. 55–6). To counter and eliminate communist influence in Western Europe, US foreign policy promoted prosperity through productivity and consumption, Italy participating in the Marshall Aid programme (Treveri Gennari, 2009, p. 5; De Cecco, 1972, p. 177). The American presence in post-war Italy manifested itself on various levels, including those of popular culture and entertainment.

The casting of a Hollywood star in an Italian-produced film was by no means unusual at the time. The 1949 *Fabiola* features three French stars—Michele Morgan, Henri Vidal, Michel Simon—in lead roles. Clearly, neither the Italian film industry nor local audiences were notably resistant to imported stars, even if the film was set in Italy's illustrious past. As Christopher Wagstaff notes, a shortage of Italian male leads for dramatic roles in the 1950s led to the use of American actors (Wagstaff, 1998, p. 76). A recession in Hollywood and increased American production in Italy made US stars both available and relatively inexpensive. The presence of a Hollywood 'name' also made the films more exportable (Wagstaff, 1998, p. 76). American actors working in Italy during this period include Kirk Douglas, Anthony Quinn, Henry Fonda, Broderick Crawford, Richard Basehart and Steve Cochran. The wider ramifications of this American 'invasion' lie outside the scope of this book; it is, however, arguable that these Hollywood stars served as standard bearers for the Americanisation of Italian and, by extension, European film production and, more broadly, European culture in general. Within this context, the casting of an American as Hercules was hardly remarkable in terms of industry practice or audience expectation, especially given Douglas's recent appearance as Ulysses.

Though not a film star as such, Reeves had modest acting experience, including the MGM musical *Athena* (Richard Thorpe, 1954), a title with its own classical associations, which billed him as 'Steve Reeves, "Mr Universe of 1950"'. His image as a 'star' bodybuilder was perpetuated largely by personal appearances and coverage in such specialist magazines as *Strength & Health*, *Physique Pictorial*, *Muscular Development*, *Muscle Builder*, *Muscle Power*, *Mr. Universe*, *Athletic Model Guild* and *Body Beautiful*. One of these magazines, *Mr. Universe*, and the forms of masculinity it promoted and perpetuated, is discussed in more detail below. As an American 'star' name, albeit in a field as yet unrelated to films, Reeves also had a greater potential international appeal than an Italian actor whose local popularity might not extend to other countries. A French poster for *Hercules* promoted Reeves as 'le celebre "Monsieur Univers"'.

Reeves had competed outside the US, as in the 1948 Mr. World contest held in Cannes, and was certainly known in Europe, figuring in British and French specialist magazines such as *Mr. Universe*, *Santé et Force* (Health and Strength), *La Culture Physique* and *Venus Apollon* from the mid-1940s, a decade before *Hercules* was produced. Mary P. Wood notes that the US fashion for bodybuilding had spread to Italy by the early 1950s (Wood, 2005, p. 71). This statement is partly contradicted by *Hercules* co-star Mimmo Palmara, who has claimed that bodybuilding was

largely unknown in Italy when the film was being cast (Della Casa, 2006). In the same interview, Palmara takes credit for bringing Reeves, with his extraordinary body and 'angel face', to Francisci's attention. In a 1994 interview, Reeves stated that Francisci's daughter had seen *Athena* on its Italian release and recommended him to her father (Frumkes, 1994). While neither claim qualifies as documentary evidence, it is reasonable to suggest that Reeves's fledgling US film career was a factor in his casting as Hercules alongside his status and celebrity as a world-champion bodybuilder. As Wood observes, Italian audiences had warmed to local stars with sporting backgrounds, such as Raf Vallone (football) and Vittorio Gassman (basketball) (Wood, 2004, p. 139). Though not as heavily muscled or 'sculpted' as Reeves, 'physicality marked them out as different from the non-professional actors [associated with neo-realism] who played peasants, fishermen, the unemployed. Their size, athleticism, [and] vigorous gestures indicated their force, their virility and their *health*' (Wood, 2004, p. 139). The confident, aggressively heterosexual masculinity represented by these stars highlighted their bodies without reservation or apology. Reeves could convey these qualities on a grander scale ideally suited to the role of the demigod Hercules. An Italian newsreel item on *Hercules* shows Reeves in costume, flexing his muscles and lifting arc lights while a narrator lists his bodybuilding titles; a woman dressed in a bikini measures Reeves's biceps, equating his built body and sporting prowess with heterosexual virility (Della Casa, 2006).

Press coverage of *Hercules*, in Italy and elsewhere, invited readers and viewers to recognise and appreciate the factors that served to create and present Steve Reeves as the new cinematic incarnation of Hercules. An edition of *La Tribuna illustrata*, a weekly Italian current affairs magazine, dated June 30 1957 (while *Hercules* was in production), included a picture of Reeves in its 'Events of the Week' pages. A brief caption refers to Reeves as 'the new Hercules', citing his Mr. Universe title, his location by the river Tevere, in Rome, and his ability to lift co-star Sylva Koscina 'as if she were a feather' (1957, p. 5). Dressed only in white bathing trunks, Reeves displays his exceptional or Herculean physique while engaging in a show of strength associated with both the mythical hero and the strongman/bodybuilding culture. Posed against a Rome landmark, bearing an established starlet of Italian films on his shoulder, Reeves is assimilated into the Italian landscape on various levels: industrial, cultural, mythical and geographic. I am wary of making too direct a link between Reeves as Hercules and the multifaceted US presence in post-war Italy. It is, however, arguable that the latter facilitated, to whatever degree, Reeves's acceptability as an example of high-profile Americanisation

Fig. 1.1 Steve Reeves promotes *Hercules* (1958)

both benevolent and powerful. Newsreel images of Reeves working out include shots with Italian youths exercising in the background (*fig. 1.1*), underlining his status as a positive role model.

The UK press book for *Hercules*, unconcerned with Reeves's assimilation into Italian life, focused instead on his 'natural' casting as Hercules, noting how his early film aspirations were thwarted when he 'was told that he was too big and would dwarf the other players, except in some special part' (1959, p. 3). This implies the young Reeves was already too hyper-masculine to be cast in a regular film role, requiring a suitably extraordinary or legendary character to match his physique. Thus Reeves and Hercules were an ideal fit, 'a man with the most perfect physique, rivalling the demi-god himself' (1959, p. 3). The press book also claims, inaccurately, that Reeves is making his film debut as Hercules, linking further performer and character, and predicting screen immortality for Reeves on a par with that of the demigod (1959, p. 3).

Throughout his career in *pepla*, Reeves would be acknowledged and defined by the popular press almost exclusively in terms of his body and what they took it to represent. An anonymous report in the British newspaper *The Guardian* claimed that Reeves's 'only qualification as a cinema actor is the physique that won him the title "Mr. Universe"', a sentiment also expressed in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (Anon, 1960, p. 21; Anon, 1959, p. 71). This is clearly intended as a derogatory remark, questioning and undermining Reeves's status as a film star. Even when the critical response was less negative, the terminology employed tended to highlight the star's physique. Discussing *Romolo e Remo / Duel of the Titans* (Sergio Corbucci, 1961), an anonymous Italian reviewer for *Nuovo Spettatore Cinematografico* referred to the climactic fight between Reeves and co-star Gordon Scott as 'the super duel between the two super

torsos' (qtd. Casadio, 2007, p. 236). The significance of this torso in relation to 1950s body culture and wider debates on masculinity during this era merits closer examination.

Framing the Super-Torso

The association of bodybuilding culture and the classical world that underpins *Hercules* was hardly a new phenomenon. As Blanshard notes, the Farnese Hercules, a sculpture with origins dating back to 4 BC, was a major influence on bodybuilding (Blanshard, 2005, p. 155). While Hercules's posture is relaxed rather than tense, his powerfully built physique and heavily defined musculature are nevertheless posed for maximum effect. Discussing cinematic representations of Ancient Greece, Gideon Nisbet suggests the progression from competitive bodybuilding to playing Hercules was a more-or-less logical one: 'To become a bodybuilder was already to emulate Hercules, within a discipline that had always consciously modelled itself on the hero's feats of strength' (Nisbet, 2006, pp. 48–9). Nisbet makes a valid point, in that the adjective 'Herculean' was employed frequently in bodybuilding literature. Reeves had posed for magazines such as *Demi-Gods* and *Grecian Guild Studio Quarterly*, the titles of which drew clear parallels with the classical world and its attendant mythology. His magazine work included a series of photographs entitled 'The Twelve Labours of Hercules' (Lucas, 2007, p. 197).

I argue that this conscious modelling was as much to do with legitimisation as inspiration or aspiration. Wyke traces the origins of modern bodybuilding to the late nineteenth century, in the circuses and funfairs of Europe and the United States, where 'the practice of putting highly defined musculature on public display drew its initial context and much of its validation from the ancient world' (Wyke, 2002, pp. 355, 357). A performer evoking and emulating the heroes and gods of Greco-Roman myth was not simply putting on a muscle show to impress or titillate an audience for monetary gain, but working in a culturally and aesthetically valid tradition. As Blanshard states, circus strongmen often wore leopard or lion skins in emulation of Hercules and 'carnival imagery was replete with classical allusions designed to add touches of exoticism and class to the various acts' (Blanshard, 2005, p. 153). The 'Herculean' strongman was part of a wider nineteenth-century culture of classically-inspired spectacle, both in Europe and the United States. In 1888, circus showmen Barnum and Bailey's *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome* was staged at the Olympia in London, with a credited cast of 2000 that included athletes and gladiators (Blanshard, 2005, p. 153). While the strongman

acts initially featured displays of weightlifting or horsemanship, Wyke notes how later variations 'wholly focused on the representation of classical figures familiar from statues and paintings' (Wyke, 2002, p. 357). Italian performers in this tradition include Mario Guaita Ausonia, billed as the 'gladiator of the early nineteen hundreds', who went on to play the lead in the 1913 film *Spartaco* (Wyke, 1997, pp. 44–5). This emphasis on display rather than skill or action would be carried over into modern bodybuilding and have ramifications for the representation of masculinity in the *peplum* genre.

Bodybuilding magazines of the 1950s placed images of their stars in the context of articles that blended aspiration, instruction, inspiration and references to classical art. I will discuss briefly three British editions of *Mr. Universe*, an American-based magazine published by Joseph Weider, a leading figure in the field of competitive bodybuilding. The credited editors and contributors to *Mr. Universe* included Steve Reeves, and the magazine declared itself 'written and prepared by perfect men title winners' (August 1955, p. 3). This emphasis on physical perfection, competition and triumph is, unsurprisingly, the dominant discourse of the magazine and, I suggest, also underpins *Hercules* and the *peplum* genre as a whole. The January 1955 issue of *Mr. Universe*, Vol. 2 No. 1, features such headlines as 'Here's How You Can Easily Improve Your Physical Appearance', the implication being that any man with the determination and dedication could achieve this transformation without excessive or unreasonable effort. Features include 'So You Want Biceps Like the Champions' and 'Musclebuilder of the Month', suggesting that a physique of world-class proportions could be attained. An article entitled 'You Can Pose Artistically' underlines the widely-accepted notion that a well-developed physique in and of itself was insufficient to achieve champion status; this body had to be displayed in a series of prescribed poses that conformed to culturally determined notions of the 'artistic'. Yvonne Tasker argues that bodybuilding promotes narcissism antithetical to conventional notions of manliness, though the male preoccupation with appearance is hardly confined to this one extreme manifestation (Tasker, 1993, p. 78).

The cover illustration for *Mr. Universe* August 1955, Vol. 2 No. 8, is a photograph of a heavily-muscled young man seated on a cushion. Two aspects of the image are notable. Firstly, the near-naked model is in pseudo-classical garb, wearing a gold crown and a cloak. The backdrop of a large double door and a section of wall also suggest a classical setting. As noted, Greco-Roman tradition had long been evoked to contextualise and legitimise the display of the male physique. Robin Osborne

cites classical Greece as 'the cultural reference point by which the public display of the naked male body is justified' (Osborne, 1998, p. 80). As a static image emphasising both the body and the 'noble' profile, this illustration could be compared—however speciously—with a classical painting or statue. The cover model is billed as 'Bud Counts, California Hercules', another appeal to classical tradition and a direct identification with a hero of Greco-Roman myth. Classical images of Hercules often presented the demigod naked, identified by his wooden club and lion skin.

The second notable aspect is the passivity of the model. Arranged in a sitting position, with legs folded and arms rested on the cushion, the figure holds no suggestion of action, strain or even tension. The aggression and violence associated with the Hercules of myth are nowhere to be found. This picture may not be typical of the images featured in *Mr. Universe* or 1950s bodybuilding publishing as a whole. Nevertheless, its use as the cover illustration suggests this representation of masculinity was not regarded as problematic with respect to the magazine's image and target readership. Clearly, the achievement and display of a muscular body was in itself sufficient to confer heroic or mythic status. Within bodybuilding culture, the figure of Hercules could be evoked or emulated as the ultimate role model. Steve Reeves would go a step further, representing or embodying Hercules in a filmic narrative, his performance of masculinity framed and legitimised within another form of performance. This California Hercules would become the classical Hercules. The May 1958 issue of *Mr. Universe*, Vol. 5 No. 5, featured Reeves as Hercules on the front cover. Though hardly the best-timed promotion for the film, which would not open in the UK for another year, the *Mr. Universe* cover acknowledged, endorsed and associated itself with Reeves as the new embodiment of Hercules.

The California-based bodybuilding community offered an extreme manifestation of a highly visible male identity located in and around the body. Steven Cohan suggests that social and political factors in America and elsewhere during the 1950s had contributed to a pervasive anxiety over masculine identity and potency: 'The postwar "free man" had to depend upon the state to preserve his independence in the face of the communist threat, thereby calling into question the myth of rugged, rebellious, and masculine American individuality' (Cohan, 1997, p. 134). Direct linkage of this nature is problematic, and the myth of rugged American masculinity had been called into question before, not least during the years of the Great Depression (cf. Treveri Gennari, 2009, p. 131). As John F. Kasson states, at the turn of the twentieth century,

'perceptions of manliness were drastically altered by the new dynamics created by vast corporate power and immense concentrations of wealth' (Kasson, 2001, p. 11). If power and wealth were now associated with corporations, these qualities could no longer be linked so readily—if at all—with the autonomy and independence traditionally embodied by American manhood. It is notable that bodybuilder Eugene Sandow made his US debut in 1893, at a time of economic depression accompanied by a perceived loss of masculine independence and control (Kasson, 2001, p. 23). Invoking a classical, pre-modern tradition, Sandow promoted an ideal of individual achievement, power and worth located in and expressed by the strong male body, implying, as Kasson notes, 'a transformation of self and of social standing' (Kasson, 2001, p. 223). Another form of male anxiety was manifested during the post-World War I era, when Hollywood star Rudolph Valentino was attacked as effeminate and unmanly (cf. Studlar, 1996, pp. 150–98). This criticism was inextricably linked with a xenophobic attitude towards Valentino's Italian national identity and a sense of otherness that was 'contaminating' the American male, in contrast to the hyper-masculine, American-born star Douglas Fairbanks and the physical culture he aggressively promoted. I would concur, however, that the muscular, virile images of masculinity promoted during the 1950s could reflect, to whatever extent, an underlying anxiety about the worth of this masculinity. With the concept of a 'free man' qualified to a damaging degree by his dependence on government for stability and protection, the myth of the self-sufficient male could only be sustained through prescribed cultural forms, such as the bodybuilder or the movie star. A man who lacked social, economic or political control and power could at least control his own body and create an impression of individual power, evoking Sandow's earlier incarnation of the 'self-made' man.

Cohan is concerned largely with mainstream American cinema of this era, citing the representation of William Holden in *Picnic* (Joshua Logan, 1955) as a prime example of 'Hollywood's investment in the spectacle of the male body during this period… The film is organised, in both its cinematic address and its narrative, around the body of its male star' (Cohan, 1997, p. 167). Though differing greatly in form and content from *Hercules* and subsequent *pepla*, *Picnic* shares a preoccupation with the open display of the male body and surrounding debates on masculinity. Hollywood seemed less comfortable with bodybuilding culture itself, as depicted in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953) and *Athena*. In the former, Dorothy Shaw (Jane Russell) seeks the attention of muscular male athletes working out in a gym with classical décor, yet as Robin Wood

notes, these budding champions are 'too self-absorbed in body-building exercises to notice her' (Wood, 1981, p. 171). Dorothy is surrounded by near-naked male bodies that are repeatedly denied her, and she regards a flexed bicep with both amazement and dismay. Wood observes how the men's blank faces and mechanical movements give them a machine-like aspect (Wood, 1981, p. 171). The healthy, natural sexual appetite and energy displayed by Dorothy are reconfigured as a mechanistic, narcissistic, asexual all-male workout. *Athena* locates bodybuilding in a wider, classically-inflected health culture marked as eccentric yet well-intentioned. Bodybuilding is represented in more ambivalent terms, with prone bodies under sheets evoking corpses in a morgue. Steve Reeves's character, Ed Perkins, is vain and aggressive, mocking hero Adam Calhorn Shaw (Edmund Purdom) for lacking muscle tone. His physical intimidation of the slighter Adam results in the latter throwing Ed to the ground, using judo he learned in the navy. While Ed's body is depicted largely as an object of display, Adam demonstrates a practical application of strength, agility and skill acquired in the service of his country. Ed can be read as an anti-Hercules, in the Prodican sense, though his boorish behaviour is consistent with other incarnations. Moreover, this thuggish Mr. Universe cannot best a decent regular guy and deserves the resulting humiliation, caught on national television.

While these depictions of bodybuilding are hardly positive, a number of 1950s Hollywood stars were noted for virile, body-centred displays of masculinity, including Holden, Burt Lancaster, Rock Hudson and Kirk Douglas. When Dorothy Shaw yearns for 'a beautiful hunk of man' this is what she has in mind, rather than self-regarding gym-obsessed iron-pumpers. Douglas represents a prime example of this 'real' masculinity, making his appearance in the proto-*peplum Ulysses* especially significant. While *Ulysses* foregrounds Douglas's athletic physique, as in a wrestling scene, it achieves an extra level of significance in the closing stages of the film. Ulysses has disguised himself as a beggar, wearing a ragged robe that conceals his body. Confronting his enemies, Ulysses throws off his robe, and it is this exposure of the body to signal the climactic combat and reassertion of heroic masculinity that links *Ulysses* most strongly with *Hercules*.

'He must truly be the son of Jupiter!'

Hercules equates male potency with spectacle, each quality reinforcing and validating the other. In the opening sequence, the uprooting of a tree signifies the presence of Hercules, foregrounding his attributes,

effects and spectacle. His appearance is heralded by the performance of a feat impossible for an ordinary man. Hercules is a larger-than-life figure, both in terms of his physical attributes—height, build—and his supernatural transcendence of human limitations. Herculean masculinity is represented throughout the film by acts of physical strength that no other character can emulate: lifting trees, bending metal objects, fighting wild beasts. Each manifestation of his extraordinary strength serves to underline its unique character. The introduction of Hercules can be compared with the first appearance of Maciste in *Cabiria*. Maciste is placed in the foreground of the frame, dressed in a white robe that leaves his arms and torso exposed. This shot lasts around forty seconds, lingering on the dominant figure of Maciste, whose very presence, in terms of lighting, framing and Pagano's physique, connotes his strength. By contrast, Hercules's presence is from the start equated with action, specifically the performance of a heroic deed in the service of another.

The narrative structure of *Hercules* highlights extended scenes emphasising the body as spectacle. Like the viewer, the supporting characters are placed in the position of spectators, responding to Hercules's feats of strength with admiration, awe, desire and fear. Discussing Hollywood crime films and westerns, Neale notes that 'both forms of voyeuristic looking, intra- and extra-diegetic, are especially evident in those moments of contest and combat…at which a narrative outcome is determined through a fight, at which male struggle becomes pure spectacle' (Neale, 1993, pp. 16–7). While the notion of 'pure spectacle' is contestable, I concur that presenting narrative progression and resolution in the form of a physical struggle legitimises the resultant spectacle and associated voyeurism as a necessary, even crucial, component of the wider narrative arc. The most striking manifestation of Hercules's physical strength has him wrapping chains around two stone pillars of a royal palace. A long shot places Hercules in the centre of the frame, his body standing out against a shadowed doorway. Two low-angle medium long shots show Hercules pulling on the chains, his muscles straining (*fig. 1.2*). Wrenching the pillars out of position, he brings them and a section of roof down on his enemies (evoking the climax of the Hollywood-produced *Samson and Delilah*). This image defines the *peplum* genre as a whole: a tensed built male body performing a miraculous or superhuman feat of strength, not as mere narcissistic display or demonstration of brute force, but in the service of the forces of good. The chains that previously confined Hercules—connoting imprisonment, oppression, enslavement—are transformed into an extension of the male body that is the instrument of liberation. US posters for *Hercules* highlight this

Fig. 1.2 *Hercules* (1958)

image of Hercules unchained, which became the English title for the sequel (the image also dominates the Japanese promotion for the film). I would argue that Steve Reeves's Hercules was constructed to endorse prevailing conservative notions of masculinity, albeit in exaggerated, hyperbolic form.

Hercules's representation of masculinity proved to have wide popular appeal. Opening in Italy on 20 February 1958, *Hercules* grossed 887,384,717 lire, equivalent to US$1,420,406 or £507,284, three times its production cost (Rondolino, 1979, p. 134). It was the most popular Italian film of the 1957–58 season, outperformed only by six big-budget Hollywood imports, led by *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956) (Spinazzola, 1974, p. 328). *Hercules*'s US success may have been exaggerated, not least by promoter Joseph E. Levine, but the film took around $4.5 million in rentals (Hall and Neale, 2010, p. 172; cf. Lucanio, 1994, pp. 27, 13). While box-office figures for other territories are elusive, *Hercules* was also distributed successfully in Europe, Latin America, South Africa, the Middle East, Australia and the Far East, creating markets where the *peplum* genre would flourish for the next few years (Philippe, 1964, p. 53).

The reasons for *Hercules*'s commercial success are not a central topic of this book. What interest me at this point are the commentators who link this success—directly or indirectly—with the film's depiction of masculinity. Writing on the *peplum* genre in the early 1960s, Richard Whitehall suggested the film's uncomplicated heroics and clear-cut moral certainties suited the mood of the times (Whitehall, 1963, pp. 8–9). A hero without physical or mental flaws, who possessed an unshakeable sense of right and wrong and an unstoppable determination to ensure the former triumphed, provided an attractive source of escapism in an era marked by Cold War tensions between West and East. This socio-political contextualisation becomes problematic, however, when linked too directly with a

specific film. Wyke reads the casting of Reeves in explicit Cold War terms: 'the resulting modern Hercules symbolised the victory of Beauty, Virility, *and* the American Way over a villainy depicted as monstrous, weak, and decidedly "Asiatic"…a seemingly natural link was forged between muscularity, masculinity, justice, and the supremacy of the West' (Wyke, 2002, p. 370). This association of Reeves's Hercules with Beauty, or perhaps the Body Beautiful, is intriguing, yet the overall reading of the film seems simplistic and reductive. Characterising Hercules as a Cold Warrior, representing American strength, potency and integrity in a specific historical context, suggests that other interpretations of the film are at best secondary, if not redundant altogether. Furthermore, *Hercules* as a film text resists the pattern imposed by Wyke. The Italian actors cast as the villains are not Asiatic in appearance and the scenario of antagonistic superpowers is notably absent, even in veiled form. There is, however, a case for arguing that the wide appeal of *Hercules* reflected an international need for reassurance over the value of individual strength and integrity. Discussing the concept of star charisma, Richard Dyer states that 'charismatic appeal is effective especially when the social order is uncertain, unstable and ambiguous and when the charismatic figure or group offers a value, order or stability to counterpoise this' (Dyer, 1991, p. 58). Embodying traditional moral values, Reeves's Hercules restores both order and stability to the troubled kingdom of Jolco. This idea ties in with Cohan's point about the perceived loss of masculine individualism in the face of social, political and, I would add, economic pressures and anxieties during the 1950s.

Hercules Displayed

The *peplum* genre is notable for giving the male body primacy over the female body, though both are presented to the spectator as objects of contemplation, admiration and desire (cf. Günsberg, 2005, p. 107). It should be stressed that this was not in itself a new or unknown strategy, though some commentators suggest otherwise. Discussing 1950s American cinema, Neale cites the musical as 'the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema in any consistent way' (Neale, 1993, p. 18). Neale is perhaps over-generalising here, and discussing Hollywood output in strictly generic terms risks excluding titles that do not conform readily to a widely recognised genre category. Dyer affirms that, 'until the 1980s, it was rare to see a white man semi-naked in popular fictions' (Dyer, 1997, p. 146). While the art gallery, sports and pornography 'offered socially sanctioned or

cordoned-off images…the cinema only did so in particular cases' (Dyer, 1997, p. 146). Again, this implies that these instances were few and far between which, I argue, is not necessarily the case. Discussing Rudolph Valentino, Michael Williams suggests: 'Films such as *The Son of the Sheik* (George Fitzmaurice, 1926) offer up the voyeuristic pleasure of gazing at the fetishised male body offered for view' (Williams, 2003, p. 16). A scene where the main character is hung up and whipped provides 'a diegetic excuse for close-ups of his [Valentino's] body' (Williams, 2003, p. 115). Exotic adventure films and serials such as *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, Charles Vidor, 1932), *Flash Gordon* (Frederick Stephani, 1936), *The Crimson Pirate* (Robert Siodmak, 1952) and *Against All Flags* (George Sherman, 1952) employ a similar strategy, with the hero stripped to the waist for both action and punishment. Films centred on a form of sport often highlighted the exposed male body, most obviously in boxing-related dramas such as *Champion* (Mark Robson, 1949), starring Kirk Douglas. The cycle of Tarzan films produced in Hollywood from the 1930s to the 1960s highlights an even more open display of the male physique, an example—or exception—acknowledged by Neale (Neale, 2000, p. 56). Walt Morton suggests that a Tarzan film 'prioritises the physicality of the male body in action… Tarzan's physique becomes the object of display' (Morton, 1993, p. 114). Dyer notes how publicity images of screen Tarzan Johnny Weissmuller emphasise his athletic body as the main object of contemplation while simultaneously denying associated notions of passivity: 'Weissmuller is posed with his body turning, resting on his arms… [he] seems to be caught in action and his body is tensed… [he] looks up, in a characteristic pose of masculine striving' (Dyer, 1987, p. 118). An exposed male body is an active body, a concept discussed in more detail below. *Hercules* participates in and extends this tradition by offering a new form of display, emphasising feats of strength and the sheer spectacle of the built male body—both in motion and at rest—over shows of agility or athleticism. Drawing on the same classical references and iconography that informed the bodybuilding culture, *Hercules* placed these bodies within narratives of trial, ordeal, conflict and triumph.

The display of heroic masculinity is crucial to *Hercules*, yet its status as spectacle or performance reveals the fragility of its construction. *Hercules*'s representation of masculinity is complicated—and compromised—by the latent eroticism associated with displays of bare flesh. The *peplum* genre's undercurrent of homoeroticism has been noted in academic studies, film criticism and the wider popular culture. For example, Steve Reeves is referenced in the glam-rock musical *The Rocky Horror Show*, first

performed in 1973, and its film adaptation *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975). In the song 'Sweet Transvestite', performed by the cross-dressing bisexual Frank N. Furter, Reeves's films are cited for their (guilty) visual pleasures and alleged low quality. While the *peplum* cycle had ended a decade earlier, writer Richard O'Brien counted on audience familiarity with Reeves's name, image, the type of film in which he appeared and the accompanying notions of 'perfect' masculinity and latent homoeroticism. All of this dovetails into *The Rocky Horror Show*, where Dr. Furter creates his own perfect man, the blond, tanned, muscular Rocky Horror, as a purpose-built sexual plaything. As discussed in the introduction, the emphasis on the muscular male body as the main object of contemplation is at odds with conventional notions of cinematic representation as erotic spectacle. For men to look at men, this look must be controlled, directed and legitimised in a way that nullifies or at least counters any suggestion of eroticism. Neale states that cinema as a whole has contended with the tensions and contradictions implicit in presenting the male body as spectacle while denying any element of homoeroticism: 'male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed' (Neale, 1993, p. 19). It can be argued that *Hercules* and subsequent *pepla* represent an extreme form of the ongoing struggle between the open display of the male physique and the systematic repression—and denial—of what this display implies in terms of erotic spectacle. The standard strategy cited by Neale for this 'de-eroticisation' is to present the exposed male body in a context of struggle. Images of violence against the body signify this repression. Furthermore, they disqualify the male body 'as an object of erotic contemplation and desire' (Neale, 1993, p. 14).

There are obvious problems with this reading as applied to *Hercules*, demonstrated by the sequence where he fights the Cretan Bull. Hercules is left with bloody wounds on his left shoulder and pectoral muscle, ostensibly denoting his newly-achieved mortal status. However, the careful placing of the fake blood serves to enhance the impact of Steve Reeves's exposed body rather than disqualify it as an object of contemplation. The wounded male body has a long tradition of display, including in Christian art, and the repression of this body has the paradoxical effect of heightening its spectacular appeal. This is a frequent strategy in action cinema, as well as other genres, and in religious art can be seen in images of martyrdom, especially Saint Sebastian. After Hercules falls through a trap door, there is a long shot of him lying on a dungeon

floor, arms outstretched in a cruciform position, light reflecting off his face and arms. While *Hercules* is set in a pre-Christian world, the film was made in a Catholic country and it is likely the film-makers were aware of this shot's religious associations. In the case of *Hercules*, the strategy of repression and disqualification identified by Neale is ultimately unsuccessful, highlighting only its failure to contain the undercurrent of homoeroticism.

The representation of the male body in *Hercules* suggests another strategy at work, that of expression rather than repression. The eroticism associated with the passive display of bare flesh is countered by equating the male body with action. The bodybuilding culture that supplied most of the *peplum* stars emphasised the male body in and of itself, rather than actions performed by the body. Wyke notes: 'Concerned with the display of static moments of extreme physical tension, male bodybuilding involves the pleasures of looking at a muscular body that performs no other function than the display of itself' (Wyke, 2002, p. 357; cf. Bolin, 1996, p. 50). The built body is its own achievement and does not require further validation or legitimisation through displays of skill or action. In *Hercules*, static poses combine with action or at least the impression of action. The muscular body of Hercules is more than a passive object of display. Discussing male pin-ups, Dyer argues that these images 'counteract the passive, objectifying tendency by having the model tauten his body, glare at or away from the viewer, and look as if he is caught in action or movement' (Dyer, 1986, p. 117). Unlike still photography, a motion picture can (re)present actual movement, enhanced by framing, composition, editing and other cinematic tools. *Hercules* opens with the hero stopping a runaway chariot. With this action accomplished, he is seen at rest, though the 'objectifying tendency' identified by Dyer is countered by Hercules's established role as active rescuer and by his own gaze at the prone Princess Iole.

By highlighting display as action, *Hercules* attempts to legitimise its emphasis on the male body. Demonstrating the longbow and discus, Hercules strikes muscle-flexing poses, his tensed 'perfect' body contrasted with the slight build of the younger Ulysses. Leon Hunt states that in *peplum* films, 'scene after scene contains "classic" body building poses which bear little or no relation to the script' (Hunt, 1993, p. 70). While this is an over-generalisation, it is the case that some *pepla* motivate their muscle-flexing set-pieces with more success than others. Discussing the discus scene in *Hercules*, Hunt argues that 'little attempt is made to disguise the scene's purpose in displaying those well-oiled pectorals for a predominantly male group of intra-diegetic admirers' (Hunt,

1993, pp. 70–1), though the presence of Princess Iole serves as a token endorsement of heterosexual desire. Ostensibly training the young men of Jolco, Hercules is also performing for an audience of older men. Orpheus directs his fellow elders—and the viewer—to 'Look at him', as the film cuts to a low-angle long shot of Hercules standing centre frame on the (moral) high ground, posed like an Olympic champion. The camera tracks in on Hercules, emphasising his heroic status.

Throughout *Hercules*, the lighting, camera angles and framing emphasise the iconic quality of Steve Reeves's portrayal. In a scene where Hercules consults the Sybil, a prophetess and mouthpiece of the gods, he is placed on the far left of the frame, in semi-shadow. The lighting highlights the muscle definition on Reeves's back and right arm, oiled so as to better catch the light. As Hercules raises and extends his arms to the heavens, rain begins to fall, water running down Reeves's torso. (This image dominates the Yugoslav poster for the film, albeit without the aqueous element; in an interesting enhancement, Hercules's raised arms semi-encircle a portrait of Iole, the primary reason for him renouncing his immortality.) The image is repeated and exaggerated in a later storm scene, as seawater pours over his flexed muscles. The spectacular appeal of these scenes is arguably in the display of Reeves's body, rather than the motivating actions, revealed as mere narrative pretext. Standing with his head tilted back and his arms outstretched, Hercules invites—even demands—the spectator's attention. As *fig. 1.2* shows, Reeves's succession of minimal costumes permits his muscular, glistening torso and arms to be the focal point of almost every shot in which he appears. Placing Hercules in scenarios of action serves only to highlight further the body performing these actions. Neither repression of the male body nor its showcasing as an instrument of action can displace the homoeroticism associated with its display. Drawing on representations of masculinity constructed by 1950s body culture, *Hercules* also evokes the tensions and contradictions associated with this representation.

Subsequent depictions of heroic mythical masculinity are equally problematic from this perspective, despite the relative liberalisation of sexual mores in most Western cultures from the 1960s onwards. In *The Giant of Marathon* (Tourneur, 1959), Philippides is sexually bolder than most of Reeves's heroes, articulating his romantic interest in Andromeda on first meeting. This expression of heterosexual desire is, however, countered by the visual emphasis on the near-naked male body. In the opening sequence, a low-angle shot of Philippides flanked by a pair of nude male statues encapsulates the (b)latent homoeroticism associated with the *peplum* (*fig. 1.3*). Scenes of underwater combat feature exposed

Fig. 1.3 The Giant of Marathon (1959)

male bodies pierced by arrows and spears, evoking both the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian and its gay icon status (cf. O'Brien, 2011, p. 184). Once again, the strategy of de-eroticising the displayed male body through combat and injury serves only to highlight its spectacular appeal, underlined by the passive corpses drifting slowly through the frame.

The homosocial nature of these films borders on the homoerotic but rarely the homosexual, though some, such as the TV movie *Beastmaster III: The Eye of Braxus* (Gabrielle Beaumont, 1996), seem to play on this notion. In this sword-and-sorcery sequel, hero Dar (Marc Singer) encounters the acrobat Bey, a dark-haired young man who wishes to join him in his adventures. In their first scene together, Bey watches as Dar polishes his sword blade, symbolism verging on the parodic. Both men are bare-chested, emphasised with framing and cross-cutting. Bey then grips Dar's arm to make the latter face him and appreciate his knife skills. As Dar leaves to resume his rescue mission, Bey, framed in medium close-up, sighs, 'You won't get rid of me that easily'. A later sit-down discussion about adventuring together reinforces Dar's wariness of this relationship. In the final scene, Bey, whose blue tunic contrasts with the leather and armour of other male characters, leaves Dar like a spurned lover ('I don't care if I never see you again'). Called back to join Dar and his group, Bey rides pillion on Dar's horse, a position traditionally taken by a woman, and reaffirms his belief in their compatibility. While there is nothing explicitly sexual about this new pairing, the progression of the relationship and the sidelining of warrior woman Shada result in a homosocial bonding that highlights rather than suppresses its homosexual aspect.

Jerry B. Pierce argues that the heroes of later epics such as *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), *Troy* (Petersen, 2004) and *300* (Snyder, 2007) engage in what he terms 'heteroperformance' via safely heterosexual zones of display (Pierce, 2011, pp. 42, 43). These films exhibit a calculated avoidance of potentially homoerotic scenes, as with Maximus (Russell Crowe) and his fellow gladiators being dressed in torso-covering tunics

(Pierce, 2011, pp. 43). Even *Troy*'s Achilles (Brad Pitt) is the epitome of 'male heterosexual physical perfection and virility' despite the displays of his naked or near-naked body (Pierce, 2011, p. 45). Achilles impales numerous opponents with various weapons, a form of male-on-male penetration linked clearly with combat and, therefore, devoid of erotic or sexual connotations. Yet the depiction of his near-superhuman fighting prowess is countered and, I argue, overwhelmed by the sustained presentation of his passive body as an object of spectacle and beauty. Achilles is introduced prone and naked, light playing on his back and buttocks, his body framed and highlighted by shadow. While a naked woman is draped around him, with another lying in the background, the focus remains on Achilles's spectacular body: his rippling back muscles, bronze sheen and flowing blonde hair. He decapitates a gold statue of Apollo, defiling the only figure to rival him in radiance. Achilles later strips naked, legitimised by the need to wash off the dirt of battle, the ultimate display of masculine physical prowess. Once again, his body is the visual centre of the scene, underlined by the shift from soft to sharp focus as his torso moves into medium shot. Even the love scene between Achilles and priestess Briseis favours the former's naked body over the latter's partially clothed form in terms of lighting, composition and framing. By contrast, the naked body of Paris emphasises his vulnerability and recklessness as he trysts with Helen, wife of King Menelaus. The erotic spectacle of this scene is centred on Helen, who undresses to reveal her breasts, rather than her lover's pale, slender and discretely framed physique. Achilles's relationship with his lookalike cousin Patroclus plays with homoerotic elements, as during a cliff-top joust scene. The former is clad in a loose blue top and matching skirt that expose his midriff, rather than the rigid armour of his first combat scene, and his 'defeat' of Patroclus consists of slapping him on the rear with a wooden sword. It is, however, the depiction of Achilles himself rather than his interaction with other men that defines his status as the film's pivotal, (homo)sexually-charged body beautiful.

Discussing the television series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010), David Simmons notes the conscious use of homoerotic imagery, arguing that this excessive representation of the male body highlights its own artificiality and exaggeration to the extent that 'it is no longer threatening to a heterosexual male audience, who can instead take pleasure in the playful amplification on display' (Simmons, 2011, pp. 151, 152). While I find this argument problematic, it is notable that the series and its sequels, *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012) and *Spartacus: War of the Damned* (2013), highlight openly gay male relationships, presented in

sympathetic fashion. This could be read as a strategy, unavailable during the *peplum* era, for displacing homoerotic undercurrents around the 'straight' male bodies, whose frequent display is linked to homosocial bonding, heterosexual coupling and violent action.

Hercules Excluded

Hercules establishes its title character as an emblem of benevolent patriarchal authority. This status is shown to be irreconcilable with the construction of heroic masculinity. The attributes that render Hercules 'heroic' are the same qualities that cannot be incorporated into a patriarchal hierarchy. Hercules is named—and names himself—as 'Hercules of Thebes', ostensibly tying the character to a specific geographical location, point of origin and established social order. While Hercules is of Thebes, he does not belong to Thebes, which serves only as a neutral reference point. Hercules is associated initially with the natural landscape, such as the cliff and coast outside Jolco, rather than the artificial 'cityscape' built and occupied by mortal men. He exists outside this social and domestic order, both figuratively and literally. At the same time, Hercules is depicted as disturbing the natural order, his presence first signified by the uprooted tree. As a 'superhuman' who transcends the laws of nature and cannot be assimilated or contained by the constructs of civilisation, Hercules is a potentially threatening figure.

Hercules's status as both hero and outsider is underlined by comparison with the other male characters. The masculinity of the villains is marked as inadequate compared to that of Hercules, a representation that seems both logical and unproblematic. The representation of Hercules's allies is more troubling. Characters such as Jason, rightful king of Jolco, embody the film's structuring norm of 'ordinary' masculinity, by which Hercules's superhuman strength can be assessed and appreciated. Though depicted as brave warriors and skilled athletes, they remain relatively powerless compared to Hercules, whose feats of strength create a sense of uneasiness, signified by an eerie electronic tone. Ellis Cashmore argues that, for the Ancient Greeks, 'Athletic excellence achieved in competition was an accomplishment of, literally, heroic proportions' (Cashmore, 2000, pp. 63–4). To train, discipline and hone the body in pursuit of sporting excellence was to emulate the heroes of classical myth. In *Hercules*, there is a clear distinction between the achievements of mortal men and those of the demigod. A scene where Hercules throws a discus with supernatural force is of particular interest from this perspective. A low-angle medium long shot frames Hercules looking off to

the right, holding the discus in his right hand, stretching and bending his arm in readiness for the throw. This 'heroic' image is intercut with medium shots of the spoilt prince Iphitus, clearly jealous, and his sister, Iole, clearly admiring, returning to Hercules as he lets loose the discus. The flying discus is seen in long shot, followed by a long shot of more neutral onlookers, a medium shot of the astonished Iphitus, a long shot of the discus as it disappears from view and a medium shot of the now-fearful Iphitus. Even Ulysses's look of admiration and wonder turns to fear. Hercules's supernatural strength marks him as unacceptably 'different'. After the death of Iphitus, for which Hercules is unjustly blamed, the hero is left standing alone on the palace steps, a long shot emphasising his isolation.

The scene where Hercules renounces his immortality is an attempt to recode the character's status, enabling incorporation into the prevailing social structure that was previously impossible. This strategy for restabilising Hercules as the prime signifier of traditional patriarchal values is itself inherently unstable. His new mortality has negligible effect on his representation, despite being written on his body in the form of wounds inflicted by the Cretan Bull. The quest for the Golden Fleece is another strategy for incorporating and regulating Hercules's super-masculinity in an organised social structure. Hercules joins the all-male crew of the *Argo*, endorsing their mission and erasing his former marginalisation and exclusion. Once again, this reconstruction of Hercules is unsustainable. Günsberg characterises homosociality—the relations between men—as 'the powerful and fundamental dynamic…on which patriarchy is founded' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 108). Yet the Argonauts' all-male group is shown to be unstable, ruptured easily by guile and sabotage, held together only through the superhuman strength of Hercules, whose patriarchal authority is depicted in terms of brute aggression. He wields a huge phallic club, which identifies him in classical statuary, along with the lion skin, and threatens to use it even on his friend Jason when the latter demands to be reunited with Antea, the Amazon who bewitched him. A long shot places Jason and his fellow dissenters on the left of the frame, while Hercules is on the extreme right, standing on a higher level of the ship, his right arm leaning on the club. The composition separates Hercules from his companions and places him above them. This image encapsulates his representation throughout the film, superior to other men and isolated from them by this superiority. At a crucial point in the narrative, the recovery of the Golden Fleece, Hercules's extraordinary masculinity must be subordinate to the 'orthodox', socially containable masculinity embodied by Jason, who claims both the fleece and

the kingdom of Jolco. Furthermore, the patriarchy represented by Jason does not require the heroic masculinity of Hercules nor can it accommodate his difference and potential threat. In the end, *Hercules* fails to resolve or even contain its problematic representations of masculinity. The latent eroticism of the displayed super-torso is not repressed, displaced or legitimised through violence or spectacular action. Hercules is not a viable figurehead for homosociality, resisting any incorporation into a sustainable social hierarchy.

Hercules Divided

Having played Hercules, Reeves starred in *Duel of the Titans* as Romulus, a hero associated with Roman myth and, alongside Remus, a figure both familiar and specific to Italian culture. The original title is *Romolo e Remo* and both names were still in use as first or Christian names when the film was made. (By coincidence, the crew included key grip Romolo Romagnoli and gaffer Remo Dolci.) *Duel of the Titans* marked the first pairing of two muscle-bound heroes in a *peplum* film, Gordon Scott co-starring as Remus. The casting of Americans as heroes associated strongly with Italy and its mythical past in an Italian production does not appear to have caused significant local debate or controversy, judging from contemporary reviews. From this perspective, the anonymous reviewer for the British *Monthly Film Bulletin* missed the point when he or she argued, 'Steve Reeves and Gordon Scott are charmingly, incongruously all-American as the noble Romulus and the intractable Remus' (Anon, 1963, p. 89). By the early 1960s, *peplum* stars were expected to be American, even if they were in fact British, or Italians working under Anglicised pseudonyms.

The relationship between Romulus and Remus, twin brothers and demigods, has a number of implications for the concept of heroic masculinity as constructed by *Hercules*. It should be noted that the strategy of bifurcation employed by *Duel of the Titans* is by no means definitive or unproblematic, being dependent on the elimination of Remus. Nevertheless, the film's construction of heroic masculinity evolves into a sustainable form that can contain such potentially troubling issues as male potency and perfection as threat. In *Hercules*, the titular hero has no definable position in Jolco's patriarchal hierarchy, despite his crucial role in placing Jason on the throne. In *Duel of the Titans*, the reactionary patriarchal status quo is overcome, destroyed and replaced by a new benevolent patriarchy with Romulus as its figurehead. The threatening, uncontainable aspects of the *peplum* hero are embodied by Remus. As

the marginalised 'other', he cannot be reconciled with the social, hierarchical and gender orthodoxies endorsed by his brother. Refusing to be assimilated into the new order, Remus must be eliminated, leading to Romulus's reluctant fratricide.

Evolving Masculinities

The US press book for *Duel of the Titans* suggests an unqualified endorsement of male physical strength and potency: 'The film gives Steve [Reeves] an opportunity to display his magnificent physique as he fights, rides and wrestles to victory in the action-filled adventure thriller' (1963, p. 4). The film itself represents heroic masculinity as a process of gradual evolution rather than a fixed, pre-existing essence. On the most obvious level, *Duel of the Titans* is unusual for the *peplum* genre in stressing the vulnerability of its heroes. In *Hercules*, the title character appears as a fully-formed heroic figure of established legendary status. In *The Giant of Marathon*, athlete-soldier Philippides also shows extraordinary physical and moral strength. Philippides does, however, require assistance to defeat Persian invaders, and the film shows him stumbling and exhausted as he runs to deliver a vital message. The strain is emphasised with a low-angle tracking shot, his strength tested to the limit, and the urgent, driving music starts to slow and falter as he does. This tentative challenge to the concept of Herculean invincibility associated with Reeves's star persona is developed more fully in *Duel of the Titans*. Romulus and Remus are first seen as new-born infants, emphasising their helplessness and dependency on maternal protection, whether human or lupine. A medium shot frames the brothers wrapped in a blanket, only their hands and faces visible, with no sign of the bodies that will become super-torsos. The familiar classical image of the infant Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf is not recreated for the film, though they are seen in her lair, alongside several wolf pups.

Romulus and Remus's flawed masculinity renders them powerless and under threat on several occasions. For the first third of the film, Romulus is associated with images of entrapment and helplessness as much as freedom and action. In the most extreme scene of physical punishment, he is spun around on a wooden platform and whipped a dozen times, leaving large welts on his torso. Medium shots of the captive Romulus, his arms outstretched, evoke crucifixion and Christian martyrdom, with no show of pain, though his expression is stoical rather than beatific. Remus is powerless before an erupting volcano and his resulting injuries render him as

passive and helpless as his infant self, dependent once more on female nurturing. Throughout *Duel of the Titans*, the brothers' male potency is represented in terms of qualification and restriction. It is within these limitations that their respective masculinities evolve. In foregrounding both the strengths and weaknesses of Romulus and Remus, *Duel of the Titans* openly acknowledges their flawed masculinities. *Hercules* is unable to sustain its construction of perfect masculinity; *Duel of the Titans* represents this imperfection as a given.

The casting of Gordon Scott as Remus is especially important with regard to the film's construction of evolving and competing masculinities. A friend of Reeves and a fellow bodybuilder, Scott had replaced Lex Barker as the film incarnation of Tarzan in *Tarzan's Hidden Jungle* (Harold Schuster, 1955), making six appearances as the character. Scott's Tarzan films proved popular both in the US and overseas, playing in such key European markets as the UK, West Germany, France, Spain and Italy. Despite Scott's success as Tarzan, Reeves was the bigger box-office draw thanks to *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*. Reeves's contract for *Duel of the Titans* gave him star billing above the title, with Scott second billed. Discussing the earlier Tarzan films starring Johnny Weissmuller, Morton argues that they foreground the exposed male body as the primary object of display and spectacle (Morton, 1993, p. 114). While this downplays other forms of exotic spectacle offered by these films, such as the jungle settings, wild animals and 'savage' natives, I concur that the emphasis on Tarzan—and therefore his body—is a consistent feature of the cycle. In *Tarzan's Greatest Adventure* (John Guillermin, 1959), Scott's Tarzan rescues a young woman, Angie, from a crocodile. He is then placed in medium shot on the left of the frame, facing the fully-clad Angie. His muscular torso drips water, the shot dominated by Scott's physique. Scott was established internationally as an action star whose body was on constant display for a predominantly male juvenile audience. As with the *peplum* genre, the Tarzan films provided a legitimate, culturally sanctioned context for the public display of the near-naked male body, clad only in a loincloth. In this respect, the transition from Tarzan to *peplum* hero was no great leap. Scott's association with the Tarzan role established his legitimacy as a *peplum* star on an equal footing to Reeves. Their casting as twin brothers underlined this equality.

Several of Scott's Italian co-stars remarked that he was a 'real' athlete, with a more 'natural' and powerful physique than the average bodybuilder *peplum* star (Della Casa, 2006). There is a case for arguing that Scott's bodybuilding enhanced his already powerful physique rather than replacing his natural build with an artificially pumped-up musculature.

This quality had already been noted during Scott's tenure as Tarzan. Reviewing *Tarzan's Fight for Life* (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1958), *Variety* commented, 'Gordon Scott makes the athletic stunts believable and possible' (variety.com). The spectacle and pleasure of a stunt were enhanced by a performer whose physical appearance and abilities made the action more plausible. From this perspective, Scott was not only Reeves's equal, but also threatened his position as the leading *peplum* star. The US press book for *Duel of the Titans* claimed Scott was two inches taller than Reeves (1963, p. 5), implying he was more than a match for the screen Hercules. This undercurrent provided a further extra-textual level to the growing competition and rivalry between Romulus and Remus. The film's English title also emphasises the size and strength of the main characters (a tactic used earlier for *Goliath and the Barbarians* and *The Giant of Marathon*) and their climactic confrontation. The US artwork highlights these elements, showing the heavily-muscled Romulus and Remus in mid-battle. While Romulus lacks a conventional weapon, he looks both determined and confident, his body moving as a single harmonious unit. Remus is heavily armed, yet his face conveys strain and his stance is awkward. For audiences of the time, the first point of contact with the film would often have been the promotional material, especially the posters. *Duel of the Titans* was sold as the confrontation of two competing supermasculinities which could only be resolved through mortal combat.

Contained Masculinity

In *Hercules*, the title character's heroic masculinity is fully formed at the outset of the narrative and cannot be contained by any social, political or ideological orthodoxy. The film's attempt to represent this masculinity as an unqualified validation of male strength and conservative patriarchy is therefore unsustainable. The perfection embodied by Hercules is in itself a threat to the established order. Where Hercules seems more or less invulnerable, Romulus falls short of this perfection, both vulnerable and threatened. Unlike Hercules, he is dependent on the assistance of others for both success and survival. While Romulus evolves into a masculine ideal, his ultimate triumph requires a level of cooperation and collaboration that transcends gender, generation, class, nation and even species. The 'manliness' embodied by Romulus is not self-sufficient, nor can it thrive independently of a wider social or political framework. The potential threat represented by Hercules is present not in Romulus but in Remus. Told the truth of his origins, 'You're the son of a god', his heroic persona is reconfigured: 'I've known it for a long time. Something

different flows in my veins; something superior to the others.' Unlike Romulus and other *peplum* heroes, Remus articulates his difference from *and* superiority to ordinary men. Remus's representation of masculinity is reduced to ruthless, self-serving aggression. Romulus gains the wider socio-political-gender perspective necessary for a democratic patriarch. He declares himself king, framed in a low-angle medium close-up, dressed in white, a symbol of purity, against a backdrop of blue sky that suggests freedom and good fortune. He ploughs the first furrow of the city of Rome with two white oxen, a symbolic expression of renewal and foundation. Having accepted his responsibilities to the wider community, Romulus must distance himself from Remus.

The divergence between Romulus and Remus is reflected in their costumes. Initially, they wear complementary tunics of simple cloth, Romulus dressed in brown-purple, Remus in dark red. For the first major action set-piece, both brothers wear the short skirt favoured by the *peplum* hero, united in their struggle against oppression. Once Remus has asserted his leadership, he favours a black, shoulder-revealing tunic and green cloak, while Romulus wears a torso-covering buff tunic with crude stitching. The covering of Romulus's body suggests a degree of civilisation and domestication. The relative simplicity of the garment signifies that Romulus, though a leader and warrior, remains a man of the people and for the people, eschewing the finery associated with the ruling classes. Remus's bare shoulder reveals his strength and aggression, while the cloak underlines his aspirations for the trappings of wealth and power, rising above the common people.

The framing and composition of key shots underline this sense of gradual distancing. Early on in the film, the brothers are framed opposite the Sabine princess Julia with the screen bisected by a wooden post. Julia stands to the left of the post, dressed in white, with the brothers to the right, in dark tunics, the semi-shadowed Remus merging with Romulus. The film's main embodiment of femininity stands apart from the as-yet indistinct representations of super-masculinity. Having defeated the tyrant king Amulius, the brothers are framed in medium close-up either side of their dying mother, Rhea Silvia. While this arrangement of the figures could suggest unity, alongside grief, she favours Romulus with her look. After the brothers have agreed to compete for leadership of their people, Remus is placed on the extreme left of the frame, in close-up, while Romulus and Julia stand together in long shot to the centre right. Favoured by the gods, Romulus is proclaimed leader, only for Remus to reject this divine verdict. The brothers are positioned in medium close-up at extreme ends of the frame, Romulus on the left side,

Remus on the right, their followers in the distant background. Despite this positioning, it is Romulus, on a figurative level, who is truly on the side of right. Whereas Romulus and Julia are brought together in harmony, the brothers will embrace one final time only in death, their bodies united as Romulus impales Remus on his sword. The dying Remus is placed in medium close-up on the left of the frame, with Romulus in the centre, also in medium close-up, while Julia walks into long shot from the right, poised to take her place by Romulus's side as he is separated forever from his brother.

The final image of *Duel of the Titans* is an overhead long shot of the victorious Romulus and the slain Remus. They are surrounded by Romulus's followers, against the backdrop of the land on which Rome will be built. The focus thus shifts from the individual, the triumphant yet saddened Romulus, to the group, the leader merged with his people. Remus, manifestation of the threatening, uncontainable 'other', has been eradicated. Nature will be transformed harmoniously into a new civilisation. Male potency, as represented by Romulus, is incorporated into the evolving social structure, underlined by his culturally sanctioned union with Julia. *Duel of the Titans* constructs a dual representation of the *peplum* hero, resolving his inherent contradictions through a binary reapportioning of his attributes. Convinced of his 'natural' superiority, Remus becomes an aggressive, disruptive, uncontrollable force representing selfish ambition. From this perspective, his death is a necessary step in the foundation of a sustainable and benevolent patriarchy.

As a counter-discourse to *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans* offers a potential resolution of debates raised in the earlier film, constructing a viable, evolving masculinity. However, its emphasis on male vulnerability and dependence could not be easily reconciled with the dominant narrative, thematic and ideological requirements of the wider *peplum* genre. Produced three years after *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans* proved a commercial success, in the domestic market at least. The film opened in Italy on 6 December 1961 and took 704,713,709 lire at the Italian box office, compared to *Hercules*' 887,384,717 lire (Rondolino, 1979, pp. 192, 134). Of the twelve Steve Reeves films released between 1958 and 1962, it was the seventh most successful in Italy but had little obvious influence on subsequent *pepla*. The concept of competing super-masculinities was reused in only a handful of films, including *Ulisse contro Ercole* / *Ulysses against Hercules* (Mario Caiano, 1962), *Ercole sfida Sansone* / *Hercules, Samson and Ulysses* (Francisci, 1963) and *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus: gli invincibili* / *Samson and the Mighty Challenge* (Giorgio Capitani, 1964). This doubling or quadrupling of muscular heroes was one strategy employed

by producers to lure audiences as the *peplum* genre declined in popularity. In most cases, the competing masculinities progress through initial rivalry or enmity to ultimate alliance, reversing the premise of *Duel of the Titans*. Moreover, later *pepla* adhered largely to the *Hercules* formula that—on the surface—valorised masculine potency, perfection and independence.

2
Hercules Reformed

Hercules Conquers Atlantis (Cottafavi, 1961) both acknowledges and departs from the depiction of Herculean masculinity in the 1958 *Hercules*. It is also one of the most discussed *peplum* films in terms of academic debates in this field. From its initial reception onwards, the film's representation of Hercules has been identified as substantially and significantly different from that embodied by Steve Reeves in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959). I am interested in the nature of this difference, how it has been presented in previous commentary and what it may reflect of wider debates during the early 1960s, both in Italy and elsewhere.

Other Italian films of this era, such as *La dolce vita* (Fellini, 1960) and *Accattone* (Pasolini, 1961) address contemporary social, cultural and political issues in forms intended to have clear extra-filmic relevance and significance. As Peter Bondanella and Jacqueline Reich observe, Italy during the late 1950s and early 1960s experienced increasing employment, a booming economy and emergent consumer culture (Bondanella, 1992, p. 132; Reich, 2004, p. 24). Tullio Kezich identifies *La dolce vita*'s main theme as 'café society, the diverse and glittery world rebuilt upon the ruins and poverty of the postwar period' (Kezich, 2007, p. 203). Frank Burke suggests that *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offers a socio-political critique which places it 'in perfect alignment' with Italian art films such as *La dolce vita* (Burke, 2011, p. 47). I find this notion of alignment, perfect or otherwise, problematic, and Burke does not in this instance develop his argument fully. I concur, however, that *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* intersects with contemporary debates, despite being conceived, produced, promoted and, for the most part, received as a mythological fantasy adventure far removed from everyday realties. In contrast to *La dolce vita* and *Accattone*, which highlight representations of modern Italy, specifically Rome, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offers both an exploration of global issues of the era and a reflection on the recent past.

As noted, *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* were major successes at both the local and international box office. While Steve Reeves and Pietro Francisci moved on to other projects, the Hercules brand was still perceived as a valuable commodity by the Italian film industry. The next Hercules film produced and released in Italy was *La vendetta di Ercole / Goliath and the Dragon* (Cottafavi, 1960), starring Lou Degni, an Italian-American bodybuilder billed as 'Mark Forest'. *La vendetta di Ercole* opened in Italy on 12 August 1960, and while it did not match the previous Hercules films at the local box office, it was a success, grossing just under a million lire less than its predecessors (Rondolino, 1979, pp. 134, 145, 172–4). The character still had wide audience appeal independent of Reeves, prompting producer Achille Piazzi to embark on a follow-up, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. Degni declined to return as Hercules and was replaced by British bodybuilder Reg Park. Like Reeves, Park was an international bodybuilding champion, achieving second place to Reeves in the 1950 Mr. Universe contest, who went on to win the title in 1951 and 1958 (Lucas, 2007, p. 376). Park also published his own bodybuilding magazine, *Reg Park Physical Culture Journal*. As discussed, bodybuilding culture promoted muscular development for display rather than strength. Kim Shahabudin notes, 'Park was unusual in this respect, usually ending his bodybuilding exhibitions with a display of actual strength' (Shahabudin, 2009, p. 213). While Shahabudin cites this attribute as a reason for Park being cast as Hercules (Shahabudin, 2009, p. 213), his imposing, powerful physique and strong yet benevolent features were likely more significant factors. Park's Hercules lacks the sharply defined, or 'sculpted', form and classical good looks of the Reeves incarnation. Nevertheless, his appearance was deemed by producer Piazzi to be suitably Herculean in terms of previous *pepla* representations and predicted audience response.

Key personnel involved with the production of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* stated retrospectively an intention to subvert the familiar image of Hercules as portrayed in the Steve Reeves films. Tim Lucas quotes co-writer Duccio Tessari: 'The idea to make an ironic Hercules was mine and Cottafavi's' (Lucas, 2007, p. 384). The film-makers planned both to undercut viewer expectations relating to Hercules and provide a critical commentary on the conventions of the *peplum* genre. While Tessari's claim does not necessarily qualify as documentary evidence, it is supported to an extent by an analysis of the film, though the characterisation of Hercules as 'ironic' is, of course, open to debate. Shahabudin sees a clear distinction between Reeves's virtuous Prodican Hercules and the character as depicted in this film, where Hercules is 'often unconcerned

for heroic conventions, unreliable as a husband, and ineffective as a father' (Shahabudin, 2009, p. 204). I do not agree with this reading and will address the issues raised in turn.

Hercules at Rest

Reg Park's Hercules is described repeatedly in terms of his passivity. Tom Milne's review of the film's 1986 UK videotape release notes Hercules's 'unshakeable placidity' (Milne, 1986, p. 19). Leon Hunt suggests the film 'is striking for the initial passivity of its hero' (Hunt, 1993, p. 71). It is notable that, unlike Milne, Hunt qualifies Hercules's inaction, suggesting later developments, a point addressed further on. There is little argument that the film foregrounds images of Hercules at rest, especially during its first half hour. When King Androcles debates a threat to Greece with his fellow rulers, Hercules is framed as a passive background figure. He reclines on some steps, cushioned by a leopard-skin rug, dressed in a fine tunic and sandals that connote wealth and leisure. His relaxed, supine body is contrasted with armed guards standing to his right, implicitly men of action, dressed for combat. Later on, the camera tilts down from the top of a ship's mast to reveal Hercules asleep on the deck, oblivious to the activity around him. As the guest of Antinea, Queen of Atlantis, he rests on a couch, dressed once more in a costume suggesting leisure and opulence rather than action. As discussed, the passive, exposed male body risks being appreciated and evaluated in terms more usually associated with the female form, undermining its masculine potency and evoking an undercurrent of homoeroticism. These images of Hercules do not even resort to the strategy, derived from physique photography, of showing the male body upright and tensed as if caught in mid-action.

In *Hercules*, Reeves's hero is first seen uprooting a tree in the performance of an act of rescue. Park's Hercules is a notable non-participant in the extended tavern fight that opens *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, despite his presence throughout the sequence. The first shot of Hercules has him seated at a long table, dining from a plate and cup, seemingly oblivious to the brawl taking place around him. The location is itself significant, a tavern being associated with recreation, leisure and repast, a pause from action connoting both passivity and indulgence. By contrast, *La vendetta di Ercole* opens with Hercules on a perilous mission involving strenuous physical activity and superhuman strength. He climbs down a steep rock face, fights with a three-headed, fire-breathing dog and, a few scenes later, battles with a large flying cat creature. In *Hercules Conquers*

Atlantis, a hero associated with action is conspicuously inactive, his passivity contrasted with the fighting—an extreme form of physical activity—that would appear to invite his participation or at least require his intervention.

Shahabudin reads this placidity as a reflection of self-interest and selfishness, stating that Hercules is 'little interested in the problems of his friend, his son or his country, except when they threaten to interrupt his sleep or his dinner' (Shahabudin, 2009, p. 205). Burke also characterises the demigod as indolent and interested only in self-gratification (Burke, 2011, p. 40). Yet the default passivity associated with Hercules is not always by choice. On a narrative level, he is put to sleep by the unwitting ingestion of drugs and later knocked unconscious during a violent storm at sea. It can be argued the light-hearted, knockabout nature of the tavern fight—which plays very much like a comedy western—does not require Hercules's intervention until his heavily outnumbered friends are threatened with serious injury. Reviewing the film in *Movie*, Charles Barr found this sequence 'perfectly consistent with the film's presentation of heroism' (qtd. Frayling, 2006, p. 93); Lucas suggests Park's Hercules exhibits, 'a strength so self-confident that it didn't need to show off' (Lucas, 2007, pp. 384–5). While Androcles and Hylus, son of Hercules, treat the brawl as an opportunity to demonstrate and test their masculine potency in combative terms, Hercules recognises the fight for what it is: a pointless wine-fuelled expenditure of energy better employed to more constructive purpose.

Writing near the time of the film's release, Luc Moullet argued the near-parodic representation of Hercules's lazy hedonism concealed a high moral purpose (Moullet, 1962, p. 41). While morality is a problematic concept in terms of identification and analysis, I suggest his behaviour early in the film reveals a coherent and consistent strategy unrelated to mere self-interest. Hercules's apparent indifference to the fate of others can be interpreted, in part at least, as a punitive measure against those who have questioned either his decisions or his masculine authority. Androcles and Hylus must face the consequences of their actions, whether participating in the tavern fight or kidnapping Hercules. In one scene, the camera pans left with Androcles to find Hercules resting on a beach while the ship's crew look for provisions. Far from being mere laziness, this is a strategic denial of labour, lent added significance through its association with a character famous for his Twelve Labours. Shortly afterwards, Hercules turns his back on Androcles, underlining his calculated disassociation from the latter's homosocial group. It is notable that, Hylus and the dwarf Timoteus aside, Androcles's crew

consists of criminals and other lowlifes, marked explicitly as unreliable and untrustworthy. Circumstances have obliged the king to choose his allies poorly, creating a social and, by implication, military unit unworthy of Hercules's assistance, even if he were a voluntary participant. As discussed below, Italy's recent history was dominated by a political and military alliance with Nazi Germany, a short-lived union that ended in comprehensive defeat. Without suggesting any direct or intended link, Androcles could be equated with the patriotic yet naive Italians who regarded the Axis pact as the best option for preserving their country's independence and strength.

This representation of Hercules has antecedents, however unintentional and undeveloped, in *Hercules Unchained*. The latter opens with a sequence where Hercules, Iole and Ulysses bid farewell to their companions and embark on a wagon ride to Hercules's home city of Thebes. When Iole and Ulysses complain that Hercules is driving the horses too fast, he responds by giving the reins to Ulysses and climbing into the back of the wagon for a rest. The travellers arrive in a valley strewn with human bones, where they are challenged by the giant Anteus. Aware of the threat, Hercules does not initially react to Iole and Ulysses's calls of alarm, choosing leisure and indolence over action: 'Oh, I want to sleep.' When Anteus issues a direct challenge to combat, Hercules finally responds. This delayed reaction to the immediate and undeniable threat posed by Anteus is of interest on several levels. Newlyweds Hercules and Iole have a parental relationship to Ulysses, a naive young adult, described as 'a child who thinks he's a man'. Having implicitly challenged Hercules's judgement and patriarchal leadership, Ulysses is granted the opportunity to take the latter's place. Hercules's gesture of giving Ulysses control of the horses also places him in charge of their 'family' unit. This strategy proves both a test of Ulysses's manhood, which is found wanting, and a punishment for questioning Hercules's decisions and associated authority and potency.

After his kidnap in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, Park's Hercules does not express openly his disapproval, allowing his actions—or rather inaction—to speak for him. Reeves's Hercules articulates his dissatisfaction with Iole and Ulysses: 'You're playing games with me. All right then, have your fun. I want to rest.' Lying back and yawning, Hercules allows Ulysses to be thrown around and Iole sexually threatened by Anteus before intervening. He presents himself to Anteus as prone, vulnerable and by implication weak in both body and spirit. He even appears to give Iole up to Anteus, 'If that's the way it is…' This 'punishment' for transgressive behaviour seems both extreme and unmotivated, especially given

the characterisation of Hercules in the 1958 film. I suggest the depiction of the hero in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offers a more measured, developed and consistent expression of this idea. Furthermore, his strategic denial of labour and willingness to be viewed in terms of inaction rather than action is related to disengagement with all-male adventures in foreign lands—and the associated perils—in favour of a commitment to the domestic sphere and a stable, sustainable heterosexual union.

Hercules at Home

Shahabudin identifies a further reversal of Reeves's Hercules 'when Park's hero prioritises private happiness over the public good, by unpatriotically refusing a mission to save Greece in favour of a settled family life with Deianeira' (Shahabudin, 2009, p. 205). This opposition of the private with the public and its associated patriotism suggests the two concepts are mutually exclusive and that Hercules is necessarily at fault for choosing the former over the latter. I argue that Hercules's prioritisation of the private sphere over the public merits a more considered analysis, not least in its ramifications for his subsequent actions in Atlantis.

Discussing the Euripidean conception of Hercules, G. Karl Galinsky states 'he is characterised as the completely domestic and loving family man' (Galinsky, 1972, p. 62). This aspect of the hero is conveyed in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* and appears to have been a conscious decision on the part of the film-makers. Quoted by Michèle Lagny, Cottafavi described his Hercules as 'a heroic-cum-comic figure…obsessed with the idea of having a home, a family and children' (Lagny, 1992, p. 177). His wife, Deianeira, appears in only one scene, yet her presence is essential to the film's construction of Herculean masculinity. The sequence opens with a long shot of the prone Hercules being massaged by Deianeira, the active female acting upon the passive male. Their surroundings are also significant, the room adorned with luxurious fabrics and ornaments. As earlier scenes stress, Hercules has a taste for fine wine and fine clothing, and his wardrobe stands in contrast to the animal skins and simple cloth tunics worn by the Steve Reeves incarnation. The Herculean torso is revealed fully but both represented and declared to be inactive. Hercules is living the good life or *la dolce vita* and does not appear concerned with the world beyond his immediate domestic sphere.

This scene could be read in terms of Herculean emasculation, the legendary man of strength and action reduced to passivity and impotence under feminine influence. Alastair Blanshard notes that 'Deianeira' is a classical Greek word that can be translated as 'man killer' or 'husband

killer' (Blanshard, 2005, pp. 138–9). In this instance, the killing is figurative rather than literal, yet the superhuman masculinity associated with Hercules seems effectively eradicated. There is a superficially similar scene in *La vendetta di Ercole*; indeed, the set-up is near identical, Deianeira massaging Hercules against the backdrop of their domestic, familial environment. In this instance, the apparent reversal of active/male and passive/female gender roles is countered on several levels. In narrative terms, Hercules has just returned home from a long, arduous and perilous quest, battling monsters and appeasing gods. By contrast, in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, he has merely put a swift end to a tavern brawl, sat through a protracted and unproductive council meeting and smashed a throne to the ground. The décor of the room in *La vendetta di Ercole* is significantly different. In place of the plush fabrics and ornaments, the chamber is dominated by a stark black-and-white mural depicting a boar hunt, the connotations of masculine action, aggression and violence reflected in Hercules himself. Despite his prone position, he is not relaxed but agitated, his restless manner motivated on a narrative level by the hostile behaviour of his son.

I argue the massage scene in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* reflects not his emasculation, but an affirmation of his commitment to the domestic sphere, as embodied by Deianeira, and the associated responsibilities. This voluntary domestication also underlines the film's humanisation of Hercules, in both visual and thematic terms. Discussing depictions of Hercules in classical literature and drama, Galinsky notes how the mythical hero 'could be humanised only in those episodes of his life that were not a part of his mythic deeds' (Galinsky, 1972, p. 112). Hercules in action must be the superhuman demigod, placed in perilous foreign ventures, precluding his ready incorporation into the domestic sphere. The ornaments in Hercules and Deianeira's chamber include a statue of a soldier. This upright figure, armed for action, could be read as a contrast to the prone, relaxed Hercules, echoing the similar juxtaposition during the council meeting. I suggest it serves more as a pointed reminder of Hercules's masculine potency, ready to be tapped if needed but only by his choice and on his terms. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the hero makes a conscious, explicit choice of domesticity and heterosexual union over adventure and homosocial bonding.

Hercules Unleashed

It should be emphasised that this domesticated, familial Hercules retains the extraordinary physical appearance and capabilities associated with

the Reeves incarnation. In the first sequence of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the tavern brawl ends abruptly when Hercules halts the progress of an impromptu battering ram with one hand and proclaims: 'That's enough now, boys', associating the participants with a reckless, immature form of masculinity that manifests itself only in terms of drunken combat. When Androcles's crew mutiny and attempt to steal his ship, Hercules grabs hold of the huge anchor chain and slowly hauls the boat back to shore. Superhuman strength is validated, inspired and indeed nurtured by Hercules's open, uncomplicated enjoyment of the good life and associated domestic stability and responsibility. A comparison of Herculean masculinity with the film's other male figures is revealing. On the most obvious level, the perfect body of Hercules is contrasted repeatedly with the imperfect body of his friend Timotheus, a strategy also employed—to a lesser degree—in *La vendetta di Ercole*. Maggie Günsberg identifies 'the midget as epitome of male powerlessness made comic (and thereby less alarming)' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 118). The depiction of Timotheus also suggests all men are children compared to Hercules, a benevolent father figure. Hercules first bares his torso as he lifts Androcles's throne above his head and dashes it to the ground. While this demonstration of superhuman strength has a clear and stated symbolic significance—Androcles's kingdom will not be usurped while he is absent—the latter is unappreciative: 'What a waste of a fine throne.' While this could be read as both subverting and questioning a typically Herculean show of strength, Androcles's attachment to a material manifestation of his kingship, not to mention its associated power, status and wealth, suggests he lacks the wider perspective of the older, wiser Hercules.

Hercules's relationship with his son, Hylus, affirms the former's commitment to the domestic, familial sphere. According to Blanshard, the Hercules of Greco-Roman myth is attributed with having many sons—between sixty and one hundred—but little contact with any of them; furthermore: 'In a world which prized the father-son relationship above all else, Hercules is a failure' (Blanshard, 2005, pp. 149–50). By contrast, the hero of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is the epitome of paternal responsibility and discipline, as when Hercules associates Hylus's initiation of the tavern brawl with a lack of respect for social convention, which he finds unacceptable. The sense of affirmed domestic bliss at the end of the scene with Deianeira is undercut by the uncertain expression on Hylus, clearly reluctant to forgo homosocial adventure in favour of familial containment and associated security. Overeager to prove himself in terms of masculine prowess, Hylus seeks adventure, while Hercules, a man with nothing to prove, is content to have it find him.

When Hercules and Hylus are trapped together in a subterranean cell, the son is dwarfed by the father. Hercules's imposing, ideal physique is contrasted further with Hylus's slender, dirt-coated torso, and the composition and framing of the scene emphasise Hercules's role as paternal protector. While Hylus clearly lacks Herculean strength, there is a sense of generational continuity, the son demonstrating his worth to the father. Having saved a young princess, Ismene, on one occasion, Hercules subsequently delegates the task to Hylus, who rescues her from captivity twice over. Hercules's paternal attitude to Ismene on their first meeting anticipates her subsequent heterosexual union with Hylus, which in turn ensures as far as possible the continuation of Hercules's bloodline. The film concludes with an image of Hylus and Ismene embracing, underlining the former's achievement of a mature masculinity defined in terms of a domesticity and commitment also embraced and promoted by his father. In this respect, at least, the son of Hercules displays an evolving, proactive and productive masculinity denied Androcles, a figure latterly associated with inactivity, female domination and, by implication, impotence. It is, however, the opponents rather than the allies of Hercules that have attracted the most critical and scholarly debate.

'A peril from afar'

By the early 1960s, as Bondanella notes, most *peplum* films were aimed largely at the *seconda visione* or second-run circuit, cinemas away from the urban centres, with significantly cheaper ticket prices (Bondanella, 2002, p.159). Goffredo Fofi concurs that 'the Italian audience for the genre was mainly in the rural south and the migrant areas of industrial cities' (Rondolino, 1979, p. v). While the *peplum* genre remained profitable three years on from *Hercules*, few of the films attracted much critical notice, or coverage in the mainstream national press. *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* made 568 million lire in Italy, a respectable sum for a *peplum* in 1961, though *La guerra di Troia / The Trojan War* (Giorgio Ferroni, 1961), starring Steve Reeves, grossed over 799 million (Rondolino, 1979, pp. 185, 186). However, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is notable—and unusual—among the *pepla* both for the amount of attention it received from contemporary critics and the positive nature of much of this reception. The critic for the official Vatican film review, which attached little importance to the wider *peplum* cycle, acknowledged the film's production values, spectacle and even noted the craftsmanlike direction (qtd. Casadio, 2007, p. 61). The *Monthly Film Bulletin*, usually dismissive of

the *peplum*, praised Cottafavi's flair, 'almost alone amongst his Italian colleagues, for this kind of cinema…' (Anon, 1962, p. 112). A review in *Films and Filming* also emphasised the film's craft and spectacle (Durgnat, 1962, p. 35). What interests me in particular is the identification of several allegorical strands by various commentators. Writing in 1967, Gianni Rondolino praised the 'intelligent references to contemporary social and political realities…veiled behind ancient history and characters' (Rondolino, 1979, p. 186). For the most part, these contemporary references can be divided into three overlapping areas: fascism, nuclear anxiety and 'unnatural' feminine threats. I address the last of these in chapter seven, focusing on the first two here.

Writing in *Films and Filming* in 1963, Richard Whitehall stated that Cottafavi 'is giving mythology a contemporary application', identifying a fascist subtext (Whitehall, 1963, p. 14). As noted, Richard Dyer sees a fundamental contradiction in the *peplum* with regard to fascism, as linked with Hitler's Germany and, especially, Mussolini's Italy. The appeal of the muscular male body type that dominates the genre, typified and exemplified by the figure of Hercules, is inevitably in tension with the memory of its valorisation in the recent past (Dyer, 1997, p. 176). Dyer suggests this tension finds its ultimate expression in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*: 'Hercules is opposed to this fascist regime but Reg Park's muscles embody its very ideals' (Dyer, 1997, p. 176). It seems Park's Hercules is both atypical of the *peplum* genre yet also the most potent manifestation of its fascist subtext. It can be argued the active Hercules represents strong male leadership which is disregarded at high cost. The freed slaves of Atlantis ignore his counsel and attack the royal palace, only to be massacred. During the council of Greek kings, democracy is equated with male impotence, Hercules looking on with amused resignation as Androcles fails to win the support of his self-interested, self-absorbed peers. I suggest that *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* consciously downplays any fascist associations of the *peplum* hero with a strategy of displacement, evoking fascism in the corporeal form of his opponents in order to distinguish and disassociate it from Hercules and mark its containment and elimination.

Hercules Conquers Atlantis should be placed within wider debates relating to fascism that were prevalent in Italy at the time of the film's conception, production and release. In 1960, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement), a neo-fascist political party, achieved unexpected prominence and significance. Formed in 1948, the *MSI* was dominated initially by supporters of Mussolini's *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Italian Social Republic), based in Salò, a short-lived (1943–45) puppet

state controlled by Nazi Germany (Tannenbaum, 1973, p. 390). As Paul Ginsborg notes, the *MSI* took 5.8% of the vote in the 1953 national election, which saw 'the emergence of the neo-Fascists as a permanent force in Italian politics', serving also as a 'reminder of the potent appeal that authoritarianism and nationalism could still exercise amongst the southern students, urban poor and lower middle classes' (Ginsborg, 1990, pp. 143, 145). Fascism, in whatever guise, retained an attraction for a minority of the geographically, economically and socially disadvantaged and disempowered. Edward R. Tannenbaum suggests that, while the *MSI* was relatively moderate during the 1950s, officially proclaiming fascism to be dead, its leaders clearly still admired aspects of the Mussolini regime (Tannenbaum, 1973, p. 390). The *MSI* remained a minor but persistent political force which, on occasion, appeared to sanction or at least not condemn direct physical confrontation as a legitimate form of activism. Tannenbaum states: 'By the 1960s the *MSI* was also attracting secondary-school students who had no experience with Fascism but who enjoyed beating up Communists and Socialists and shouting nationalist slogans' (Tannenbaum, 1973, p. 390). Appealing to a new generation of Italian males drawn to violence in the name of patriotism, the *MSI* remained a legitimate political party with many allies in the dominant *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democrat) party that led Italy's coalition government.

R. J. B. Bosworth argues that while the *MSI* continued to be an active force in Italian politics, 'they made few converts outside the extreme right', remaining on the margins of the political mainstream (Bosworth, 1998, p. 53). In 1960 this seemed about to change, as the first attempt to legitimise neo-fascism officially was made when the Christian Democrat government, headed by Ferdinando Tambroni, 'tried to rule with the "external support" of the *MSI*' (Bosworth, 1998, p. 109). The Christian Democrats had been the ruling party in Italy since 1948 but did not command a workable majority and were dependent on *centrismo*, characterised by Guido Crainz as 'an anti-communist alliance based on the Christian Democrats in coalition with some minor parties' (Crainz, 1999, p. 125). While this alliance remained viable, if not always stable, for most of the 1950s, by the end of the decade centrism was in serious difficulties (Crainz, 1999, p. 125). In need of additional support, Prime Minister elect Tambroni looked to the *MSI*. Under the terms of the deal, the Christian Democrats would rely on *MSI* votes in Parliament but not give its members seats in the cabinet (Bosworth, 1998, p. 109).

Tambroni's proposed alliance with a party regarded widely as neo-fascist had ramifications that extended beyond the immediate political

sphere. For much of the 1950s, there had been few public debates that addressed, let alone criticised, fascism and Italy's recent fascist dictatorship. Laura Maritano suggests post-World War II Italy witnessed a collective form of expedient amnesia on all sides of the political divide: 'for the sake of national unity it was decided to forget the Fascist past of a large number of Italians' (Maritano, 2004, p. 72). While this claim can be criticised as a generalisation, Bosworth notes how the 1950s 'was marked by a profound silence about the failures, delusions and terrors of Fascism' (Bosworth, 1998, pp. 109–10). The early 1960s saw heightened Cold War tensions between the US and the USSR, the former promoting the latter as a real and active threat to the free world. Placed within the US sphere of influence, politically conservative and vulnerable, geographically and militarily, to aggression from the Eastern Bloc, Italy had sidelined anti-fascism in favour of a staunchly anti-communist stance. To be openly critical of fascism within Italy risked accusations of communist sympathies. As Bosworth suggests, 'any hint of a critical reading of Mussolini's rule could be attacked by the anti-Communist media as insulting the war dead and "outraging" the *patria*' (Bosworth, 1998, pp. 109–10).

With the communist threat dominating mainstream political debate, and a corresponding veto—official or otherwise—on anti-fascist discourse, Tambroni's courting of the *MSI* did not seem wildly at odds with the perceived consensus. Bosworth states, 'to a naïve onlooker, all that he seemed to propose was an acceptance politically of what was already the norm in the functioning of the national economy, society and culture' (Bosworth, 1998, p. 110). Tambroni discovered, however, that for a significant—and vocal—number of Italians, legitimising the neo-fascist right was unacceptable and 'the attempt failed in the face of massive, and what seem to have been spontaneous, popular demonstrations' (Bosworth, 1998, p. 109). His cause was not helped by the actions of the *MSI*, which in June 1960 announced its annual national congress would be held in Genoa, a city associated strongly with anti-fascist resistance. Proposed guests included Carlo Emanuele Basile, the last prefect of Genoa during the Salò era and a man associated with the deportations and deaths of many Genoese (Ginsborg, 1990, p. 256). As Roger Eatwell notes, the congress required government authorization, further implicating the Christian Democrats in the ensuing scandal (Eatwell, 2003, p. 252). Tens of thousands of Genoese demonstrated, forcing the *MSI* to postpone their congress, and as public unrest spread to other cities, Tambroni gave the police licence to shoot in emergencies, resulting in several deaths (Ginsborg, 1990, pp. 256–7). Tambroni quickly fell

from grace and was forced to resign (Bosworth, 1998, p. 110). Just as 1953 had seen neo-fascism rise as a persistent force in Italian politics, so the Tambroni affair marked the ascendance of anti-fascism as part of the prevailing ideology, with the result that 'any attempt to move in an authoritarian direction…was likely to meet with a massive and uncontrollable protest movement' (Ginsborg, 1990, p. 257).

The Tambroni controversy was part of—and arguably helped facilitate—a new willingness, within Italy and elsewhere, to discuss openly and critically the country's recent fascist history (Bosworth, 1998, p. 236). This debate circulated in various media, including domestically-produced feature films. David Ward cites *La lunga notte del '43* (Florestano Vancini, 1960) as one of several films which 'began to offer far less flattering images of Italy's war and Resistance experiences which contrasted strongly with the more saintly portraits of national unity and everyday heroism that had emanated from films like *Roma: città aperta* [*Rome, Open City*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945] in the immediate post-war years' (Ward, 1999, pp. 65–6). *Accattone* includes a passing reference to Buchenwald concentration camp, invoking fascist Italy's Axis ally and a site associated with the worst Nazi atrocities. In *La dolce vita*, journalist Marcello Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni) is accused by his friend Steiner of writing for 'semi-Fascist papers'. While Steiner does not accuse his friend of harbouring fascist sympathies, he implies Rubini's indifference to his employers' political outlook is tantamount to collusion. By extension, Italians who were indifferent or apathetic towards the Mussolini regime became complicit in its acquisition, consolidation and abuse of power. On another level, Rubini's father is played by actor Annibale Ninchi, star of the fascist-era epic *Scipione l'Africano* (*Scipio Africanus*, Carmine Gallone, 1937), regarded widely as propaganda for the Mussolini regime's invasion of Ethiopia. While *La dolce vita* avoids direct reference to the earlier film, Signor Rubini is depicted as an alien figure in his son's modern, cosmopolitan world, at ease only in an old-fashioned nightclub which features dance numbers from the 1920s, the decade the fascists took power in Italy. Though jovial and courteous, he rejects Marcello's invitation to stay on in Rome and spend time with him. Emotionally distant, Signor Rubini cannot give his son the intimate connection he desires, and their negligible relationship—as a boy Marcello barely saw his father, a travelling salesman—seems beyond recovery. This father-son schism is not characterised as political, yet suggests a larger generation gap where children can barely communicate with parents nostalgic for an era overshadowed by fascism, if not for fascism itself.

In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the fascist subtext identified by Whitehall is embodied in Queen Antinea's 'master race' of super-warriors, with their distinctive blonde hair and beards and lack of eyebrows (*fig. 2.1*). Italian scholars such as Vittorio Spinazzola and Goffredo Fofi associate these warriors specifically with Nazism ('nazismo') rather than a broader fascist movement that would include the Mussolini regime (Spinazzola, 1964, p. 79; Fofi, 1979, p. vi). Fofi describes Antinea's soldiers as 'the army of Aryan robots, blond and cruel' (Fofi, 1979, p. vi). Spinazzola makes direct reference to Germany's recent history, stating 'the elect race of Antinea's warriors has Teutonic features, evoking a sense of Nazi eugenics' (Spinazzola, 1974, p. 335). Domenico Cammarota is more specific still: 'the "superior" warriors with which Atlantis means to dominate the world are depicted like the mannequins of Leni Riefenstahl; tall, vigorous, blond, cold eyes and inexpressive features' (qtd. Casadio, 2007, p. 62). In essence, Italian commentators characterise the warriors as Nazis in thinly disguised form and make no reference to the Mussolini regime. These figures are Aryan, blonde, Teutonic and the male ideal of director Riefenstahl, associated closely with the Nazi government-sponsored films *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935) and *Olympia* (1938), which construct and valorise images of human physical perfection in accordance with Nazi ideology. These parallels require at least some qualification, especially with regard to the Riefenstahl comparison. It can be argued that her heroising of the human physique in the context of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games invites parallels between Greco-Roman and Nazi-Aryan ideals of physical perfection. However, Cammarota's claim that Antinea's warriors are blatant reproductions of Riefenstahl's Aryan heroes is open to question. Discussing the prologue to *Olympia*, Taylor Downing notes: 'For twelve minutes the film evokes a classical past and celebrates the human form…the power and beauty of the human body in motion' (Downing, 1992, p. 48). Shots of a male

Fig. 2.1 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961)

athlete lighting the Olympic torch against a backdrop of Ancient Greece have a stronger link to the classical tradition than the stereotypical Nazi 'superman' and the sportsman is dark-haired rather than blonde.

Above all, Antinea's super-warriors are non-Italian, their blonde hair, pale skin and inexpressive features in contrast with typical or stereotypical images of Italian masculinity. The identification of these warriors with or even as Nazis serves to distance Hercules further from the tinge of fascism linked with the *peplum*. The Italian reception of the film could be read as a collective denial of Italy's recent fascist past as something intrinsic to the nation and the national character. Ward suggests the post-war Italian liberal culture had a very particular take on fascism: 'the liberal reading of these years tended to view Fascism as a foreign, imported phenomenon which had had no lasting effects on Italian society' (Ward, 1999, p. 65). Dyer concurs that fascism came to be seen as a perversion of or deviation from 'real' Italianness (Dyer, 1997, p. 174). From this perspective, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* participates in the new willingness to debate the Mussolini era, and by extension the Nazi alliance and occupation, yet identifies its fascist aggressors as an external threat, whether from Nazi Germany or the fabled city of Atlantis. This 'Nazification' of the villains by Italian scholars can be read as a sidestepping or outright evasion of Italy's own experience of fascist government and any admission of responsibility or culpability. Nevertheless *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is one of the few *pepla* to address on any terms the fascist element associated with the genre. A mainstream film invoking fascism made in a country recently under fascist rule is significant in and of itself, whatever the constraints of this invocation. Critics and scholars outside Italy have discussed the film's fascist allegory without making a distinction between Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, suggesting its approach to the issue is not necessarily compromised by local historical revisionism. *Hercules, Samson and Ulysses* (Francisci, 1963) adopts a similar tactic of Nazification in more visceral, if superficial, form. In this instance, the heroes battle Philistine soldiers who wear customised German helmets from World War II. Anachronism aside, these sadistic thugs commit atrocities evoking the Nazi regime, such as torturing, killing and enslaving Judean villagers and slaughtering their children (onscreen in the uncensored version). If nothing else, this Nazi-tainted depiction of the Philistines counters any troubling Aryan associations evoked by the blue-eyed, light-toned Hercules and his blonde family.

In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the link with Nazism and specifically theories of eugenics is underlined by the soldiers being clones and therefore lacking the individuality associated with Hercules. They

represent an artificial form of masculinity, though it could be argued that the masculinity endorsed by the bodybuilding culture that supplied Reg Park is itself inherently and overtly constructed or 'built'. Shahabudin describes these clones as 'a cinematic realisation of science's power to remake men' and identifies a contrast and opposition between this technological power and 'the natural power of Hercules' (Shahabudin, 2009, pp. 212, 213). This is an oversimplification, as bodybuilding culture aggressively promoted its ability to 'remake' the male form, turning weaklings into he-men. It is notable that the scene where Hercules confronts the cloned guards contains an element of contest not dissimilar to the images promoted by bodybuilding media. Hercules lifts a marble tabletop over his head and dashes it to the ground, much as he did with Androcles's throne. One of the guards then matches this Herculean feat with no apparent difficulty. This could suggest these soldiers are themselves Herculean—in terms of physical capabilities if nothing else—undermining his distancing from fascist ideals. This notion is dissipated rapidly during the ensuing skirmish, where Hercules fights off the guards with ease, until removed from the arena by a hidden trap door. The direct opposition between Hercules and the super-warriors is emphasised in visual terms. The cloned soldiers resemble Hercules in photographic negative, his dark hair and relatively light clothing contrasted with their blonde hair and black armour.

The notion of cloned blonde aggressors with fascist associations can be found in other genres and national cinemas of this era. Subjected to sustained aerial bombardment during World War II, Britain was never overrun by Nazi troops, but the fear of invasion found expression in various forms long after the end of the conflict. A notable example is *Village of the Damned* (Wolf Rilla, UK/US 1960), a science-fiction thriller based on the novel *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) by John Wyndham. Born to Earthwomen impregnated by a mysterious alien force, the look-alike children are humanoid but not quite human. While Antinea's soldiers are promoted as superior physical specimens, the children have extraordinary mental powers. Lacking in emotion, they exhibit a group mind and often dress similarly, a 'uniform' that differentiates them from other children and underlines both their lack of individuality and the parallels with fascist tyranny. Where the soldiers of Antinea are defeated by Herculean brawn and brain, the children are destroyed by a middle-aged male scientist whose maturity and capacity for self-sacrifice proves stronger than their mental facility.

The fascist cloned soldiers of Antinea are linked with the film's representation of nuclear anxiety, combining the recent struggle with Nazi

imperialism and the major post-war threat to world peace. The Cold War tensions between East and West created a global fear of nuclear conflict that reached a peak in the early 1960s. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, this threat is represented, arguably, as the blood of Uranus transformed into 'a miraculous rock which has the power to change all men'. In Greco-Roman mythology, Uranus, or Ouranos, is the sky god, husband to Gaia, the earth goddess. Uranus was castrated by their youngest son, Kronos, the father of Zeus (cf. Cotterell, 1979, pp. 146, 152). From Uranus's spilled blood Gaia conceived the Erinyes, or Furies, and the Titans, while his severed phallus fell into the sea to engender the goddess Aphrodite (cf. Cotterell, 1979, p. 152). *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* dispenses with the finer details of this creation myth, depicting the rock of Uranus as an element of transformative properties that can remake or destroy. The blood of Uranus is equated, by implication at least, with the element uranium, which in turn is associated with the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. The film-makers may also have been influenced by *She* (Irving Pichel, Lansing C. Holden, 1935), based on H. Rider Haggard's 1887 novel, where a sacred flame that grants eternal life is explained in pseudo-scientific terms as an unknown and highly radioactive chemical element. In the opening scene, scientist John Vincey announces he is dying of radium poisoning after years of dangerous research, and the title character is killed by overexposure to the flame, in effect a massive overdose of radiation.

As Shahabudin notes, by the early 1960s, the long-term effects of radiation fallout were beginning to be apparent (Shahabudin, 2009, p. 212). *The Damned* (Joseph Losey, UK/US 1963) depicts a new 'race' of normal-looking children immune to radiation but themselves lethally radioactive to ordinary humans. This mutation is represented by the establishment as the supreme form of empowerment in a world where nuclear conflict is just a matter of time. Unlike Antinea's guards or the aliens in *Village of the Damned*, these children are not inherently aggressive or malevolent, emerging as victims rather than victors. Confined and continually monitored by the British government, only the extinction of the human race will bring them any kind of freedom. On this level, the radioactive children represent, for all their placidity, a form of conquest and domination more absolute than that found in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* and *Village of the Damned*, underlined by the lack of narrative closure.

In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, male subjects who prove resistant to the cloning process grow up with mutated features. Spinazzola suggests this

'blood plague' recalls radiation burns on atom-bomb victims, the slaves of Antinea displaying prominent facial disfigurements (Spinazzola, 1974, p. 335). While a direct parallel is problematic, the association of physical mutation with a mysterious, barely controllable source of power employed for military purposes would have had resonance for many audiences at the time. A liberated slave is vaporised when he stands too close to the rock of Uranus, again evoking the power of nuclear warfare. Burke argues that the annihilation of Atlantis and its inhabitants has clear parallels with Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Burke, 2011, p. 44). Shahabudin gives a very specific reading of this subtext: 'The film's warning that the danger comes "out of the west" presents an explicit critique of US possession of nuclear weaponry, in the context of Cold War paranoia' (Shahabudin, 2009, pp. 213–4). This interpretation seems overly reductive and does not address the Soviet Union's corresponding stockpiling of nuclear arms. Atlantis can just as readily be associated with the USSR: a closed, secretive, authoritarian nation state, hidden from the eyes of outsiders. Hercules asks, 'What has Atlantis to hide which mortal man must not behold?' As with the fascist aggression embodied by Antinea's warriors, the rock of Uranus is countered and neutralised through the intervention of Hercules, who undertakes the ultimate test of his super-masculine potency, stepping into its lethal light and emerging unscathed. Conquering both fascism and the nuclear threat, Hercules is a powerful, socially integrated male who breaks decisively from the past and any fascist associations, embraces the present as represented by the good life of the new Italy, and offers reassurance for the future, confronting and containing the disturbances produced by political, social and economic upheaval. From this perspective, the figure of Hercules, remodelled over the centuries in accordance with the needs and aspirations of a given society or culture, now represents the ideal Italian male and perhaps the ideal Italy in allegorical form.

3
Hercules Diminished

The American-produced *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963) was made partly in response to the international success of *Hercules*, its sequel *Hercules Unchained* and the *peplum* cycle as a whole. The film is linked to the Italian-produced *peplum* films on various levels: chronological, thematic, industrial and economic. It was financed and distributed by Hollywood major Columbia Pictures and filmed in 1961, the mid-point of the *peplum* cycle and shortly after the US release of *Hercules Unchained* in 1960. Very few American film-makers imitated or drew upon the *peplum* genre, despite the local box-office success of the Steve Reeves Hercules films. Columbia also released the comedy *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* (Edward Bernds, 1962), which depicts Herculean masculinity in broad parodic form. The low-budget *Atlas* (Roger Corman, 1961) is discussed briefly below, yet this, like the Columbia releases, was the exception rather than the rule. Most American film companies, major and minor, bought the US rights to existing *pepla*, which involved a relatively small financial outlay and the chance of a significant profit in relation to cost. A new project, by contrast, entailed a significant period of gestation—through initial pitches to post-production—with no guarantee that the *peplum* genre would still be popular by the time the film was completed. I argue, therefore, that Columbia Pictures' decision to back *Jason and the Argonauts*—and *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*—involved factors not related directly to the popularity of the *peplum*. The studio had ongoing business relationships with the key personnel involved with these films, which were, in effect, independent productions financed and distributed by Columbia. In both cases, it is these relationships combined with the commercial value of the Hercules brand name and the wider *peplum* genre that made production of the films both desirable and economically viable. I argue further in the case of *Jason and the Argonauts* that this combination of factors shaped the overall style of the film—in both form and content—and especially the depiction of Hercules and associated notions of heroic masculinity.

Relaunching the *Argo*

Unlike *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, *Jason and the Argonauts* has been characterised as both part of the *peplum* cycle and a direct imitation of the genre. Writing in 1963 for the British publication *Films and Filming*, critic Allen Eyles stated, 'it [*Jason and the Argonauts*] lacks the visual flair and sweeping scale of the best in this genre' (Eyles, 1963, p. 26), the implication—or assumption—being that *Jason and the Argonauts* was a genre film of a piece with *Hercules* and its successors. While Eyles's review may not be representative of the international or even British critical response, it is notable that at least some reviewers saw little or no reason to differentiate *Jason and the Argonauts* from its supposed Italian counterparts. In terms of the film's North American reception, critic Danny Peary states, 'the typical review lumped the picture with the numerous inferior Italian-made epics that flooded the country after the success of *Hercules*' (Peary, 1982, p. 168), though he does not give any relevant examples. The *New York Times* review implied rather than stated that the film belonged to the *peplum* or sword-and-sandal genre: 'This absurd, unwieldy adventure—if that's the word—is no worse, but certainly no better, than most of its kind.' Cited generic ingredients include 'mythological footnotes, monsters, magic and carefully exposed limbs and torsos', and the anonymous critic noted how leading man Todd Armstrong, playing Jason, 'seems spindly compared to some "beefcake" predecessors' (Anon, 1963). It seems that, for at least some critics, the subject matter and timing imposed an automatic *peplum* status on *Jason and the Argonauts* which did not require further explanation or debate. This view continued to have currency years after the film's initial release. Writing in the early 1990s, scholar Robert Murphy characterises *Jason and the Argonauts* as an 'excellent imitation Italian epic' (Murphy, 1992, p. 312). While the term 'imitation' often has negative connotations in terms of film production, Murphy's reference suggests *Jason and the Argonauts* both equalled and surpassed the more 'authentic' Italian epics of the era in its referencing of *peplum* characteristics. As discussed below, this categorisation of the film is at odds with the stated intentions of its creators.

In terms of its Italian promotion and distribution, *Jason and the Argonauts* does appear to have merged—however unintentionally—with the contemporaneous *peplum* cycle. Local audiences were well accustomed to watching mythological action films with American—or apparently American—stars and the film was dubbed in Italian, erasing any trace of linguistic disjuncture. The film's Italian title, *Gli Argonauti* ('The

Argonauts') is also the local subtitle for *I giganti della Tessaglia / Giants of Thessaly* (Riccardo Freda, 1960), risking potential confusion with the earlier Italian-produced film. Jason, or Giasone, was a recurring figure in the *peplum*, serving as a supporting character in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*, and as the hero of *Giants of Thessaly*, though without attaining a prominence or popularity comparable to that of Hercules or Maciste. *Jason and the Argonauts* could also be incorporated into a *peplum* subgenre, featuring an athletic rather than muscle-bound hero who relies on his wits and skill—and occasional help from the gods—instead of brute strength, as seen in *Giants of Thessaly*, *Il Colosso di Rodi / The Colossus of Rhodes* (Sergio Leone, 1961) and the semi-parody *Arrivano i Titani / Sons of Thunder* (Duccio Tessari, 1962).

The prime movers in the making of *Jason and the Argonauts* were the established American team of producer Charles H. Schneer and special effects technician and associate producer Ray Harryhausen, best known for combining live action with model animation. Harryhausen is now regarded as the major creative force behind *Jason and the Argonauts*, though at the time his name was little known to audiences and the US press book for the film barely mentions him, focusing far more on Schneer. Harryhausen established his career with a series of modestly-budgeted science-fiction adventure films shot in black and white and sold largely on the strength of their monsters and aliens. *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (Nathan Juran, 1958) marked a departure from Schneer and Harryhausen's previous work, which featured contemporary narratives with largely urban North American settings. From this point on, their films were often set in exotic foreign lands in the distant, sometimes mythical, past. A switch to colour filming heightened the sense of spectacle, and the narratives were constructed around a series of set-pieces highlighting Harryhausen's fantastical animated creatures.

Jason and the Argonauts marked a continuation of this production strategy, which, arguably, ran parallel with—and coincidental to—the emergence of the *peplum*. *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* was released the same year as *Hercules* opened in Italy. Unlike *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, which draws on Middle Eastern folklore, *Jason and the Argonauts* has a clear and perhaps inevitable overlap with the *peplum* genre. Schneer pitched the project to Columbia in December 1960, when the success of *Hercules Unchained*, in particular, was still recent history (Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p. 151). It derives its narrative from the same Greco-Roman myths as the second half of *Hercules* and the entirety of *Giants of Thessaly*, which, in contrast to the earlier film, omits the figure of Hercules. It was filmed on Italian locations, including Paestum, in Southern Italy,

and Palinuro, south of Naples, and interiors were shot at the modestly-sized Palentino Studios in Rome (Harryhausen, 1989, pp. 75, 78; Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, pp. 152, 153). The production employed a number of Italian personnel, including several associated with the *peplum*, such as art director Antonio Sarzi-Braga, an assistant set designer for *Ercole al centro della terra / Hercules in the Centre of the Earth* (Mario Bava, 1961), and actor and fight arranger Ferdinando Poggi, who served as the fencing master on *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961). In terms of subject matter, locations, infrastructure and, in a few instances, crew members, *Jason and the Argonauts* intersects with the *peplum* on several levels.

Given these factors, it is not surprising that *Jason and the Argonauts* is regarded as imitative of the *peplum*. However, it was not intended to be received as an imitation and does not qualify as pastiche as the term is usually understood. Characterising pastiche as 'a kind of aesthetic imitation', Richard Dyer asserts that this form 'imitates other art in such a way as to make consciousness of this fact central to its meaning and affect' (Dyer, 2007a, pp. 1, 4). In order for pastiche to operate fully, its status as an imitation must be signalled by the producer to an extent that can be recognised, acknowledged and appreciated by the intended audience. Despite the narrative elements in common, and many of the same characters and settings, *Jason and the Argonauts* is not patterned closely on *Hercules*, nor does it assume audience familiarity with the film or the *peplum* genre as a whole. In terms of recorded intent, Harryhausen stated his interest in the subject matter predated the North American release of *Hercules* (though his accounts are not consistent) and, furthermore, that he and Schneer did not want *Jason and the Argonauts* to be associated with the *peplum* (Harryhausen, 1989, p. 73; Harryhausen and Dalton, 2005, p. 102; Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p. 174). Though commercially successful, the *pepla* were not highly regarded by many critics, and it is understandable that Harryhausen and Schneer would not want their relatively expensive production linked with low-budget dubbed imports. The film was intended as a showcase for Harryhausen's special effects (Harryhausen and Dalton, 2005, p. 110), not the muscular male body associated with the *peplum* genre in general and *Hercules* in particular, certainly within the United States.

Columbia Pictures' advertising campaign for *Jason and the Argonauts* emphasised its status as an original piece of work. The press book cover bears the banner headline, 'Presented on the Screen for the First Time…' and the sample posters illustrated within all feature a variation on this line, 'For the First Time on the Screen' (1963, p. 1). Not only did *Jason and the Argonauts* fail to acknowledge *Hercules*, it also

denied that the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece had previously been retold in a film, eradicating *Hercules* and *Giants of Thessaly* from existence. By contrast, *Atlas*, an American-financed production shot on locations in Greece, could be characterised as an imitation *peplum*, certainly in terms of its domestic promotion (cf. Nisbet, 2006, p. 12). In the case of *Jason and the Argonauts*, it is relatively easy to identify its differences from the *peplum*, not least the elaborate set-pieces highlighting animated monsters, the largely British cast and the relatively high production values. The published budget of US$3 million, quoted in the press book, is far higher than the production costs for the average *peplum* film (1963, p. 15).

Hercules Reimagined

The depiction of Hercules in *Jason and the Argonauts* is markedly dissimilar from that found in *Hercules*. On the most obvious narrative level, the latter film is based around the figure of Hercules, rather than Jason, and chronicles two of his famous labours before his chance encounter with Jason prompts the quest for the Golden Fleece. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Hercules is reconfigured as a supporting character, his scenes occurring over half an hour of the film's running time. He is also depicted as a thief, or at least an amoral opportunist, a radical departure from the irreproachable morality embodied by Hercules in the 1958 film, though not out of keeping with pre-Prodican depictions in Greco-Roman myth and art. Furthermore, there is little doubt that the representation of Hercules in *Jason and the Argonauts* is, in part at least, a conscious reaction to his depiction in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*. Harryhausen stated that the casting of Nigel Green, a South African-born character actor based in Britain, was a deliberate strategy to avoid comparison with the *peplum* epics: '[W]e wanted to get away from the Italian beefcake the public had expected of him [Hercules]' (Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p. 152). This characterisation of the *peplum* incarnations of Hercules as 'Italian beefcake' is revealing on several levels. Associating this figure with the Italian film industry, which is broadly accurate in terms of production context, obscures its origins in Greek mythology and, moreover, implies it is not intrinsic to other national film industries, especially the American and British ones that respectively supplied the finance and stars and most of the crew and supporting cast for *Jason and the Argonauts*. The term 'beefcake' also has pin-up connotations of passivity and sexual display more overt than the bodybuilder tag, suggesting the Italian films were more about pose than action. Yet the *peplum* stars, led by Steve

Reeves, were largely American, and 'beefcake' is an Americanism originating with Hollywood stars such as Victor Mature.

Harryhausen and Schneer had a different conception of Hercules, for which Green was deemed suitable. As Harryhausen put it: 'Nigel was perfect as a slightly older and more intelligent hero, who in his ratty old lion skin was both a braggart and compassionate' (Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p. 152). Green's Hercules is tall, tanned and muscular but not super-built. Usually seen bare-chested, Hercules lacks the sculpted bodybuilder physique of the Steve Reeves version, an established *peplum* signifier of super-masculinity. In *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, the latter character, played by Canadian bodybuilder Samson Burke, conforms to the standard *peplum* representation of the hero in appearance if not character. Unlike Reeves and his imitators, parodic or otherwise, Green's Hercules has chest hair, which designates mature masculinity in antiquity. *Peplum* stars underwent regular depilation to remove body hair, a practise carried over from bodybuilding culture, where the chest, arms and legs were shaved in order to display the shaped physique to best advantage (Hollywood stars who expose their torsos for the camera have frequently undergone a similar treatment). No mention is made of Hercules's demigod status, as recounted in Greco-Roman mythology, and it is implied that he is mortal. Peary argues that 'Hercules is portrayed as a *man* of believable strength and physical proportions' (Peary, 1982, p. 168).

Hercules performs three feats of exceptional if not supernatural strength in *Jason and the Argonauts*, a notably modest number compared to the numerous exploits seen in *Hercules* and most other *pepla*. His last display of strength is pushing open the door to the treasure house of the gods, slammed shut by unseen forces. He is framed in medium shot, bracing his back against the door and his left arm against the door frame, a composition that emphasises his determination and effort as much as a spectacular physique. While there is an element of spectacle in the representation of Hercules, it is relatively low-key compared to the 1958 *Hercules* or indeed *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, where a low-angle medium long shot shows the latter lifting a man above his head, emphasising his size, strength, physique and prowess in combat. The positioning, framing and lighting of Green's body, along with his more regular, non-built physique, are part of a strategy to shift the emphasis from the muscular male body to the special effects that are the film's main selling point. It also suggests that the formerly imposing Herculean physique has been displaced as the film's main site of heroic masculinity.

Hercules makes his entrance approximately twenty minutes into the film, heralded by an off-screen announcement that plays over a shot of

applauding and cheering spectators. The film then cuts to a medium shot of Hercules, placed in the centre right of the frame. Hercules is heralded by Phalerus, a fellow athlete competing for a place on the *Argo*. Positioned in the centre left of the frame, Phalerus invites his fellow spectators—both intra- and extra-diegetic—to recognise, acknowledge and applaud the legendary hero of Greece. Hercules announces himself in the third person, 'He's here!', and raises his arms, further emphasising both his presence and his expectation that this presence will be regarded and acclaimed as an important event. In *Hercules*, the hero signals his presence with a daring act of rescue, for which he expects no acclaim or reward. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Hercules simply announces himself and demands a reaction. He throws the familiar lion skin over his shoulder, underlining his identity and status. Compared to Reeves's Hercules, this Hercules's initial display of athleticism and strength—a brief wrestling match—is not particularly remarkable, let alone supernatural. It is his very presence, its proclamation and acknowledgement, which evoke and confirm his heroic status during this first appearance. Hercules's incorporation into the homosocial order that constitutes the Argonauts is on the basis of his name and reputation alone. On the other hand, Hercules's debut in the film also features his first interaction with Jason and the first implication that the former's heroic status is open to question.

By the time Hercules makes his appearance, Jason is established as the film's focal character—implied in the title—and a man of moral purpose and both physical and mental strength. Like Hercules in the 1958 film, the adult Jason is introduced with a heroic act, saving King Pelias from drowning, echoed in a later scene where he rescues Medea from the waters controlled by the Clashing Rocks. Seeking to establish further his heroic status and claim to the throne of Thessaly, Jason looks to Hercules as an established hero. Hercules's arrival and display of wrestling is followed by a long shot of Jason and his fellow athletes admiring Hercules and moving to the foreground of the frame to greet him, Jason repositioned in medium shot. All men are drawn to Hercules, signalling their respect and recognition of his higher, heroic status. Both Jason's and the audience's perception of Hercules shifts radically during the course of the latter's scenes.

Hercules and Jason are first framed together in a medium long shot that places Jason on the left and Hercules in the centre right of the image. Hercules is positioned face-on to the camera, emphasising further his dominance of both the shot and the admiring Jason. This sense of seniority is underlined in Hercules's dialogue: 'I mean to sail with

you, Jason. Tell me which champion you want me to beat.' His desire to join the crew of the *Argo* is not a request but a stated intention. He demands to be matched against only the best athletes and denies there can be any element of competition, as his victory is inevitable and cannot be questioned. This confidence in his heroic status, which could be construed as arrogance, is matched by an assumption that this status is not and cannot be shared or matched by the other athletes. Jason's dialogue in the next shot, 'I know you can beat us all. Your place is reserved', would appear to endorse this view, yet the framing of this medium shot is less clear-cut. Jason is placed in the centre left of the frame, Hercules in the centre right, evoking a sense of equality endorsed further by the characters shaking hands and appearing to be, in this framing, of similar height. Furthermore, it is Jason who is now placed face-on to the camera, suggesting that Hercules's dominance of the athletes' meeting and, by implication, of the homosocial order they represent, is open to challenge.

The contrasting and—in due course—competing forms of masculinity represented by Hercules and Jason are underlined by a generational schism, the former depicted as a noticeably older man. G. Karl Galinsky notes how Apollonius Rhodius's *The Argonautica* represents Hercules as a hero of the old order, whose will and exceptional strength are sometimes defeated, even if only by a snapped oar (Galinsky, 1972, p. 109). In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Jason's shifting relationship with Hercules can be read as an allegory for a younger generation's disappointment and disillusionment with an older generation that was previously respected, trusted and even worshipped. While generational conflict is more obviously represented by Jason's antagonism towards the usurper-tyrant Pelias, its simplistic good-versus-evil construction lacks the relative complexity afforded his relationship with Hercules. Pelias is a villain who remains such while Hercules is a hero—his heroism pre-established beyond the film's diegetic space—who will be deprived of this status.

The Kennedy Ideal

The competing masculinities embodied by Hercules and Jason can be related to wider debates on male potency within the United States during the early 1960s. Some critics of 1950s America claimed it marked a period of conformity, anonymity, apathy and unquestioning compliance to the dictates of the corporate business machine. Individualism, ambition and initiative were not only surplus to requirements but

potentially threatened the stability of the capitalist structure and, by implication, society as a whole. Robert J. Corber notes how aggressive competition between men was discouraged in favour of submission to corporate structures that enabled a secure position within an organisation: 'The successful negotiation of the corporate hierarchy depended less on personal ambition and individual initiative than on respect for authority, loyalty to one's superiors, and an ability to get along with others—all qualities traditionally associated with femininity' (Corber, 1997, p. 6). Respect, loyalty and sociability were not intrinsically negative qualities, yet their promotion at the expense of more traditionally male attributes had eroded the masculine potency—and therefore strength—of America, both individually and collectively. While space does not permit a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, commentators argued that an increasingly urbanised, corporate and consumerist American society risked undermining the spirit, drive and virility of the modern American male, which in turn sapped the national strength and will in the face of Soviet aggression. K. A. Cuordileone states: 'One social commentator after another in the 1950s had decried the softness of Americans, their lack of self, of character and inner strength… Americans grown self-absorbed and apathetic' (Cuordileone, 2005, p. 172). Whatever the simplifications and generalisations of this view, it gained wide currency during the late 1950s against a backdrop of heightened Cold War tensions. If American males were becoming soft, apathetic and inward-looking, their Soviet counterparts were increasingly tough, determined and ambitious.

John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign and subsequent presidency emphasised repeatedly that America needed a new spirit, toughness and leadership that only he could provide, especially in its international relations at a time of marked US–USSR antagonism. Kennedy was by no means the first US leader to cultivate a public image of masculine toughness. John F. Kasson notes how Theodore Roosevelt, president from 1901 to 1909, promoted himself as a horseman, hunter and soldier (Kasson, 2001, p. 4). Kennedy's 1960 election campaign invoked the concept of the 'New Frontier', which in Cuordileone's words, 'promised to reinvigorate the nation with the spirit of courage, adventure, daring, and self-sacrifice that its would-be leader personified' (Cuordileone, 2005, pp. 168–9). Robert D. Dean identifies the Kennedy persona with 'an elite ideology of masculinity, focused on heroic deeds of masculine will and courage in the "public" sphere' (Dean, 2003, p. 179). The timidity, apathy and self-centredness that had supposedly taken root in American society during the previous decade was no longer merely

frowned upon but actively condemned as unacceptable, dangerous and downright un-American.

In part, Kennedy aimed to recapture what E. Anthony Rotundo terms 'passionate manhood', a concept that first took root in America during the late nineteenth century and promoted qualities such as ambition, competitiveness, combativeness and toughness as positive attributes rather than dangerous urges to be repressed and controlled (Rotundo, 1993, pp. 5–6). Kennedy allied these qualities with the physical prowess, discipline and sense of purpose required of both an athlete and an international statesman. It is notable that Kennedy's promotion of the strong, athletic male body drew on the classical world, which also inspired the US-centred bodybuilding culture. Cuordileone states that Kennedy 'imbued his physical fitness crusade with an aura of classical sophistication by invoking the example of the ancient Greeks. They saw excellence in body as the complement to excellence in mind' (Cuordileone, 2005, p. 203). The concept is also found in Roman culture: *mens sana in corpore sano*, 'a healthy mind in a healthy body'. Dean concurs: 'He [Kennedy] imagined the ideal as one resembling a kind of classical Greek masculinity…an *agon* of physical, mental, spiritual striving' (Dean, 2003, p. 179). While this reference to the Greek ideal could be read as a superficial marketing strategy, the appeal to classicism—whatever Kennedy took this concept to mean—is in itself significant. In 1960s America, Ancient Greece and its associated masculinity was a cultural reference point shared by a sufficient number of the people Kennedy wished to address and influence. Just as Jason selects his crew of Argonauts through intense competition—with the notable exception of Hercules—so Kennedy assembled a team of bureaucrats promoted both for their minds and bodies, sportsmen as well as intellectuals. As Dean notes, members of the presidential team were expected to demonstrate their sporting prowess and tenacity through such events as fifty-mile hikes: 'Kennedy repeatedly created scenarios for the ritual enactment of physical ordeals as tests of manhood' (Dean, 2003, p. 183).

From this perspective, it is instructive to consider images of Kennedy circulated publicly during his presidential campaign and presidency and the qualities they invoke. A photograph of Kennedy during his wartime service on the PT-109 motor torpedo boat frames the young lieutenant in medium long shot, his expression purposeful and resolute. Kennedy's exposed upper body shows him to be of average build, rather than spectacular physical dimensions, underlining his supposed 'Everyman' status and corresponding courage, patriotism and spirit at a time of both national and global crisis. On an extra-textual level, the picture serves

as a reminder that Kennedy earned war hero status in 1943 by saving fellow crewmen after the boat was sunk during enemy action, a courageous, selfless deed in the public sphere. The PT-109 incident remained valuable currency for Kennedy during his presidency and was perpetuated and circulated further in popular entertainment media, inspiring a hit song, 'PT-109' (1962), performed by Jimmy Dean, and the film biopic *PT-109* (Leslie H. Martinson, 1963), starring Cliff Robertson. Later portrait shots of Kennedy as president emphasise his looks, widely regarded as handsome, his style and grooming. While these elements could be characterised as superficial, they proved marketable assets in the promotion of the Kennedy brand image. The frequent tilt of his head and upward glance connote intelligence, thoughtfulness and aspiration, all qualities befitting a national and, by extension, world leader. Though clearly older than the figure in the PT-109 shots, Kennedy retains an aura of youthfulness, now enhanced by the quality of maturity and its associated experience, wisdom and judgement. Pictures of Kennedy with his wife Jacqueline and two children promote the devoted husband, father and all-round family man. These images emphasise the personal aspect of the public man while also providing the strongest evidence possible of his masculine virility in reproductive terms. This range of images enabled ordinary Americans to feel they were being granted closer and privileged access to their president in terms of his illustrious past, public role and private life.

Kennedy's public image also had wide recognition and appeal outside the United States, as reflected in contemporary foreign media coverage. An interesting example is found in the Italian magazine *Ercole*, subtitled *rivista di cinema e culturismo* ('the review of cinema and bodybuilding'), which focused on the *peplum*, its stars and developments in the associated bodybuilding culture. The September 1963 issue features a photograph of Kennedy making a speech (1963, p. 23). Wearing a suit and tie, his middle and lower body concealed, he offers a marked contrast to the images of bodybuilders that dominate the magazine, usually dressed in no more than posing briefs. However his facial expression and hand gesture have connotations of forcefulness, determination and striving also linked with bodybuilding culture. Furthermore, the quoted speech emphasises strength, youth, health, vigour and vitality, all qualities essential for a champion bodybuilder. The quoted material may not be representative of the speech as a whole or even an accurate translation of the original text. Nevertheless, the use of Kennedy in *Ercole* reflects how his image and associated ideology were felt to have relevance and appeal for the magazine's target readership. The qualities and values embodied

by the US president had wide application outside the American political sphere, intersecting here with an avowedly Herculean model of masculine strength and potency that was by its classical nature constructed as both timeless and universal.

A number of US films produced around this time can be linked, albeit in differing ways, with the new intellectual yet virile masculinity associated with Kennedy. This is not a question of a direct connection, in terms of a Kennedy-inspired film cycle, with the obvious exception of *PT-109*. I argue, however, that several key films of this era refract ideas and images associated with the Kennedy persona, including *Jason and the Argonauts* and the 'Rat Pack' vehicles *Ocean's Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960) and *Sergeants 3* (John Sturges, 1962). *Ocean's Eleven* addresses the notion of collective endeavour in a fashion both similar to and at variance with that promoted by the Kennedy administration and, indeed, by *Jason and the Argonauts*. This caper movie stresses the main characters' youth, just as Kennedy's youthfulness relative to incumbent president Dwight D. Eisenhower was employed successfully as a campaigning tool, connoting spirit, vitality and bold new ideas. Similarly, Danny Ocean (Frank Sinatra, a Kennedy supporter) and his pals represent a new generation of entrepreneurs, criminal or otherwise, with the initiative and ability to execute a robbery thought impossible. The gang's activities also reflect a disillusion and disappointment, personal and professional, with post-war life in 1950s America. High-level corruption and greed, political and otherwise, are taken for granted. Only two of the team are married and both have separated from their wives, running against the grain of stable suburban domesticity and equally secure heterosexual relationships. There is an interesting, if undeveloped, critique of 1950s consumer culture, the men placed under undue economic pressure to provide the luxury and status goods desired by their female partners. The Las Vegas heist offers a chance for these men to reclaim their wartime masculine potency and power, demanding both strength—of body and mind—and intelligence. Unlike Kennedy and Jason, who represent benevolent leadership and opposition to tyranny, Ocean's eleven express their masculinity in terms marked as self-centred and illegitimate, evading official retribution but ultimately failing in their mission.

If *Ocean's Eleven* reflects male discontent with 1950s America and its associated 'soft' masculinity, the western *Sergeants 3* can be read as addressing the challenges facing the Kennedy administration during the early 1960s, in terms of tough leadership, foreign aggression and racial equality, in the form of a cavalry-versus-Indians narrative. Team leader Sergeant Mike Merry (Sinatra) is not superhuman, unable to beat

a giant-sized buffalo hunter in a fair fight, much as Jason cannot defeat the bronze giant Talos without assistance from the goddess Hera. However, Merry, like Kennedy and Jason, can adapt to his enemy and fights the renegade Indians with any method necessary. Merry's position in the army hierarchy marks him as an establishment figure. As with Kennedy, Merry breaks with the previous generation and style of leadership yet must establish a new order and command the respect of his subordinates. *Sergeants 3* constructs a series of inter-group tensions between Merry and his comrades, and while Merry's leadership is ultimately endorsed, he also becomes more open to suggestion and, by extension, the notion of collective endeavour.

Set in 1873, eight years after the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery, *Sergeants 3* reflects 1960s debates on racism and the growing Civil Rights movement which Kennedy supposedly endorsed, without offering a consistent or even coherent stance on the various issues, constrained perhaps by the requirements of generic verisimilitude. Jonah Williams (Sammy Davis Jr.) is a freed slave whose wish to join the army is frustrated by the colour bar, a clear sign of persisting racism in post-Civil War—and post-World War II—America. However, Williams is characterised less by a sense of pride and self-worth and more a desire to please, belong and achieve acceptance on white man's terms. His reward for several heroic acts—and serious injury—is acceptance into the army at the lowest level of private. The achievement of racial integration, depicted as a proud accomplishment, is therefore marked by qualification and restriction, emphasised by the standing Williams being flanked by two white soldiers on horseback, elevated above him.

It could be argued that many US films of this era refract, to whatever degree, ideas associated with the Kennedy image. I suggest contrasting and more conservative forms of heroic masculinity can be found in historical epics of the period, notably *The Alamo* (John Wayne, 1960) and *El Cid* (Anthony Mann, 1961). Set in 1836 Texas, *The Alamo* is concerned with resistance to a military dictator, inviting Cold War parallels, though the climactic defeat of American forces, albeit of a heroic variety, renders too close a comparison problematic. Davy Crockett (John Wayne) is first seen in long shot, on horseback, flanked by his men, part of a homosocial group marked further by their distinctive buckskin outfits. The middle-aged Crockett serves as a paternal leader, his status reaffirmed through regulated, non-dangerous contest and combat. While the films discussed above can be categorised broadly as intersecting with a Kennedy-era Democrat worldview, *The Alamo* articulates clearly its conservative political stance. Crockett declares to his Mexican lady friend,

Flaca: 'Republic. I like the sound of the word.' Flaca refers to Crockett as 'Mr. Tall American', underlining his masculinity, size, nationality and the associated physical and moral strength.

El Cid is set in eleventh-century Spain, where nobleman and soldier Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar (Charlton Heston) leads the country's defence against invading Islamic fundamentalists from North Africa. Initially depicted as a youngish man, Rodrigo ages noticeably during the course of the narrative, acquiring grey hair and a beard, standard markers of mature masculinity. Like Crockett, he is a patrician figure and natural leader who does not seek leadership, holding the crown of Valencia but refusing to claim it for himself. The younger generation is represented by the royal family, Princes Alfonso and Sancho and Princess Urraca, in terms of petulance, immaturity, division, selfishness, conflict and fratricide. The relationship between Alfonso and Urraca is marked as unnatural, Sancho taunting his brother: 'You held her too close!' I concur with Leon Hunt's assertion that this implied incest is a clear marker of '"deviant" behaviour signifying the decadence of a corrupt regime' (Hunt, 1993, p. 75). Serving as the crowned Alfonso's surrogate father, Rodrigo leads by example, bearing the responsibilities of a king until Alfonso acquires the character and honour of a king, alongside the status and power he previously abused. The humbled and penitent Alfonso now resembles a younger version of Rodrigo, reinforcing the notion that the qualities of leadership have finally been passed from one generation to another. This sense of continuity is notably absent in the relationship between Jason and Hercules or, indeed, the transition from the Republican Eisenhower to the Democrat Kennedy.

Both *Ocean's Eleven* and *Sergeants 3* reflect various aspects of the Kennedy administration. Qualities associated with the Kennedy image also intersect with the depiction of the adult Jason, a fearless man of action who undertakes a perilous voyage into the unknown, battling hostile forces in his quest for a prize that will deliver his country from oppression and endorse his rightful leadership. While I do not suggest the figure of Jason was consciously modelled on the Kennedy ideal—though Charles Schneer pitched *Jason and the Argonauts* to Columbia a month after Kennedy's election victory—his representation in the film chimes with contemporary debates over a revitalised American masculinity where hard-headedness and determination combined with youth, intelligence and fair-mindedness. Of course, the Kennedy image would acquire a posthumous association with mythology of an Anglo-Saxon variety. Interviewed after her assassinated husband's funeral, Jacqueline Kennedy revealed he loved the closing song from the 1960 Broadway

musical *Camelot*. The Kennedy administration was subsequently known as Camelot, drawing a direct parallel with the legendary court of King Arthur, or at least the Americanised popular entertainment it had inspired (Brown, 1988, p. 42; Hellmann, 1997, p. 145). In retrospect, this analogy invites some uncomfortable parallels—in terms of intrigue, betrayal, infidelity and corruption—yet at the time the association of Kennedy and his inner circle with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table gained wide currency, suggesting honour, chivalry, glamour, benevolence and, above all, a mythical heroism to equal that of Jason.

It would be both restrictive and reductive to characterise *Jason and the Argonauts* as a veiled Cold War allegory rendered in Greco-Roman mythological form, with Jason standing in for Kennedy. What I do suggest is that the film was devised and produced at a time of heightened international tensions and refracts this geopolitical climate in ways both unconscious and conscious. Cuordileone asserts: 'Kennedy placed the imperative for courage, nerve, will, and self-sacrifice in competitive Cold War terms' (Cuordileone, 2005, p. 172) and the US press book for *Jason and the Argonauts* makes explicit reference to the Cold War. It is difficult—if not impossible—to gauge the extent to which exhibitors and the media pursued this angle, yet the fact that Columbia regarded the Cold War as a suitable promotional tool is itself of considerable interest. An account of producer Charles H. Schneer's search for authentic locations, intended for reproduction in newspapers and magazines, states: 'Journeying across most of Southern Europe, he followed Jason's alleged route, according to classical scholars, and at one point was led perilously close to the sputnik-launching Black Sea area on the fringe of the Iron Curtain where Jason is said to have found the coveted Golden Fleece' (1963, p. 15).

This segue from historical accuracy to contemporary relevance is interesting on several levels. The emphasis on peril implies Schneer placed himself in danger in the line of duty, a combination of scholarship, adventurousness and masculine toughness in line with the Kennedy ideal. Moreover, the Soviets' launch of the sputnik satellite in 1957 had come as a shock to America, suggesting as it did that Russia was ahead in the much-debated space race (cf. Cuordileone, 2005, p. 177). There are stories of public events being halted midway so an announcement could be made to a stunned, sometimes disbelieving audience (cf. King, 1982, pp. 15, 17, 21–2). Evoking the sputnik affair served to remind Americans of a major Cold War upset, while underlining that the Soviet technological and political threat embodied by this satellite was still an unpalatable

reality, as represented by the Iron Curtain. Far from being a remote figure of ancient history—if not outright myth—Jason becomes a fearless Cold Warrior in the Kennedy mould, crossing new frontiers in the name of rightful leadership for himself and peace and security for his country. Just as Kennedy had gone head to head with the USSR during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, so Jason and his elite team of warriors make a successful incursion into enemy space to (re)claim a prized object that confers great political power (cf. Dean, 2003, pp. 9–10; Cuordileone, 2005, pp. 230–1). As with Kennedy's promotion of the New Frontier, the film suggests lasting peace must be secured overseas as well as at home.

Hercules Diminished

If Jason reflects the new intellectual manliness of the Kennedy era, the masculinity embodied by Hercules is by implication ineffective and anachronistic. During the 1960 election campaign, the JFK team argued repeatedly that incumbent president Eisenhower and his vice-president, Richard Nixon, represented a tired leadership that lacked the toughness, discipline and determination necessary to deal with Soviet aggression (Cuordileone, 2005, p. 181). Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a political analyst and Kennedy adviser, characterised the Eisenhower administration as 'the politics of fatigue', implying a lack of both strength and will in the president and his inner circle (qtd. Mordden, 1990, p. 32). Kennedy's campaign speeches included the line: 'The old era is ending. The old ways will not do' (qtd. Cuordileone, 2005, p. 167). While the Kennedy team avoided personal attacks on Eisenhower, the implication seemed clear. As Cuordileone notes, 'aged, exhausted leadership would now give way to that of youth, strength and courage' (Cuordileone, 2005, p. 173).

I see little direct connection between Eisenhower and Hercules, yet the latter as represented in *Jason and the Argonauts* also embodies an aging, faltering generation whose flawed male potency is both compromised and reckless, in contrast to the depictions of heroic paternal masculinity in *The Alamo* and *El Cid*. On the most obvious level, Hercules's hair and beard have touches of grey and he is markedly older than Jason, who has smooth features, neatly cropped dark hair and a beard, underlining his youth but also his manliness. Hercules is usually bare-chested, which reflects his heroic virility yet also, perhaps, an underlying anxiety over this virility and consequent need to express it constantly in physical terms. This relates to the 1950s 'crisis of masculinity', reflecting social, cultural and political upheaval, discussed in chapter one. Hercules's first appearance and cry of 'He's here!' imply a need for recognition

and reassurance that he is still the hero of reputation. His unkempt hair and mangy lion skin suggest a man who is wild, uncivilised and undomesticated. The skin is also a reminder and trophy of his first labour, slaying the Nemean Lion, and as such serves as a marker of former glory, here presented as worn and battered. It is notable that Hercules bears a passing resemblance to the older Rodrigo in *El Cid*, though the maturity embodied by the latter has very different connotations. The aged, injured and prone Rodrigo represents not weakness or frailty but near-superhuman strength of mind, transcending his exposed, arrow-pierced body to fight on and triumph even beyond death.

Jason's torso remains covered throughout *Jason and the Argonauts*, whether by a simple tunic or leather breastplate, suggesting his conception of masculinity is not centred on the open display of his physique. Opting for tailored garments over animal skins, Jason embraces the trappings of civilisation and also possesses a wider social and political perspective than Hercules, manifested in his communion and debate with the gods of Olympus. Like Kennedy, he negotiates deals and alliances, however temporary or expedient, such as his bargain with the blind prophet Phineas, ridding the latter of tormenting harpies in exchange for information. Jason also adapts to and masters new spaces and environments, contending with potentially or actively hostile inhabitants. Hercules seems increasingly awkward and out of place, becoming inflexible and stubborn. Associated with rugged individualism, Hercules operates within a very small sphere—the heroic yet reckless adventurer—and becomes lost outside it. On another level, Hercules's cultured English accent equates the character with the fading, largely impotent British Empire, unfavourably compared and contrasted with Jason's embodiment of America's ever-growing superpower status. It is notable that the stars of Italian-produced Hercules films—Reeves, Mark Forest, Reg Park, Kirk Morris (Adriano Bellini), Alan Steel (Sergio Ciani), Ed Fury *et al*.—were invariably dubbed with American accents in the English-language versions of their films, regardless of the performer's nationality.

The marginalisation of Hercules in *Jason and the Argonauts* is, I suggest, a necessary and inevitable strategy given his prescribed subservience to Jason and, on another level, the special effects-dominated set-pieces. The film's very title plays down Hercules's role and significance, underlined by Jason's killing of the hydra after Hercules's departure from the narrative. In Greco-Roman myth, the Lernaean Hydra is a many-headed monster slain by Hercules as the second of his Twelve Labours. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, the reattribution of this heroic deed reflects the film's strategy of diminishing Hercules's male potency in favour

of the youthful masculinity represented by Jason. On an inter-textual level, the US press book for *Jason and the Argonauts* does not feature an image of Hercules or billing for actor Nigel Green on the cover. Green is thirteenth-billed in the cast list and the inaccurate plot synopsis does not mention Hercules at all (1963, p. 14). The press book includes a brief comic-strip rendition of the plot in simple black-and-white line drawings. This section features the only image of Hercules, holding a giant pearl inside the treasure house of the gods while the armoured Jason stands behind him, looking disapproving. The representation is inaccurate on several levels yet underlines Hercules's loss of heroic masculinity. From a narrative perspective, Jason is not present during the treasure house scene—which pairs Hercules with the youthful Argonaut Hylas—nor is he (Jason) dressed in armour during the Talos sequence. It is Hylas who shows an interest in the pearl, while Hercules is drawn to a brooch pin he mistakes for a javelin. The spatial relocation of Jason and change in costume cause the association of weaponry to shift away from Hercules, whose masculine potency is, arguably, compromised further by his fascination with jewellery, a traditionally feminine adornment and object of interest.

Jason's authority over the Argonauts, Hercules included, is asserted openly prior to the Isle of Bronze sequence, as he conveys Hera's warning to take only food and water. A medium long shot depicts Jason staring directly at Hercules, his first open challenge to the latter. Jason then moves towards Hercules, from left to centre left of the frame, takes a step up, and places himself on a higher level than Hercules, literally and figuratively (*fig. 3.1*). This composition reverses the characters' positioning during a key scene in *Hercules*, where it is Steve Reeves's Hercules who occupies the high ground, elevated above and isolated from Jason and

Fig. 3.1 Jason and the Argonauts (1963)

the other Argonauts. Here, Jason is already in a position of leadership, albeit a tentative one, prior to his meeting with Hercules, who implicitly challenges Jason's authority but does not seek official leadership of the Argonauts. The competition and conflict between their respective representations of masculinity reaches its culmination in the sequence on the Isle of Bronze, where Herculean strength is reduced to impotence through interaction with a third 'character', the bronze giant Talos.

Talos is manufactured by Hephaestus, god of fire and metal-working (Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p. 157). To use the terminology of competitive bodybuilding, Talos represents the ultimate built hard body. His bronze form is a literal manifestation of the tanned or bronzed look valued by the California-based body culture. As a moving statue, he also embodies the concept of the classically posed muscular physique as a work of living sculpture. On another level, Talos can be viewed as a negative critique of bodybuilding culture, reducing the male body to a soulless machine of retribution and destruction. In some respects, his representation in *Jason and the Argonauts* relates to the US retitling and promotion of *pepla*, which, as noted, emphasise the sheer size of the main character. While Talos is not the central figure in the film, he dominates much of the publicity—in the US and elsewhere—and features on the cover of the press book. His dominance is magnified in the film itself from the first to the last shots in which he features. Standing in a valley, Hercules and Hylas are reduced to insignificance by a series of vast bronze statues, especially Talos. Clad for combat, with a helmet and sword, and crouched down on one knee, Talos is a tensed body ready for action.

Talos can also be equated with the threat of nuclear conflict prevalent during the early 1960s, a super-weapon which cannot be defeated by conventional means. He is not deployed without provocation, however, and his representation eschews a simplistic confrontation between forces of good and evil. Contained on the Isle of Bronze, Talos is not a threat unless activated by an aggressive and illegal act, in this case the theft of the pin. Jason, an intelligent leader and diplomat, is willing to follow Hera's terms to ensure the safety of his men and his mission. Hercules is not and his actions have disastrous consequences for the Argonauts. Unlike the conflicts in *The Alamo* and *El Cid*, which also invite Cold War parallels, the battle with Talos is represented as neither inevitable nor necessary.

Hercules's initial interaction with Talos, prior to the latter's attack on the Argonauts, is of special significance in relation to issues of heroic status and male potency. In most *pepla*, the hero is framed regularly in

close low-angle shots that emphasise his impressive physical build and imposing presence. In this sequence, repeated high-angle long shots stress Hercules's smallness compared to Talos. One medium long shot places Talos on the centre left of the frame, looming over Hercules, the bronze statue looking off to the left. Hercules is positioned on the right, his presence reduced to the back of his head and shoulders. As Talos turns his head to look at Hercules, the latter looks up to meet the statue's gaze, then backs away to the right and out of the frame. Hercules's absence serves to confirm Talos's dominance of the image. Subsequent long shots show Hercules fleeing from Talos, the former's avowedly heroic masculinity reduced to impotence by the latter's gigantic hard body and transition from stillness to motion. Hercules is emasculated throughout the duration of the sequence, this loss of male potency underlined by the absence of his emblematic lion skin. A long shot places him behind the unarmed Argos, an older man, and the youthful Hylas, as they await the approach of Talos, Hercules sheltering from the consequences of his actions behind two physically weaker men who make no claim to his heroic status. When Hercules does attack Talos, stabbing at his foot, his efforts have no effect at all and do not even prompt retaliation from the giant. To underline Hercules's loss of heroic masculinity, Hylas is killed by the toppling remains of Talos—drained of his life essence by Jason—while trying to retrieve the fallen pin, Hercules's illegitimate prize. Both *The Alamo* and *El Cid* highlight the climactic martyrdom of the aging yet resolute hero in an explicitly national and political context. Hercules is a rootless figure with no discernible country or ideology and the martyrdom in the Isle of Bronze sequence falls on his young friend Hylas, leaving Hercules alive yet shamed, diminished and redundant. The arrogance and foolishness of the older generation has doomed a prime example of the younger generation, one who earlier beat Hercules at the discus by employing his brain over the latter's brawn, a marked contrast to the demigod's unbeatable throw in *Hercules* (1958).

Hercules's final scene sees the fallen hero with his head bowed, avoiding rather than meeting the looks of other men, let alone demanding them as he did during his introduction. A medium long shot places Hercules between Jason, Argos and crewman Polydeuces, who now regard him with sorrow and pity rather than admiration. The film cuts to a high-angle shot as the diminished Hercules retrieves his lion skin from the ship, marking both his former glory and his departure from the Argonauts and the quest for the Golden Fleece, another animal hide of symbolic significance. As with the 1958 *Hercules*, this incarnation of the

hero ultimately has no place in the patriarchal and homosocial order established and represented by Jason, though for very different reasons. Initially a figurehead for the Argonauts and accorded a status comparable with that of Davy Crockett or Rodrigo Diaz, Hercules voluntarily removes himself from their group, not because it cannot accommodate the potential threat of his super-masculinity, but because this masculinity has been tested and found wanting. *The Alamo* and *El Cid* emphasise the ultimate triumph of their respective representations of heroic paternal masculinity. In *El Cid*, the deceased Rodrigo assumes a legendary status and corresponding potency that transcends corporeality, his corpse leading the united forces of Spain to drive the invaders into the sea. A low-angle long shot depicts Rodrigo mounted on a white horse, clad in shining armour, his expression noble and resolute, all conventional markers of heroic status. The last image of Hercules places him in extreme long shot, as Jason, Polydeuces, Argos and Phalerus—who heralded Hercules's arrival at the athletics contest—turn away from him. They then exit frame right, leaving Hercules on his own. This image stands in contrast to the first shot featuring Hercules, where he faces the camera—and his fellow athletes—and commands their attention. Now a distant, barely identifiable figure, Hercules is subject to a spatial diminution and isolation that signifies his exclusion from the remainder of the film's narrative less than halfway through its running time. *Jason and the Argonauts* systematically devalues Herculean masculinity as an ineffectual, outdated and unstable construction that can neither lead nor serve an evolving patriarchy.

Hercules's interaction with Jason anticipates and initiates the erasure of his heroic masculinity at the hands of Talos. In terms of contemporary reception, this strategy was identified and commented on by a number of critics. Eyles notes that Hercules is 'here presented as something of a liability' (Eyles, 1963, p. 26), a negative attribute that stands in contrast to his representation in the 1958 *Hercules* and its Italian-produced successors. While Eyles's review does not attach any significance to this radically different depiction of Hercules, I argue that it ties in with the promotion of Jason as a new, dominant form of masculinity. This in turn intersects with ideas of tough, liberal and youthful leadership prevalent in American politics and society during the period of the film's conception, production and release. With Hercules marginalised and emasculated, Jason reaffirms his role as the central protagonist and embodiment of a differentiated and functional masculinity, signified by his defeat of Talos, successful completion of the quest and sustainable heterosexual bond with Medea.

Jason and the Argonauts was not a significant commercial success in the United States when released in the summer of 1963. While numbers are elusive, Harryhausen notes: 'Sadly, the film was not the box-office success we had hoped for on its initial release', though he states it performed much better in the UK and trade journal *Kine Weekly* listed *Jason and the Argonauts* among the box-office hits of 1963 (Harryhausen and Dalton, 2005, p. 114; Harryhausen, 1989, p. 73; cf. Murphy, 1986, p. 194). If box-office returns can be regarded as a reasonably accurate indicator of popular appeal, the reconfiguration of Jason as a Kennedy-style Cold War leader had little resonance for American audiences. The depiction of Hercules in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*, which drew heavily on 1950s body culture and wider debates on masculine potency, rendered the mythological hero in a form both accessible and appealing to audiences and consequently became a highly commercial property. Conceived partly as a reaction to the *peplum* cycle, *Jason and the Argonauts* diminishes Hercules in favour of Jason, a relatively obscure figure from antiquity and with no associated adjective to match the familiar 'Herculean'. While Kennedy's posthumous association with Arthurian legend had clear resonance for a significant number of people, the representation of Jason did not establish a sustainable or even recognised parallel with the Kennedy-centred modern masculine heroism, which looked to the future as much as the ancient past. Indeed, far from embodying tough, democratic leadership, Jason's pursuit of the Golden Fleece to secure kingship over Thessaly could be represented as a selfish and self-centred enterprise. It is notable that the film offers little depiction—or even sense—of Thessaly on any terms, let alone as an oppressed kingdom in need of liberation, while the majority of the Argonauts are not characterised to any extent and serve little narrative function.

This reading of the film's lack of domestic success is, however, too simplistic, disregarding other pertinent factors, not least its links, however tenuous, to the *peplum* cycle. Harryhausen suggests *Jason and the Argonauts* suffered from its association with the *peplum*, which by 1963 had lost much of its audience appeal in the US: 'The exhibitors and the public seemed to form a premature judgement based on the title and on the vogue' (Harryhausen, 1989, p. 73). Three years on from *Hercules Unchained*, *peplum* films no longer received the saturation promotion and distribution that had attracted large audiences and box-office receipts. Though *peplum* films were theatrically distributed in the US until the mid-1960s, the genre's blockbuster success was a relatively short-lived phenomenon, reflecting a decline in audience interest. Released towards the tail end of the cycle, *Jason and the Argonauts* was promoted in a

fashion that did not distinguish it sufficiently from the *peplum*, even though Schneer and Harryhausen's earlier fantasies were very successful, especially *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, and could have been employed far more extensively as a marketing tool. Released to coincide with the 1963 school summer vacation, *Jason and the Argonauts* was sold primarily as a film for children with a campaign evoking a tired genre parodied over a year earlier by *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, released in February 1962. Leaving aside the extent to which Jason's masculinity intersects with that promoted by Kennedy, the setting and subject of *Jason and the Argonauts*, combined with its generic associations and promotional campaign, did not permit Jason to be received as a viable embodiment of masculine leadership for 1960s America, despite the clear contrast with a faltering, discredited Hercules.

4
Hercules Rebooted

After the decline of the *peplum*, the figure of Hercules more or less vanished from the Italian cinema and resurfaced only intermittently in American film and television, as with *Hercules in New York* (Arthur A. Seidelman, 1969), a low-budget comedy starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as an immature, arrogant demigod. The US-Italian co-production *Hercules* (Luigi Cozzi, 1983), starring bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno, revived the hero as a sword-and-sorcery protagonist whose bulky physique sat at odds with his vulnerability to the whims and malice of both gods and mortals. The film flopped in Italy, did little better elsewhere and a 1985 sequel, shot back-to-back, was barely released. The demigod achieved a higher profile in the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–9), starring Kevin Sorbo, and the Disney animated feature *Hercules* (Ron Clements, John Musker, 1997), both of which generated short-lived TV spinoffs focused on the young Hercules.

Running for six seasons, *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* is by far the most successful small-screen rendition of the character. For reasons of space (and time) I will confine my comments to the first season, which was preceded by five TV movies and established and consolidated the series formula. In terms of appearance, this Hercules is markedly different from the Steve Reeves-inspired *peplum* incarnations. Though tanned and tall, muscular and athletic, he is not super-built in the bodybuilder tradition. In place of the standard dark hair and beard, he is clean-shaven with long brown hair. The skirt-like garments favoured by *peplum* heroes are replaced with a sleeveless yellow top and brown leather trousers. This Herculean body is rarely put on open display, largely sidestepping the objectification and latent (homo)eroticism associated with the *peplum*. Shots of Hercules bare-chested, as in 'Eye of the Beholder', 'Ares', 'Pride Comes Before a Brawl' and 'The Warrior Princess', are motivated and legitimised by industrious yet non-spectacular activities such as rock-shifting, roof-mending, rowing (glimpsed in the opening titles) and wall-building, though the brief highlighting of his straining muscle

suggests an awareness of the *peplum* antecedents. In 'Gladiator', a lustful female despot paws his bare chest with barely contained excitement; he is subsequently flogged, the bloody welts on his back also in time-honoured *peplum* fashion. In 'As Darkness Falls', Hercules strips to the waist to bury a fallen comrade in arms, an extreme form of regulating or suppressing 'inappropriate' responses to his exposure. This body is also placed in safely heterosexual contexts, as in 'The March to Freedom', where the bathing hero is massaged by an Asiatic princess, playing on male fantasies of exotic oriental women, and his protracted love scene with Xena in 'Unchained Heart'.

The departures from *peplum* tradition suggest a calculated reconfiguration of Hercules in terms of the rugged yet righteous American action hero, a longtime television staple, underlined by Kevin Sorbo's pronounced Midwestern accent and the regular use of modern US idiom, such as 'enough already' ('The Road to Calydon'). Whatever his roots in Greco-Roman mythology, or Italian popular cinema, the pumped-up musculature, near-permanently bared flesh and facial hair of the *peplum* Hercules have no place in this rendition of the demigod. He even makes his entrance in the first episode through the double doors of a tavern, evoking numerous television western heroes. The series takes a self-reflexive, often humorous approach to Hercules's legendary name and heroic status. In 'Unchained Heart', a companion proposes to make him the subject of the very first celebrity biography.

Under the surface, this Hercules is arguably in the Reeves/Prodican tradition, most obviously in his extraordinary strength, irreproachable morality, fierce sense of justice and belief in duty and toil for the greater good. In *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958), the hero's entrance is announced by the uprooting of a tree. In the first episode of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, 'The Wrong Path', his arrival is heralded by a bad guy flying through the air, marking another act of rescue. Though skilled with a knife and sword, he prefers to depend on his own bodily strength and agility. In 'The Gauntlet', a 'fist-cam' shot into an opponent's face emphasises his awesome Herculean power, invariably coupled with a sense of mercy beyond normal human measure.

The opening scenes of 'The Wrong Path' also recall *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (Cottafavi, 1961). Alongside the tavern fight, Hercules is depicted as a domesticated figure, associated with hearth and home, living with his wife, Deianeira, and their two children. This domestic contentment is, however, destroyed when his family are killed by Hera, his stepmother and arch-enemy. Denied the domestic sphere, Hercules rejects its now empty trappings, emphasised by shots of the burning house double-exposed

with his departure. Flashbacks to domestic and marital bliss, and visits to his family's graves ('The March to Freedom'), underline his enduring loss. A high-angle long shot diminishes the grief-stricken Hercules in size yet also marks his defiance of Hera and all other gods, another departure from the *peplum*, where deities are sometimes sidelined but usually respected. The enmity between Hercules and Hera, along with the occasional female villains, human and monster, is countered by a succession of sympathetic female characters, including his mortal mother Alcmene. Throughout season one, various young women, often on the margins of society, embody the same values as Deianeira and, of course, Hercules himself: intelligence, fair-mindedness, loyalty and courage.

The US television film *Hercules* (Roger Young, 2005), made in the wake of the post-millennial epic revival, is notable for depicting less palatable aspects of the hero, normally glossed over in film and TV incarnations. Lustful and arrogant, this pre-Prodican Hercules kills his lyre tutor during a temper tantrum and later slays his three young sons in a drug-induced frenzy. This darker take on the character is accompanied by departures from the standardised Herculean look established by the Steve Reeves version. The adult Hercules (Paul Telfer) is clean-shaven, underlining his lack of maturity, and his muscular form carries burn scars incurred during a suicide attempt, the imperfect body reflecting a similarly troubled mind. This reconfiguration of Hercules is, however, incorporated into a narrative of abandonment, persecution, enlightenment and redemption that invites viewer sympathy. The young Hercules is a classic teen misfit whose lack of social graces and etiquette produces angst and embarrassment, as in the Disney version. His slain tutor is magically revived to serve as his sidekick and chronicler. The killing of his sons is more problematic yet presented as a plot by his mother and wife to drive him to self-destructive madness, the delirious Hercules convinced he is attacked by demons. Given that femininity is also associated with shape-shifting monstrosity, such as a sphinx and man-eating mares, *Hercules* is arguably an exercise in sustained misogyny where the hero's worst misdeeds stem from female malevolence. Hercules is shown longing for domesticity, in terms of home, wife and family, resembling a younger version of the character in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. His growing wisdom, judgement and political nous facilitate a softened, happy ending, at odds with Greco-Roman myth, where Hercules is married to Deianeira, here a wood nymph and the one female character not motivated by vengeance, spite and selfishness. What this says about twenty-first century gender relations I leave for others to decide, though it seems hardly progressive.

While Hercules flourished on television in various forms, the Disney feature film did not prompt further big-screen outings for the hero. The next significant cinematic rendering of the character was *The Legend of Hercules* (Renny Harlin, 2014), which restages the tale via the CGI-inflected visual aesthetics and action choreography of *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), *300* (Snyder, 2007) and the television series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010). Like the 1983 *Hercules*, this is in part an origins story, even featuring the conception of Hercules, his father Zeus an invisible but keenly-felt presence in his mother Alcmene's bedchamber. Hera's traditional enmity towards Hercules, as depicted in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and the 2005 *Hercules*, is here displaced onto his stepfather, Amphitryon, king of Tiryns. The goddess even sanctions the adulterous divine-human coupling in the name of a greater good: the end of Amphitryon's tyrannous rule.

The adult Hercules (Kellan Lutz) is muscle-bound in the *peplum* tradition, his hairless torso tensed and gleaming as he climbs a sheer rock-face. His short brown hair and scant stubble suggest a young man on the verge of maturity, while his white garment and cloak connote an accompanying innocence, contrasted with his scheming half-brother Iphicles, dark-haired and often clad in black. In his first scene, Hercules is depicted as athletic, playful and considerate, while the natural surroundings connote leisure, relaxation and, especially, freedom from the oppressive regime of his stepfather. His youth is also linked to a limited perspective, Hercules unable to see beyond his frustrated love affair with Hebe and initially rejecting his divine heritage. Exiled to Egypt, Hercules discovers both his exceptional strength, taking several arrows without flinching, and its limitations, knocked unconscious by a hostile warrior. There are inconsistencies or ellipses in this representation of Hercules. Having slain the Nemean Lion with his bare hands, he allows Iphicles to take credit for the deed along with the lion skin, this acquiescence unmotivated on any discernible level, especially given Iphicles's hostility. Hercules later wears a lion pelt as a cloak, presumably the Nemean skin, though his acquisition of it is unexplained and the garment receives little emphasis given its narrative and thematic significance and long-standing association with Hercules.

The film plays with the concept of identity. As a member of Amphitryon's court, Hercules is known as Alcides, an alternate name for the hero derived from Greco-Roman mythology. Taken captive in Egypt, he calls himself Hercules, ostensibly to conceal his true, royal status. The funeral service and pyre for 'Alcides', in fact the body of an unnamed soldier, mark the end of his old identity. Stripped to the waist, his flesh seared

with a branding iron (another marker of his new identity?), Hercules serves as galley slave, pit fighter and gladiator, the arena crowd chanting his name in established *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000) tradition. His strength and skill are extraordinary, defeating six opponents single-handed, yet not quite those of a demigod. I would add that the nuances of this depiction are rendered problematic by the post-*300* conventions of the mythological action film, where once supernatural feats such as leaps across vast distances are now mere genre convention. Other images have more resonance in terms of Herculean potency and identity. A low-angle shot frames Hercules against cheering crowds and a blue sky as he brandishes an iron mace, substituting for his trademark wooden club, in a gesture of victory. In a prolonged sequence, the recaptured Hercules is chained and flogged on Amphitryon's order. A low-angle medium close-up shows him bowed, bloodied and helpless, the blue sky that marked both freedom and triumph now obscured by a wooden barrier. An overhead shot has Hercules gazing to the heavens, his face, arms and shoulders top-lit, as he finally acknowledges and prays to Zeus, previously doubted and dismissed, for the strength to save his friends. His illuminated body is infused with divine strength, allowing him to break his chains and the masonry that imbeds them, evoking the pillar-toppling scene in the 1958 *Hercules*. During the final battle with Amphitryon, Hercules's sword is transformed by divine intervention into a lightning bolt, affirming both his status as the son of Zeus and his acceptance of 'Hercules' as his true name and identity. It is, however, the image of Hercules wielding his broken chains, his heroic masculinity unleashed upon the forces of oppression, which endorses *The Legend of Hercules*'s place in the Steve Reeves tradition.

5
I'm Spartacus!

In cinematic terms, there is a notable juxtaposition of, and divergence between, Herculean, classical, pagan male forms (enlarged and muscular) and post-classical, Christian male forms (lithe and lean) as illustrated by the Hercules figure versus the figure of Christ on the cross. While not all Greco-Roman forms of masculinity are as enlarged as the Herculean model, classical action films, *pepla* or otherwise, may purposely posit the two forms in opposition, especially those with overt or subverted Christianized themes. This chapter focuses on representations of crucifixion, which Western cultures largely perceive as a Christian mode of death despite its origins in pre-Christian cultures. Richard Dyer characterises Christianity as 'a religion whose sensibility is focused on the body' (Dyer, 1997, p. 15). While this is debatable, the centrality of Christ's crucified body to Christian doctrine and iconography is beyond question. Leon Hunt describes the crucified body as contradictory, exhibiting passivity and control, humiliation and nobility (of sacrifice), eroticism and (religious) transcendence (Hunt, 1993, p. 73). Over the centuries, these contradictions have been carried over and often highlighted by representations of crucifixion, in various media, and associated images such as the martyred Saint Sebastian. Crucifixion—literal or figurative—is also a feature of classical epics, *pepla* and sword-and-sorcery films. Epic heroes such as Judah Ben-Hur and Rodrigo de Bivar, 'El Cid', are openly associated with Christ, in the former case interacting with him, whereas the pre-Christian Spartacus is arguably more complex in terms of the cruciform figure.

There is a long history of linkage between Christianity and figures from the classical world. It can be argued that Hercules, demigod son of Zeus, was an obvious choice for Christian appropriation and incorporation. Alastair Blanshard states: 'He seems ready-made for a narrative about the son of God who dies suffering and becomes divine…Hercules' apotheosis became a standard Christian allegory for the resurrection' (Blanshard, 2005, p. 146). The comparison of Hercules with Christ in

terms that favoured both dates back several centuries. As G. Karl Galinsky notes, while the early Christian Church attacked Hercules, once the demigod no longer posed a religious threat he, alongside other pagan deities, became an allegorical figure and as 'the supreme exemplar of virtue and justice was eventually even identified with Christ' (Galinsky, 1972, p. 188).

This Hercules/Christ analogy is evident from the early fourteenth century and can be found in works by Dante Alighieri and John Milton (Galinsky, 1972, pp. 202, 203, 205). The *peplum* genre, with its emphasis on Greco-Roman classicism and heroic action over noble sacrifice, rarely featured explicitly Christian subjects, perhaps sensitive to Vatican scrutiny. Steve Reeves, the most successful *peplum* star, appeared in only one film, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Bonnard, Leone, 1959), with an overtly Christian theme. Here the cross is linked initially with murder, looting and arson, whether daubed on the wall of a burning house or carved on a victim's chest. Yet it is clear early on that the Christians have been framed for these crimes and are in fact noble, pacifist and courageous in the face of pagan scheming and oppression. They are also helpless victims dependent on centurion Glaucus (Reeves) whose growing sympathy towards Christians is mediated through his relationship with fellow Roman Ione, a convert who proclaims Christ her true god in tearful medium close-up. While Glaucus fights for the Christians, he embraces Ione rather than her new congregation and is kept apart from them visually, witnessing their hymn singing through a barred window as a distant observer. The *peplum* hero aids Christianity without becoming Christianized (cf. Burke, 2011, p. 194), the moral strong man saving the virtuous yet vulnerable group; the film does not link Glaucus with the crucified body even in veiled form.

A number of *pepla* invoke crucifixion, whether as fleeting visual reference or recurrent motif, refracting the Catholic-inflected culture, social and political, in which they were produced. *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958) and *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961) employ crucifixion and martyrdom imagery in an ostensibly classical-pagan context. In *Goliath and the Barbarians* (Campogalliani, 1959), hero Emiliano (Steve Reeves) is tied in cruciform pose twice over as he faces the 'Test of Truth', while *Le sette fatiche di Ali Babà / The Seven Tasks of Ali Baba* (Emimmo Salvi, 1962) has the crucified hero framed in a heroic low angle as he spits at his oppressors, defiant in the face of death. In *Maciste l'uomo piú forte del mondo / The Strongest Man in the World* (Antonio Leonviola, 1961), Maciste (Mark Forest) is chained to a hanging wooden platform fitted with spikes. If he cannot bear the weight of the platform it will

descend and impale his two friends, chained either side of him. While the analogy with Christ and the two thieves is tentative, having the parched Maciste drink from a waterlogged sponge suggests this parallel was intentional.

Hercules Conquers Atlantis (Cottafavi, 1961) briefly puts its hero in cruciform position and he acknowledges the patriarchal authority and superior power of his father Zeus, a more nebulous, indefinable form of masculinity. At several key points in the film, Hercules calls upon Zeus for aid or at least divine favour as he performs an extraordinary physical feat of strength or searches for his friend Androcles. In *Hercules*, the title character recognises and respects the gods but neither invokes nor requires their assistance in the performance of his labours. The hero of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* recognises and accepts his human limitations. In this instance, Reg Park's Hercules is closer to the representation of Jesus Christ in *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* / *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Pasolini, 1964), whose entreaties to God and accompanying gazes to heaven are expressed in terms of their father-son relationship. This Hercules, more so than the Reeves incarnation, embodies both virtue and justice while acknowledging and respecting the higher authority represented by God the Father or Zeus.

Hollywood-produced epics of this era are open in their referencing of Christian themes and imagery, perhaps not surprising in a post-war culture where notions of church, family, patriotism and wholesome entertainment were closely intertwined, not least in opposition to the godless Soviet Union. Crosses and crucifixion are key motifs in *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), in more concentrated and schematic form than the 1925 version. Judah Ben-Hur is introduced in extreme long shot, cross-shaped wooden beams above his head, top-lit and centre-framed as the focal point of the image. While this composition suggests divine radiance and spirituality, the non-Christian Judah, a Jewish prince, must undergo a series of ordeals that precede and parallel those of Christ before finding salvation and fulfilment. The cross-beams become a target for a javelin contest, anticipating the torn and punctured crucified body, and Judah will later pass beneath them as a prisoner of the Romans. He is marched through the desert, his clothes ragged; as a galley slave he is stripped to a loincloth, emphasising his bare torso, arms tensed against his oar, gaze turned downward but expression resolute and voice firm. Judah still suffers, his back lashed by the whip, but he cannot be broken. When he later collapses in cruciform position, he is triumphant, having escaped from the underworld below decks and proved his worth to a Roman consul. Judah's body retains its strength and integrity under the harshest

conditions while the body of his corrupt Roman enemy Messala is literally broken, with no trace of nobility or transcendence.

First viewed in long shot, the body of Christ is present yet elusive, glimpsed rather than seen. As Judah lies in the dust, parched with thirst, the shadow of Christ falls upon him, accompanied by celestial music, followed by a robe and sandals, then hands which cool Judah's head with water. Their fingers touch—evoking Michelangelo's God and Adam shown in the opening titles—and Judah rises (resurrected) to walk tall again. Judah is mistaken for Christ and, after the chariot race, proclaimed by Pontius Pilate as 'the people's one true god…for the time being'. He is crowned with laurels, rather than thorns, yet discards them, renouncing any trapping of Roman divinity. Judah is called before Pilate, as Christ will be, and warned not to crucify himself over resentments and loyalties; at Christ's trial, bloody whip marks on his back recall those on Judah in the galley, both Roman-inflicted. The shadow of Christ (and the cross) falls on Judah once more, on the road to Calvary; this fleeting reunion marks Judah's embrace of the new faith, underlined by the closing shot of three crosses backlit by the new dawn.

El Cid (Mann, 1961) employs a combination of crucifixion and arrow imagery, perhaps a fusion of Christ and Saint Sebastian. As Hunt notes, Rodrigo is not literally crucified but 'is associated with its iconography throughout the film' (Hunt, 1993, p. 73). In his first scene, the camera tilts down a burnt cross pierced with Moorish arrows. In answer to a holy man's prayer, Rodrigo steps into frame, sword in hand. Knocking the arrows from the cross—one remains, which proves significant—he places it on his shoulder, evoking Christ and Calvary in clear fashion. Prior to a duel, Rodrigo prays for God's judgement before a gold cross; the bloody chest wound he incurs in the fight invites parallels with the wounded Christ while anticipating his own fate. The Christ analogy recurs when the exiled Rodrigo encounters three crosses by a roadside, recalling Christ and the two thieves, and gives water to a leper named Lazarus. Rodrigo's rival turned ally Count Ordóñez is crucified by Ben Yussuf, leader of the Moorish invaders. The use of arrows rather than nails to pin his hands evokes the vandalised cross carried by Rodrigo, underlining Ordóñez's reformation and redemption as a follower of the Cid. Rodrigo takes an arrow in the chest and willingly gives up his life and body in the presence of a cross that hangs over his (death) bed. His 'resurrection' before his enemies, his corpse fixed on his horse, is accompanied by dazzling light, thunderous organ chords and a sense of transcendence. Rodrigo becomes what Hunt terms the transfigured hero who is more than a mere man; such heroes may have religious

overtones, or merely legendary status (Hunt, 1993, p. 66). Rodrigo, or rather El Cid, embodies both qualities.

Representations of Spartacus, on film and television, have usually been made in ostensibly Christian countries yet are located in pre-Christian worlds. Thus while the figure of Ben-Hur is linked directly with that of Christ, Spartacus invites more diverse readings not necessarily bound up in Christian tradition. Though by no means Herculean, Spartacus is both man of the people and exceptional individual, vulnerable and indomitable, contradictions expressed through his body in its various incarnations. The opening scene of the 1960 *Spartacus* has the hero manacled to a rock *a la* Prometheus, though as Roman rather than divine punishment. His crucifixion, one of 6000, marks a form of triumph over the Roman Empire he could not defeat on the battlefield. As Hunt notes, Spartacus fights 'for the right to be crucified', ostensibly to spare his friend Antoninus this fate, but primarily to achieve legendary status through a transition from mortal man to symbol of freedom enabled and ennobled by crucifixion (Hunt, 1993, p. 73). Spartacus offers up his body in the name of a just cause; ultimate mastery of the corporeal form is expressed in its voluntary surrender. Spartacus the man is beaten by the Romans and his followers are mostly killed in battle or executed. Spartacus the legend cannot be defeated. This transition and transcendence is endorsed on a domestic level by the presence of Varinia, his lover. She presents their infant son to Spartacus as the embodiment of their love, the continuation of his bloodline and a symbol of the freedom all men will one day have by right. A medium close-up of Spartacus shows the realisation on his face. Varinia holds Spartacus's right foot and places her head against it, their last physical contact. While these images invoke Christian iconography of the crucified Christ, they are not defined or contained by this precise and limited reading.

Son of Spartacus (Corbucci, 1962) serves as an unofficial sequel to the 1960 film. Steve Reeves stars as Randus, a Roman centurion and confidant of Julius Caesar, who discovers his true heritage as the son of the Thracian rebel. The US version opens with a prologue which states that, twenty years after the death of Spartacus, his name (and what it stood for) seems forgotten, suggesting his struggle against Rome and slavery was in vain. Randus is initially an establishment figure, supporting the status quo and naively accepting slavery as part of life. Travelling by ship, he looks on as both dead and injured slaves are thrown overboard. However, a medal around his neck, revealed as belonging to his father, is stained with a slave's blood, both a sign of Spartacus and a mark of the Roman oppression he fought against. Randus is acclaimed

Fig. 5.1 *Son of Spartacus* (1962)

and reconfigured as the slaves' new redeemer, by the sole survivor of Spartacus's army, and accepts his legacy. He later suggests to Crassus, his father's arch-enemy, that Spartacus never really died, underscored by the sign of 'S' that marks a new slave uprising. Randus later witnesses another slave execution, standing by this time to protect his identity as the rebel leader, his dilemma emphasised in a close-up that also affirms his status as the heir of Spartacus (*fig. 5.1*).

Randus's political and moral enlightenment is associated with crucifixion imagery. In the opening sequence, a long shot of desert landscape reveals six crucified bodies receding into the distance. The camera tracks to a low-angle medium long shot of a crucified man, condemned as an enemy of Caesar. A high-angle long shot over the cross framing Randus and two fellow soldiers shows the former's obvious disquiet at this spectacle, while his companions regard it as a necessary if unpalatable evil. After the man twice asks for death, both begging and demanding, a high-angle medium shot shows Randus thrusting upwards with his sword, while a reverse shot of the prisoner connotes both pain and relief. In breaking Roman law, he performs his first act of deliverance. Captured by slavers, Randus is tied in cruciform fashion, evoking the fate of his father and his own act of mercy killing. He later frees slaves left to drown in cruciform positions, leaving their guards to the same fate, turning Rome's ruthless methods against it.

Even Randus's heroic strength of mind and body cannot defeat the Roman Empire, and the liberator of slaves is captured by Crassus and tied once more in cruciform position. Though triumphant over his father's killer, Randus seeks to save his followers by delivering himself to Caesar's justice. Caesar states that Randus is, like his father, no longer a man but an example, a threat to Rome that must be eliminated. Sentenced to share his father's fate, he is framed through a newly-erected cross against a desert backdrop, invoking the opening scene. Randus's salvation lies with his followers, who swarm over the horizon to confront Caesar's

forces armed only with their bodies and spirit. They challenge Caesar to crucify them all, evoking the 'I'm Spartacus!' scene in the 1960 film, and win freedom for themselves and Randus, Caesar the populist overriding Caesar the despot (cf. O'Brien, 2011, p. 196). As Randus walks into the distance, the cross falls into the sand, trampled by the freed slaves. *Son of Spartacus* challenges the institution of slavery, embodied by Crassus and symbolised by crucifixion, rather than the underlying socio-cultural attitudes that permit and depend on it, yet the film is progressive, verging on radical in its promotion of universal liberty and equality (cf. O'Brien, 2011, p. 196).

The television film *Spartacus* (Robert Dornhelm, 2004) employs Christ and crucifixion imagery in ways that depart from the 1960 version. Clad only in a loincloth, with long hair and a beard, the pre-gladiator Spartacus (Goran Visnjic) is scourged and suspended in cruciform position for fighting a Roman guard, a low-angle medium close-up emphasising his defiance in the face of death. Via double exposure, the film flashes back to another crucifixion of an adult male, witnessed by a young boy, later confirmed as Spartacus watching his father's execution, a conventional visual representation of traumatic associative memory. In the present, a nail is poised over Spartacus's hand but not hammered in due to the intervention of Batiatus, who seeks new talent for his gladiator school. This scene plays with viewer expectations based on the 1960 film, evoking Spartacus's fate in the latter and hinting that here it is postponed rather than prevented, the nail destined to find its mark. The sense of foreshadowing is reinforced with another flashback and shots of crucified criminals burned alive. The film unsettles this reading with the image of a Roman prisoner crucified on Spartacus's order. This renders problematic the reading of crucifixion as, on the one hand, a signifier of Roman tyranny, and, on the other, as a marker of nobility, sacrifice and transcendence. This deviation is confirmed when Spartacus dies on the battlefield. While his body is violated (off-screen) by Roman spears, his escape from crucifixion and its numerous associations (social, familial, religious, extra-textual) can be interpreted as a form of victory. From this perspective, the mass crucifixion of Spartacus's surviving followers serves minimal narrative or thematic purpose, other than symbolising Roman barbarity, an attribute well established in earlier scenes.

In terms of global circulation and commentary, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010) and its sequels offer the most significant depiction of the character since the Kirk Douglas version. While *Blood and Sand* highlights Spartacus (Andy Whitfield) in combat, with lingering shots and freeze frames of his exposed torso, there is equal emphasis on this

body being punished, as when his naked form is beaten by Roman soldiers. Episode one, 'The Red Serpent', plays with a Christ analogy, close-ups of Spartacus's face—bloody, sweaty and covered by long, lank hair—evoking images of Christ on the road to Calvary. Episode two, 'Sacramentum Gladiatorum', features images of Spartacus carrying a large wooden beam on his back and shoulder, another Calvary reference underscored by the whipping of his back. By and large, crucifixion imagery is employed sparingly in subsequent series. *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012) highlights crucifixion in episode seven, 'Sacramentum'. A cross is placed in a town square with the announcement that any slave who even whispers of Spartacus (Liam McIntyre) will be crucified. A female slave is punished as 'example', her gender and innocence of no issue to the Romans. As with the 2004 version, linking the cross with Spartacus evokes the 1960 film (McIntyre and Kirk Douglas posed for publicity shots to underline the connection), suggesting the bloody close-ups of nails piercing wrists and feet will be repeated when Spartacus falls before the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the inspirational power of Spartacus's name among the oppressed is now compromised, its articulation bringing death rather than hope or deliverance. A panning low-angle long shot reveals five crucified bodies now hanging in the square, a sign both of ongoing defiance and its terrible penalty, the limp corpses connoting torture not transcendence.

Spartacus: War of the Damned (2013) offers a reminder of the hero's likely fate in episode seven, 'Mors Indecepta', where a naked male rebel is crucified by Crassus's order. On his chest is carved the titular epithet, 'Death is undeceivable', or 'Death cannot be cheated', suggesting Spartacus's victories against Rome merely postpone the inevitable. In episode nine, 'The Dead and the Dying', rebel lieutenant Agron (Dan Feuerriegel) is crucified for defying his Roman captors, the nails hammered through his wrists in prolonged and graphic fashion. The emphasis is, however, on his survival, Agron leaving the cross as a living and free man rather than tortured corpse, transcendent spirit, revered martyr or inspirational symbol. The final episode, 'Victory', features the mass crucifixion along the Appian Way yet subverts expectations raised by the 1960 film, a clear reference point for the series, when it comes to Spartacus, who falls in combat speared through the back as he duels with Crassus (*fig. 5.2*). The bloody wooden shafts piercing his torso could be read as another form of crucifixion, and Spartacus suffers the prolonged death agonies associated with the latter punishment. Yet here he lives long enough to witness the surviving rebels evade Roman clutches, including Agron, who bears both the marks of the cross that could not kill him and the

Fig. 5.2 Spartacus: War of the Damned (2013)

legacy of Spartacus's achievement. Spartacus's body, violated by Rome, is restored to dignity and integrity with respectful burial by his allies.

Gladiator (Scott, 2000) toys with crucifixion imagery, linked with the body of Maximus (Russell Crowe), soldier turned gladiator. The captive Maximus is chained in cruciform position, his body exposed and eyes raised upward, light catching his forehead and arms. While the image connotes a Christ-like nobility and transcendence, underlined by his Roman-inflicted wound, the film sidelines these parallels as Maximus, mortally injured, takes revenge on his enemy before passing into a non-Christian afterlife and reunion with his slain wife and son. *Troy* (Petersen, 2004) highlights the concept of the body willingly given up. Greek warrior Achilles (Brad Pitt) is linked repeatedly with a desire for fame and immortality. Having stormed the beach of Troy and challenged the god Apollo, he salutes the cheering masses below. Achilles's pursuit of glory could be read in terms of vanity, arrogance and barbarity, yet it is also associated with death, as prophesised by his mother, Thetis. He sits in semidarkness and talks of the men he has killed waiting for him in the afterlife, accepting rather than fearful. Achilles appears to seek death rather than glory, encouraging Trojan captive Briseis to strike when she holds a knife to his throat. He drags Hector's corpse behind his chariot yet weeps over the body, wraps it in a shroud and calls the Trojan a brother he yearns to meet again. In *Helen of Troy* (Wise, 1956) and *The Trojan War* (Ferroni, 1961), Achilles is killed by Paris's arrow and his body falls in the dust, with no sense of sacrifice or transcendence. In *L'ira di Achille / Fury of Achilles* (Marino Girolami, 1962), Achilles knows he is doomed and the film concludes with him passively contemplating a sunset that surely symbolises his own impending and inevitable end. *Troy* has Achilles

felled by Paris, both defying and embracing death. Struck in the heel—which has no special significance here—Achilles stands as if to fight and advances on Paris as he is hit by more arrows. Pulling one from his body, Achilles lacks the passivity of a Saint Sebastian figure yet raises his sword again only to invite the last, fatal arrow. His final line, though couched in terms of a conventional heterosexual bond, affirms that Achilles has attained the inner peace he saw on the dead Hector's face. A high-angle crane shot pulls back from Achilles's corpse, valorising a fallen hero as it reveals Troy in flames, the former untainted by the ignominy of the latter.

Conan and the Tree of Woe

Conan the Barbarian (John Milius, 1982), an American-produced sword-and-sorcery film, stars champion bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger, regarded widely within bodybuilding culture as the successor to *Hercules* star Steve Reeves in terms of status and celebrity. Unlike Hercules or Spartacus, Conan the Cimmerian has no basis in classical myth or ancient history and is a character from twentieth-century fiction, created by American writer Robert E. Howard for the short story 'The Phoenix on the Sword' (1932) (Jones, 1982, p. 21). Given Howard's interest in bodybuilding, the origins of Conan can be traced, in part at least, to the physique culture that later informed the *peplum* genre and the film versions of Conan (cf. Herron, 1984, p. xv). Derek Elley, in his study of the epic film, states 'Conan is no more than the peplum mythic hero writ large' (Elley, 1984, p. 151). Certainly, Conan's torso is on display for much of the film, and his muscular arms are rarely covered. In the first scene featuring the adult Conan, as he pushes the vast Wheel of Pain single-handed, a high-angle shot frames Schwarzenegger's face and shoulders followed by a corresponding view of his back, connoting endurance, determination and, above all, strength. Conan later strikes a series of poses that emphasise both his skill with a sword and his muscular body.

Conan the Barbarian emphasises the hard-won attainment of the heroic body and corresponding masculinity. There is as much variation from the *peplum* as similarity in the deployment of this body, not least the extent to which his strength is tested and brought into question. Conan is depicted in terms of vulnerability and helplessness in several key sequences in ways more extreme than equivalent scenes in *peplum* films. While numerous *pepla* feature the hero being clawed by wild beasts or whipped by torturers, the punishment of Conan takes the concept of the body under attack to a new level. He is beaten and bitten,

falls heavily on jagged rocks, is thrown to the ground by his enemies and trampled underfoot. The ultimate assault on Conan's body is his crucifixion on the Tree of Woe. The *peplum* hero is rarely literally crucified, partly because this could undermine his heroic masculine potency to an irretrievable degree. Even in *Son of Spartacus*, rebel hero Randus is only threatened with crucifixion.

The Tree of Woe sequence can be characterised as contradictory—the muscular, powerful body of Conan now passive and helpless—yet there is little sense of the control or nobility identified by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim as key aspects of crucifixion (Kirkham and Thumim, 1993, p. 24). While Dyer states that the sequence establishes the 'moral superiority' of Conan (Dyer, 1997, p. 150), I argue the images of Conan crucified are not concerned directly with issues of morality. The climax of *Spartacus* (1960) has the gladiator turned rebel surrender his body in the name of a noble cause. Conan's capture and crucifixion can be attributed to an honourable, if self-centred, mission—vengeance for his murdered parents and destroyed village—yet are marked explicitly as a consequence of his recklessness and overconfidence. Rather than connote religious transcendence, in the Christian sense, the figure of Conan is linked fleetingly with Greco-Roman legend. A short scene where a vulture picks at Conan's flesh recalls the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and as punishment was chained to a rock where an eagle daily devoured his liver, only for it to heal overnight and be eaten anew the next day. Nailed to the tree hand and foot, Conan transcends briefly his enforced passivity and helplessness, biting into the vulture's neck. The sacrifice of Prometheus, who gave fire to mortal men, is reduced to a brute struggle for short-term survival, and Conan is denied a mythical heroism, martyrdom and nobility.

Howard's story 'A Witch Shall Be Born' (1934) features an episode where Conan is crucified and attacked by vultures. Howard describes how, despite Conan's agony, 'his blue eyes blazed with an unquenched fire' and he frees himself from the cross with the help of a passing outlaw chief who wishes to test Conan's strength and endurance (Howard, 2006, pp. 365, 368–9). In the film, Conan also survives his crucifixion but must be rescued by his companion in adventure, Subotai, a bold thief and brave fighter yet notably smaller in height and build. This helplessness and dependence is at odds with both Howard's character and other examples of the sword-and-sorcery film genre. In *The Sword and the Sorcerer* (Albert Pyun, 1982), released the same year as *Conan the Barbarian*, the hero, Prince Talon (Lee Horsley), also undergoes crucifixion. Unlike Conan, who is barely conscious when Subotai arrives,

Talon pulls the nails that pin his hands free from the cross then leads the rebellion against a tyrant king, showing strength, spirit and determination that have, temporarily, deserted his cinematic rival. Following Conan's rescue from the Tree of Woe, he is represented as a passive figure—silent, motionless, helpless—dependent entirely on his smaller, weaker friends for survival. A long shot shows the prone Conan flanked by his protective companions, and his formerly powerful body is later covered in black clothing that reveals only his injured face and hands, burnt by exposure to the sun. This vulnerability is emphasised further by the assault of the mound spirits, ethereal creatures who seek to claim Conan's body.

The repeated and graphic assault on Conan's heroic male body can be viewed in a wider context. There is a case for arguing that the late 1970s and 1980s witnessed social and economic anxieties similar to those of the late 1950s, when *Hercules* was released to worldwide success (cf. Jeffords, 1993, pp. 257–8). *Conan the Barbarian*'s representation of rugged, hard-won individualism and independence as expressed through a powerful male body could appeal to audiences who perceived themselves in terms of dependence and powerlessness, whether economic, social or political. Discussing Hollywood action films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Yvonne Tasker suggests, "…the enactment of a drama of power and powerlessness is intrinsic to the anxieties about masculine identity and authority that are embodied in the figure of the struggling hero" (Tasker, 1993, p. 243). The conflict identified by Tasker, which may be futile or at least irresolvable in real life, can be won decisively when enacted in the form of a cinematic narrative. Freed from the enslavement of his childhood and early adulthood, Conan operates on his own initiative as thief and avenger and is answerable to no one, uncontained and unconstrained by any social structure. His independence comes at a heavy cost, written on Conan's body as prolonged torture and multiple wounds, and should not be equated with a total lack of dependency on others, yet ultimately he emerges victorious.

In *300* (Snyder, 2007), Spartan masculinity is expressed through battle but also self-sacrifice, represented not just as a possibility but also inevitable and even desirable. This sacrifice is encapsulated in the image of the crucified hero. The film depicts the death of Leonidas (Gerard Butler) as the climax to the battle at Thermopylae, the Spartan king hit by multiple arrows and dying with his arms outstretched. According to historical record, Leonidas was killed midway through the battle, as depicted in *The 300 Spartans* (Rudolph Maté, 1962). While the Spartans fought to claim his corpse, it was subsequently taken by the Persians

Fig. 5.3 *300* (2007)

and decapitated, the head placed on a stake planted at a roadside (cf. Bradford, 1980, pp. 142, 143; Holland, 2005, pp. 294, 295). This is a striking image, but it lacks the desired connotations of noble sacrifice. In *300*, a backlit Leonidas faces an oncoming swarm of arrows, arms raised in a gesture of both defiance and welcome, already transcendent and triumphant (*fig. 5.3*).

Suzanne Turner notes of the fallen king: 'Leonidas, the only man with his eyes open, lies centrally framed and spread-eagled in the shape of a cross: the recognisable, if somewhat clichéd, spectacle of crucified saviour' (Turner, 2009, p. 141). The Spartan king becomes the saviour of Sparta, Greece, and by implication the entire free world. The comparison between Leonidas and Christ is by no means new, dating back many centuries. Just as Hercules was reconfigured as a Christian symbol, Paul Cartledge notes how third-century Christian writer Origen suggested 'that the central Christian mystery of Christ's passion and death might be suitably illuminated by a comparison with the self-chosen and avoidable death of Leonidas' (Cartledge, 2006, p. 174). In *300*, Leonidas is offered several opportunities to recognise Persian dominion and save himself, his warriors and all Sparta. The stand at Thermopylae is depicted as a question of principle as much as survival. Though represented as a contented and devoted husband and father, Leonidas chooses self-sacrifice without hesitation, linked with the notion that a Spartan cannot achieve his full potential within the domestic sphere of the family unit. True glory is found only in sacrifice to Sparta, described by one character as 'a beautiful death'. Unlike the *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery genres, which subject their heroes to extreme punishment but emphasise survival and reprisal, *300* highlights the death of its Spartan warriors in battle. Far from negating their bodies as sites of heroic masculinity, this underlines their noble sacrifice as an inspirational example to fellow Spartans, whose ultimate triumph over the Persian

hordes is so certain and unquestionable it need not be represented on screen, occurring outside the film's diegesis. Individual Spartan bodies may fall, epitomised by the crucifixion of Leonidas, yet the qualities of one Spartan warrior are the qualities of all.

If *300* recalls *El Cid* in its combination of crucifixion and martyrdom imagery, as represented by the arrow-pierced body, its depiction of the heroic male form has rather different connotations. *El Cid* highlights the nobility of Rodrigo and the worthiness of his cause, both of which imbue his death with a sense of triumph. Though mortally wounded in battle, Rodrigo dies in a domestic environment, a marginal space in *300*, his moment of death presented in a form so low-key as to be virtually offscreen. *300* sidelines its wider context and themes, highlighting the sheer visual spectacle of Leonidas's prolonged death scene. Just as the king embraces his fate, so the film embraces his punctured yet magnificent body, valorised by a descending overhead shot as he lies on the ground. Where *El Cid* and *Spartacus* (1960) depict the hero's death as the price paid for embodying freedom and justice, in *300* death itself is both glorious and beautiful.

Part II

Taming the Women with Love or Death

6
The Loves of Hercules

Hercules (Francisci, 1958) constructs femininity in terms of distraction, incomprehension and danger. This representation of sexual difference is problematic on multiple levels. Maggie Günsberg states that patriarchy associates 'the feminine, domestic, familial, heterosexual sphere with passivity and inaction' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 111). The early scenes of *Hercules* seem to validate this conservative and somewhat simplistic representation, the princess Iole depicted as a figure of vulnerability, fainting into Hercules's arms. Her slender figure, pale make-up, tailored white tunic and gold ornamentation stand in contrast to Hercules's muscular physique, black hair, tanned skin and dark animal-fur garment. The casting of a bodybuilder as Hercules serves to emphasise the difference between male and female. Anne Bolin argues that bodybuilding 'exaggerates Western notions of gender difference—muscles denoting masculinity and signifying "biological" disparity between the genders' (Bolin, 1996, p. 126). A strong, muscular figure can only be male, as women, by their nature, cannot attain this form, although there are female bodybuilders and, moreover, a physique achieved through bodybuilding is itself hardly natural. Hercules and Iole are the first characters to interact, and the repeated comparison of their bodies marks them as the film's dominant masculine and feminine forms. Male strength, power and activity are contrasted with female weakness, powerlessness and passivity.

Steve Neale asserts that, in mainstream films, the look or gaze of the spectator is by implication male (Neale, 1993, p. 19). On a more general level, Laura Mulvey argues: 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female' (Mulvey, 1992, p. 27). While Neale and Mulvey take differing positions in this wide area of debate, both suggest that within a patriarchal society the male is the looker while the female is the looked-at. In the early scenes of *Hercules*, Iole is the object of both Hercules's and the viewer's gaze, the camera lingering on her prone body. Iole is the passive object of desire, Hercules the diegetic spectator and active agent.

This apparently straightforward representation of gender difference is, however, revealed as another performance that cannot disguise the fragility and artificiality of its construction. There is an ongoing tension between establishing Hercules and Iole as a conventional heterosexual pairing and distancing them from each other. Exchanges of looks and fleeting physical contact culminate in the classic embrace-and-kiss barely half an hour into the film. This moment is framed in a low-angle medium long shot that emphasises a backdrop of trees and sky, placing the union of Hercules and Iole in a context of nature and freedom far removed from the constraints, dictates and political tensions embodied by the city of Jolco. Günsberg argues that, in *Hercules*, 'licit domesticated heterosexuality provides a framework for sexual desire…however, this framework is tokenistic and sketchy' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 107). I argue further that the framework is shown as unsustainable. Far from resolving the Hercules-Iole relationship in orthodox heterosexual terms, the film works to dismantle it over the next sixty minutes' running time. The split between the characters is reaffirmed on several levels, notably during a scene set in front of a fountain. This sequence opens with a long shot of the fountain, flanked by two stone pillars. Iole runs into the background of the shot, from right to left, followed by Hercules, who remains on the right of the frame in medium long shot. Placed on opposite sides of the fountain, Iole and Hercules are separated further by their respective sizes in the shot. The framing and composition of the shot, Iole keeping her back to Hercules, convey a sense of distance and isolation.

In the final scene, Hercules reclaims his place in the heterosexual, domesticised union with Iole that was established in the early part of the film. This conventional resolution is contradicted and subverted by the mise-en-scène. Placed in the centre of the frame, the reunited couple look off to the right, not at one another. On visual terms, at least, neither functions as the object of the other's desire. Positioned behind Iole, Hercules places his hands on her shoulders, a minimal physical contact that stands in marked contrast to their earlier embrace and kiss. The scene is staged in semi-shadow, leaving the actors' facial expressions obscured. While Iole turns her head to look at Hercules, she quickly looks away again to the right of the frame. Gazing in the same direction, rather than at each other, Hercules and Iole look beyond the diegetic space for a resolution of their relationship that the film itself is unable to provide.

This problematic union is seemingly resolved at the start of the sequel, *Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959). Hercules and Iole are now married,

a conventional formalisation and legitimisation of their relationship, underscored by Iole performing a love song as they travel to Thebes, Hercules's birthplace. This union is, however, disrupted and destabilised throughout the film, albeit without the hostility from Iole found in *Hercules*. Iole is abruptly left behind as Hercules goes on a quest to save Thebes from war. Struck by amnesia, he is taunted by her song, calling her name, yet forges a new heterosexual bond with Oomphale, the Queen of Lydia. While Hercules dreams of Iole, she is off-screen for much of the film and becomes associated with images of imprisonment, suffering and distress. A recurring sexual threat towards Iole culminates with sexual assault (ambiguously staged), contrasted with Hercules's sexual capitulation to Oomphale, which though ostensibly involuntary is marked by carnal satisfaction rather than violence and violation. Where Hercules is, at worst, morally compromised, Iole is physically brutalised, creating further distance between them. At the close of the film, Hercules and Iole are reunited, standing on the battlements of Thebes. Their expressions are sombre and there is talk of suffering, the caprice of the gods and the expectation of more misfortune to come. Hercules looks at Iole who looks ahead, then turns as they embrace and kiss. While this gesture conveys a sense of closure more pronounced than the ending of *Hercules*, it is notably chaste compared to Hercules's embrace of Oomphale, underlining the minimal physical contact between these 'legitimate' lovers in *Hercules Unchained*. Unlike Reeves's Hercules, the Reg Park incarnation in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (Cottafavi, 1961) is both a husband and a parent, his status as a family man confirmed by his adult son. Similarly, his wife Deianeira, though attractive, is noticeably older than Iole. This is a mature, stable heterosexual relationship that stands in contrast to the Hercules-Iole coupling in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*, the latter marked by initial meeting and mutual attraction, declared affection, disagreement, forced separation, sexual infidelity and trauma and pointedly delayed resolution.

The secondary female characters are similarly problematic in relation to *Hercules*'s construction of masculinity. The sequence with the Amazons is of special interest in that it offers an overt challenge to the representation of dominant masculinity and patriarchy. On a narrative level, this challenge is dissipated and marginalised through the intervention of Hercules. In other respects, the rupture of patriarchy embodied by the female-dominated Amazon society remains unresolved and uncontainable. The Amazons' characteristics suggest that masculinity, far from being a fixed, unchanging essence, is an acquired or performed quality that is not gender-specific. Their armour and weaponry are associated

with male aggression, militarism and conflict. It could be argued that the Amazons reflect 1950s debates about the new, economically-empowered woman asserting her place in the urban-centred, technologically-driven labour market, while unskilled male workers were increasingly marginalised. While direct links of this kind are problematic, it is notable that *Hercules* foregrounds the Amazons in a lengthy (twenty-three-minute), self-contained sequence where Jason and his followers assume the passivity and helplessness previously associated with femininity. The Amazons' first appearance is framed in long shot, the female warriors emerging from background foliage to ambush and surround Jason and his friends. Rather than compete on equal terms—a 'fair fight'—the Amazons exploit a landscape familiar to them but alien to the Argonauts to secure an advantage.

The gynosociality represented by the Amazons is also associated with illicit heterosexuality, to borrow Günsberg's term, the non-domestic, non-procreational female sexual desire that cannot be permitted by a patriarchal society as it disturbs the established gender hierarchy (cf. Günsberg, 2005, p. 120). A woman whose sexuality is dictated by appetite rather than the constraints of maternity and family is a potentially threatening figure. In *Hercules*, this threat is marked explicitly as lethal. Hercules, Orpheus and Ulysses literally carry their fellow Argonauts away from the embrace of women. Hercules is weighed down with four male bodies, reclaimed from female desire and death to resume their place in the homosocial order. Untainted by sexual contact with the Amazons, Hercules retains his masculine potency, while the Argonauts he rescues are limp, unconscious and oblivious to the dangers of gynosociality.

It is notable that Hercules is largely absent from the Amazon scenes. His exclusion from this matriarchal society is, arguably, a further rupture in the film's representation of heroic masculinity. The companions of Hercules represent ordinary masculinity, which may be challenged and temporarily matched by the Amazons. Hercules's super-masculinity cannot be shown to be vulnerable in the same way. In *Hercules Unchained*, amnesia legitimises Hercules's new passivity, dependence and petulance, but also his capitulation to illicit, non-domestic, recreational sexual desire. In *Hercules*, his unacknowledged impotence against the Amazons takes a less overt form. He may disrupt their society to rescue his fellow Argonauts, but he cannot transform this matriarchy into a patriarchal society, nor can he conquer or destroy it. The Argonauts sail away from the island of the Amazons with the latter's social, gender and hierarchical structures still intact and unchallenged. In Greco-Roman myth, Hercules does not hesitate to slay the Amazon queen Hippolyta when

he believes she has betrayed him (Bulfinch, 1984, p. 169). In *Hercules*, to engage in combat with the Amazons would be to acknowledge their status as a threat. Furthermore, this threat can only be dealt with through physical violence, underlining both its 'masculine' nature and its subversion of patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity. On another level, for Hercules to fight with a woman would undermine his heroic masculinity. The film's first scene establishes that women are to be protected and desired. Hercules's legitimate opponents are savage beasts and hostile men. The Amazons destabilise and confuse these categories, another potential threat that is resolved only by excluding Hercules from their society, with no point of engagement. In *Le gladiatrici / The Amazon Women* (Antonio Leonviola, 1963), hero Taur (Joe Robinson) articulates repeatedly his reluctance to fight female warriors, leading to his injury and capture. In this instance, confrontation is inevitable, yet Taur is able to demonstrate his male superiority in non-combative terms, standing his ground in a tug-of-war against 101 Amazonian women.

Other *pepla* offer more coherent and nuanced depictions of femininity. *The Giant of Marathon* (Tourneur, 1959) positions hero Philippides (Steve Reeves) between heroine Andromeda and villainess Karisse. Initially the distinction between the 'good' woman and the 'bad' woman seems clear and simplistic. Andromeda has long blonde hair, fair skin, a white dress and white flowers in her hair, connoting purity, virginity and innocence. Karisse, in league with an Athenian traitor, has black hair, gold ornamentation and heavy make-up. She is sexually forward, caressing Philippides and wearing costumes that emphasise her cleavage. Dressed in red, a conventional marker of female sexual appetite and abandon, Karisse kisses Philippides while Andromeda looks on. The film, however, questions this conventional dichotomy. Karisse accuses Andromeda of parading her innocence and purity, suggesting the appearance of virtue must be given substance by thought and deed. Karisse's own transformation is facilitated by her (non-sexual) relationship with Philippides, who proves a source of inspiration and example. Brought to the Persian camp, Karisse is now dressed in white, contrasted with the darkness around her, figurative and literal, and takes an arrow in the back as she flees to warn Athens. Mortally wounded, she crawls along the ground to complete her mission, dirtied yet purified, a bloodstain on her dress marking her voluntary sacrifice. Philippides folds Karisse's arms across her body, a gesture of respect, and her corpse is illuminated by moonlight, underlining her nobility and virtue. Andromeda, though marked as the legitimate love interest, is by contrast passive where Karisse is active. While the latter achieves the status of a true patriot

Fig. 6.1 *Goliath and the Barbarians* (1959)

(cf. O'Brien, 2011, p. 184), the former serves largely as the hero's trophy to be protected and finally claimed. *Goliath and the Barbarians* (Campogalliani, 1959), a sixth-century action-adventure, dispenses with the blonde virginal heroine altogether. Emiliano (Steve Reeves), a Lombard resistance fighter, is paired with Landa, daughter of a barbarian chief. Landa is played by Cuban dancer and actress Chelo Alonso, who possesses striking Latina features and was more usually cast as a villainess. They swiftly progress from antagonists to lovers, their romance causing dissention among Emiliano's friends and allies. Emiliano rejects Landa as a distraction from his cause, yet they are reconciled and reunited, their relationship reaffirmed and validated in the final scene (*fig. 6.1*). Lacking a mythical or classical backdrop, *Goliath and the Barbarians* is arguably a borderline *peplum*, despite the presence of Reeves, and its promotion of an unashamedly sensual interracial relationship is highly unusual for the genre.

The *peplum* genre often marks powerful, self-sufficient women as both hostile and unnatural, as in *Hercules*, *Hercules Unchained* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961) offers a construction of femininity notably different to these examples. Romulus's evolving masculinity progresses partly through his interaction with the femininity embodied by Sabine princess Julia, who progresses from captive to consort. To establish a bond with Julia, Romulus's super-masculinity must evolve within certain social constraints, signalling his tacit acceptance of existing conventions. When Romulus carries Julia over the threshold of a hut and places her on a bed of straw, this gesture could be read as a symbolic marriage. Julia is placed on the extreme left of the CinemaScope frame, in long shot, with Romulus on the extreme right, in medium shot, echoing the staging of the fountain scene in *Hercules*. In *Duel of the Titans*, this distance between the characters will gradually diminish. Up to this point, around twenty-eight minutes into the film,

the adult Romulus's torso has been covered by his tunic, a strategy of concealment at variance with most *peplum* films. He now removes and wrings out his rain-soaked top, displaying his torso and flexed muscle for both Julia and the extra-diegetic spectator. Having objectified Julia during their first encounter, he offers her the same privileged position with himself as the object. Romulus remains bare-chested for the subsequent dungeon, arena and uprising scenes, though not by choice. Once the tyrant's city has fallen, he is reunited with Julia, both the first and last character for whom he willingly displays his body. After these sequences, his torso is covered for the rest of the film.

Duel of the Titans gives the evolving relationship between Romulus and Julia a sense of equality absent from many *peplum* couplings. On a narrative level, Romulus's dalliance with Julia leads to his capture at sword and spear-point, a clear manifestation of masculine vulnerability and imperfection. Only Julia's intervention saves him from death, her privileged position in the existing social hierarchy more potent than Romulus's physical strength and determination. In terms of mise-en-scène, Julia's fair hair and dark costume complement Romulus's dark hair and light-coloured costume, a harmonious *yin yang* effect that avoids the more direct matching of appearance initially associated with Romulus and Remus. Denied a maternal bond, Romulus reconnects to the feminine via his relationship with Julia. It could be argued that Julia's representation reflects the new generation of economically and socially empowered women that arose during the 1950s and, furthermore, their eventual acceptance by men as an ally rather than a rival or enemy. While I am wary of such a specific reading of the character, her very presence in *Duel of the Titans* hints at a possible wider cultural shift in male attitudes. Hercules seems both compromised and diminished by his heterosexual attachment to Iole, denied the opportunity to give his masculinity its fullest expression. Romulus's bond with Julia is, to use Günsberg's terms, a licit, domesticated, procreational coupling that enhances rather than weakens the hero's masculine strength, bridging the gender divide that proved irreconcilable in *Hercules*.

7
The Temptress from Beyond

In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (Cottafavi, 1961), the ultimate embodiment of Atlantean aggression and threat is Queen Antinea herself. On some levels, Antinea is a conventional figure in the *peplum* genre, the seductive matriarch who potentially threatens patriarchal authority and male potency. Maggie Günsberg identifies Antinea and similar *peplum* characters as 'bad, sexually desiring women, who also covet power' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 121). As noted, female characters associated with recreative rather than procreative heterosexuality are usually marked as non-domestic and by implication malevolent, especially if they occupy social or political positions of power, such as the Amazons in *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958) and Queen Oomphale in *Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959). In these instances, their spheres of influence are relatively limited and may be contained if not destroyed. The Amazons are not defeated by Hercules but remain restricted to their island. Oomphale commands an army of men but seems concerned mainly with selecting a succession of male sexual partners, who are routinely killed and embalmed as trophies once she has tired of them. Antinea's ambitions, however, are not confined to Atlantis or her own sexual appetite, extending across the entire world.

As several commentators have noted, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* draws on Pierre Benoit's novel *L'Atlantide* (1919), set in the present day, which originated the character of Antinea, Queen of Atlantis, who rules over her lost kingdom in an unexplored region of the Sahara Desert (cf. Lagny, 1992, p. 176; Shahabudin, 2009, p. 206). Tim Bergfelder suggests 'the novel synthesised a number of themes and motifs that were in wide circulation throughout Europe', most notably in its representation of the exotic, the Orient and European colonialism (Bergfelder, 2007, p. 160). *L'Atlantide* proved an international bestseller, prompting a big-budget French-produced film version, *L'Atlantide / Queen of Atlantis* (Jacques Feyder, 1921). Subsequent film adaptations include the German-French co-production *Die Herrin von Atlantis / L'Atlantide / Mistress of Atlantis*

(G. W. Pabst, 1932) and the Hollywood-made *Siren of Atlantis* (Gregg Tallas, 1949). An Italian-French co-produced version was released the same year as *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, entitled *Antinea, l'amante della città sepolta / L'Atlantide / Journey Beneath the Desert* (US) / *The Lost Kingdom* (UK) (Edgar G. Ulmer, Giuseppe Masini, 1961). Locating Antinea and Atlantis in the middle of an A-bomb testing zone, this remake eschews the *peplum* film's subtext of nuclear anxiety, employing the latter theme as a straightforward narrative device linked to the queen's apparent death wish.

Antinea is marked by voracious sexual appetite and emotional fickleness. Kim Shahabudin states that the character became 'an icon of early 20th-Century popular culture as an extreme example of the vamp: the ultimate expression of perverted female desire' (Shahabudin, 2009, p. 207). The predatory, emasculating female has a long-standing cultural resonance not confined to any particular era or place, though it is possible to identify points where it assumes especial importance. Shahabudin argues that the vamp embodies this concept in particularly concentrated form and 'became popular in the early years of the 20th century as a channel for anxieties about women adopting more independent roles' (Shahabudin, 2009, p. 207). In *Queen of Atlantis*, Antinea is aware of and engaged with fashionable aspects of the outside world that could be associated with the vamp persona, taking delivery of the latest cosmetics and magazines from Paris.

Queen of Atlantis opens with a long shot of Antinea, a static portrait that depicts the latter with her body covered and her face veiled, revealing only her eyes, nose and, tantalisingly, her bare left arm and shoulder. To her right is a wild cat, a symbolic expression of Antinea's exotic, alluring and predatory nature that also features in later adaptations. In best vamp tradition, Antinea is associated with aggressive female sexual desire—recreative rather than procreative—and male sexual obsession, driving her conquests to uncontrollable jealousy, insanity, suicide and murder. The unveiled Antinea is costumed and adorned in faux-Egyptian style, seen also in *Journey Beneath the Desert*, and there is an explicit comparison with Cleopatra, a prime example of the classical vamp. *Siren of Atlantis* invokes the *femme fatale* familiar from 1940s *film noir*, introducing Antinea dressed in a black bikini and see-through negligee, flanked by phallic candles and a rope net, suggesting both sexuality and entrapment. The perverse nature of Antinea's desire is epitomised in a scene in *Queen of Atlantis* where she kisses passionately the corpse of a man murdered for rejecting her advances, an image carrying clear associations of necrophilia.

The concept of female desire as 'perverse' is found in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*, albeit in different forms. The Amazons choose sexual partners from male visitors for both recreative and reproductive purposes, ensuring the continuation of their matriarchal society from which men are excluded, their temporary lovers and any male children routinely killed. Queen Oomphale, who commands both female and male subjects, exhibits the same vampish tendencies as Antinea, seeking sexual gratification, excitement and novelty, and selecting the amnesiac Hercules as her new lover once a previous partner has been eliminated. I argue that *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* refracts, to a greater degree than many *pepla*, the shifting social, economic and labour conditions of its era that were perceived to have empowered women to a significant degree. Antinea manifests these changes and associated male anxieties in extreme form, commanding troops and technology that may bring about her domination of the world or its destruction. While her cloned soldiers are linked by commentators with fascism in general and Nazism in particular, their subservience to the wishes of their queen is at odds with these ideologies, which promoted and idealised masculine strength in mind and body. Taylor Downing emphasises 'the almost exclusively masculine setting of the Nazi party, in which there was not a single prominent woman' (Downing, 1992, p. 20). As Bergfelder notes, a connection between Atlantis and proto-Nazi theories of racial superiority predated the publication of Benoit's novel: 'The myth of Atlantis had been instrumentalised since the early part of the century in racist-inflected pulp fiction and crazed socio-historical theories by German authors as a mythical country of origin of the "Aryan race"' (Bergfelder, 2007, p. 161). It is notable that earlier film versions of *L'Atlantide* do not feature this concept of Atlantean purity or superiority. Indeed, the idea is barely touched upon in cinematic form until *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*.

The styling of Antinea, in terms of costume and make-up, could be described as Asiatic, suggesting a conflation of two different totalitarianisms: fascist and communist. This intersects with the cinematic 'yellow peril' revival of the 1960s, which foregrounded Chinese criminal masterminds and warlords—ostensibly power-crazed renegades rather than agents of the communist regime—as the major threat to world peace. A prime example is the resurrection of author Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu in the British-West German co-production *The Face of Fu Manchu* (Don Sharp, 1965). While the latter is a period piece, set in the 1920s, later examples locate the 'yellow peril' or 'red menace' in the present day, as with *Dr. No* (Terence Young, 1962), the first James Bond film. In

Battle Beneath the Earth (Montgomery Tully, 1967), Chinese forces are burrowing beneath the United States with a giant laser in an all-too-literal attempt to undermine the 'Free West'. The film opens in the 'adult playground' of Las Vegas, suggesting the US risks letting its guard down against foreign aggression, much as the complacent kings of Greece disregard the threat posed by Antinea.

The representation of malevolent femininity in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* drew the attention of critics at the time of the film's release. Writing in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1962, Jacques Siclier characterised Antinea as 'cold and perverse' (Siclier, 1962, p. 36). I suggest the queen is represented above all as 'unnatural', on social, domestic, gender and maternal levels. Antinea does not appreciate or respect nature, treating it as something to be controlled and manipulated: 'We try to subjugate nature to our own scope.' Hercules articulates his opposition to this view: 'I am satisfied with nature as it is.' It is notable that Antinea is confined largely to the interiors of her palace and rarely seen in sunlight, equated with nature, the natural environment and, indeed, the only force that can destroy the rock of Uranus. Antinea's subjugation of nature is linked explicitly with her transformation and control of masculinity, most obviously in the case of her cloned elite guards. A US poster for the film constructs the feminine as an unnamed and undefined threat to the hero, with the tagline: 'Could she subdue this GIANT OF A MAN with her SORCERY?' The emphasis on Hercules's size and gender and the unknown woman's supernatural power depicts this opposition in terms of what is natural, or rather nature in its most developed form—a giant of a man—with an unnatural female strength or power that seeks only to suppress and command masculinity. Hercules's best friend, Androcles, is transformed into a stranger, a spy and a would-be assassin. In one scene, this transformation is, briefly, of a physical nature as his face takes on the blank aspect of the queen's cloned guards, devoid of emotion and humanity. Antinea also manipulates and oppresses rival forms of femininity, placing the nation state, and her associated power, wealth and status, above her close blood ties to her daughter Ismene. It is notable that, Antinea aside, representations of Atlantean femininity are associated with subjugation, entrapment, suffering and death. Female victims of the shape-shifting god Proteus are both trapped and absorbed into rock formations. Hard yet lifeless, they are transformed into wretched not heroic statues, rigid and inert. Ismene is first seen imprisoned in the same rock, her body not yet calcified.

Antinea offers Hercules the chance to participate in her world conquest, its associated power and, by implication, a heterosexual union:

'together we shall reign over men and gods'. The queen of Atlantis also proposes her own version of 'la dolce vita' or sweet life, as represented by luxurious settings and clothes, fine dining and dancing girls, echoing several scenes in the 1960 Fellini film. In *La dolce vita*, journalist Marcello Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni) is gradually spellbound by Hollywood 'royalty' as represented by American starlet Sylvia (Anita Ekberg), whose long blonde hair, low-cut black dress and voluptuous figure embody the desirable yet unattainable feminine ideal in a form that borders on caricature. A seasoned gossip columnist, Rubini is used to mixing with high society yet buys into the illusion of stardom, temporarily at least, in the form of Sylvia. During the scene at the Trevi fountain, he worships her as a near-goddess, standing close to Sylvia yet making negligible physical contact and nothing that could be construed as openly sexual. The images of the 'divine' Sylvia standing in the gushing waters of the fountain invite comparisons with the birth of the goddess Aphrodite, or Venus, born from the same blood of Uranus that possesses rather different creative/transformative properties in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*.

Hercules's relationship with Antinea is both more prolonged and more complicated, though in essence *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* places the good father, Hercules, in opposition to the cruel mother, Antinea, which could be read as a clear example of patriarchy versus matriarchy. There is a suggestion that Atlantis, as represented by Antinea, may overwhelm and subdue even Hercules. His first entry into Antinea's cavernous throne room frames him in extreme long shot, diminished in scale against huge double doors. This apparent subversion of *peplum* conventions, the hero made small and insignificant, is itself undercut by the camera tracking swiftly to a medium shot of Hercules as he proclaims his victory over Proteus. Later on, Hercules allows himself to be perceived temporarily as a victim of female duplicity. Antinea offers him a cup of drugged wine, evoking his initial association with appetite and indulgence, particularly in relation to food and drink. Lying back in a prone position, arms outstretched, his body evokes both sexual passivity—Antinea's plaything—and the crucifixion imagery seen earlier in the film, the demigod martyred to the queen's carnal appetite (*fig. 7.1*). Antinea looms over him, her left hand on his bare chest, underlining her dominance, possession and desire. However, Hercules soon reveals he is wise and more than equal to Antinea's tricks. Spitting out the wine, he signals a rejection of her decadent ersatz domesticity and empty sexual gratification. Once more, the passivity associated with this Hercules is revealed as a pose and calculated act of pretence. He is not seduced, or even tempted, by Antinea's advances, unlike Steve

Fig. 7.1 Hercules Conquers Atlantis (1961)

Reeves's Hercules in *Hercules Unchained*, who is enchanted, on several levels, by Oomphale, losing his masculine potency and indeed identity for a significant part of the film's running time.

Reg Park's Hercules rejects Antinea's proposed union, which depends on the suppression and elimination of the younger generation, as embodied by his son Hylus and her daughter Ismene, and a repudiation of the domestic family unit valued by Hercules above all else. It is established early on in the Atlantis sequences that Ismene must die to save Antinea's kingdom and, furthermore, that the queen is willing to pay this price. On one level, male valour and strength are seen to triumph over female guile and malice. However, the opposition between Hercules and Antinea is more than a relatively simplistic gender-based conflict, where virtuous masculinity thwarts, contains and indirectly eliminates powerful yet transgressive femininity. Antinea is also compared with Hercules's wife Deianeira, and the women are of similar age, both representing mature forms of femininity. While Antinea embodies a powerful yet unsustainable matriarchy dependent on the oppression of men and women alike, Deianeira operates within a smaller domestic sphere that emphasises tranquillity, emotional warmth and, most importantly, mutual respect. Both women are mothers of adult or at least teenage children, yet their attitudes to these offspring are at polar opposites, Deianeira nurturing Hylus while Antinea treats Ismene both as material to further her ambitions and a threat to be eliminated. It is notable that Deianeira is dressed in green, equating with nature and harmony, while Antinea is often clad in black, matching her hair and eye make-up. Antinea is unable to subdue or seduce Hercules with her sorcery, super-warriors or the rock of Uranus, ultimately revealing her powerlessness. Deianeira has long since drawn Hercules willingly into

the domestic realm, as evidenced by the voluntary surrender of his body to her ministrations, his stated intention to forswear foreign excursions, and, above all, the family unit completed by their adult son Hylus and, by implication, new daughter-in-law Ismene. Antinea represents a rejection of the domestic sphere and embodies in allegorical form a conglomeration of social and historical anxieties, her 'unnatural' femininity linked with fascism and the nuclear threat. This extreme manifestation of a *peplum* stereotype—the sexually aggressive, castrating matriarch—is balanced by Deianeira, who represents a domestic, maternal, nurturing femininity which is, however, neither passive nor subservient to the masculine authority of Hercules. As with Julia and Romulus in *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci 1961), Deianeira is represented in terms of equality in her relationship with Hercules, a status Antinea is unable to achieve.

8
Fight Like a Man

Several *pepla* include female characters who are, ostensibly, warriors, such as the Amazons in *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958) and *Goliath contro i giganti / Goliath Against the Giants* (Guido Malatesta, 1961), and Delilah in *Hercules, Samson and Ulysses* (Francisci, 1963). Though clad in armour and carrying weapons, they do not engage in actual combat, whether against men or other women. *The Amazon Women* (Leonviola, 1963) depicts women fighting for the entertainment of their queen, inflicting both wounds and fatalities on each other. While individual skill and courage are emphasised, especially in the case of the heroine, these skirmishes are marked as cruel and unnatural. The *peplum* parody *La regina delle amazzoni / Colossus and the Amazon Queen* (Vittorio Sala, 1960) highlights the supposed absurdity of the warrior woman, refracting and soothing male anxieties over female independence and strength by rendering the Amazons both comic and ineffectual. Though heavily armed and armoured, they pose no threat to the heroes; when the roguish Pirro (Rod Taylor) is hit on the nose with a shield, drawing blood, the injury is played for laughs. Despite scenes of the Amazons in training, their first combat, late in the film, is depicted as a scrappy, graceless catfight among themselves, complete with biting, kicks in the rear and torn clothing. Attacked by male pirates, the Amazons must be rescued by Pirro and friends. His love interest, formerly a ruthless would-be matriarch, accepts his patriarchal embrace, abandoning her armour, which unsettled notions of gender difference, for a 'properly' feminine pink dress.

La leggenda di Enea / War of the Trojans (Giorgio Rivalta, 1962) features Queen Camilla (Liana Orfei), one of several opponents faced by Trojan leader Aeneas (Steve Reeves) as he establishes a new home for his people. In visual terms, Camilla is initially depicted in conventionally feminine fashion: long, styled hair; short dress; gold headband, and heavy make-up. She also strikes a typically 'feminine' pose, with her leg forward, knee bent and hand on hip. However, a male character remarks that Camilla both equals and surpasses most men in courage and daring, and

she later provides a demonstration of skilled horsemanship. In the key battle sequence, Camilla is seen in combat, leading her troops in a cavalry charge and slaying several men with her sword. Matched cuts and compositions link her visually with Aeneas, suggesting a sense of equality despite their enmity. This militarisation and, arguably, masculinisation of Camilla is abruptly curtailed when she is struck and mortally wounded by an arrow. The tip is embedded under her left breast, emphasised by the low-angle shot, and her helmet falls off to reveal her long hair. These conventional markers of femininity witness Camilla restored to a 'natural' state of womanhood, her threat both to the Trojans and the patriarchal order contained and eliminated. It is notable that Camilla is killed by an anonymous Trojan archer, rather than in one-to-one combat with Aeneas, sidestepping both the concept of male-female equality in battle and the implications of the hero killing a woman, whatever the provocation or her skill with a weapon. The moment of death is not shown, Camilla's horse carrying her out of frame as her sword drops to the ground, underlining once more the loss of a warrior status reclaimed as the province of men and also her removal, figurative and literal, from the battlefield. Aeneas treats her corpse with respect, marking Camilla's reincorporation into patriarchy as she makes the transition into the afterlife.

A prime example of a fighting woman in the *peplum* genre is Tarpeja (Ornella Vanoni) in *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961), a prototype of the courageous yet compromised warrior woman who figures intermittently in mythological action cinema and television. A follower of Romulus and Remus, she is marked out from the crowd with a distinctive black-and-white costume. She also wears trousers, unlike the male characters, a conventional marker of masculinity and masculine authority. While Remus takes a traditional view of a woman's role, Romulus praises Tarpeja for riding and fighting like a man. Using her feminine charm to distract a guard, playing on his male vanity, she kills two other men yet is otherwise sidelined during the action set-pieces. It is notable that she wields a long dagger rather than a short sword, suggesting that, on some level, she does not measure up to the male warriors. Tarpeja is also in thrall to Remus, whose dismissive treatment of her signposts an unfortunate outcome. Her fighting prowess is displaced by sexual jealousy, and she lingers silently on the edge of the frame. Remus praises Tarpeja as an ideal companion in adventure yet is clearly motivated by his feelings for another woman while the venture proves reckless. When Remus is badly injured, Tarpeja assumes a protective role, the camera tracking in to a *pieta*-style shot of her holding his prone form in her arms. While this

appears to mark a reconfiguration of their relationship, her betrayal of Romulus prompts Remus's rejection. Tarpeja is left begging and weeping in the dust, the shot held until she collapses face down on the ground. In this instance, Tarpeja's downfall is linked to her infatuation with Remus rather than the assumption of traditionally masculine traits. Yet his interest in the more conventionally feminine Julia suggests Tarpeja is not woman enough to achieve a viable heterosexual union, any more than she is 'man' enough to stand equal in battle with Romulus's male rebels. Later incarnations of the warrior woman display a similar ambivalence over her place in a male-dominated field of action and her transgression of, and challenge to, patriarchal gender roles.

Conan the Barbarian (Milius, 1982) features Valeria (Sandahl Bergman), Conan's fellow thief and warrior, and eventual lover. The character of Valeria appears in Robert E. Howard's serialised Conan novella 'Red Nails' (1936), described as 'stronger than the average man, and far quicker and more ferocious', and showing 'a finesse of swordplay that dazzled and bewildered her antagonists before it slew them' (qtd. Leiber, 1984, p. 10). In both literature and film, Valeria is not just strong for a woman, but has strength surpassing that of a normal male. Furthermore, she has a speed and aggression exceeding those of the average man. Far from being unconditionally positive, however, these qualities when exhibited by a woman can be characterised as problematic and, especially, unfeminine. Anne Balsamo suggests: 'To be both female and strong implicitly violates traditional codes of feminine identity' (Balsamo, 1996, p. 43). Discussing female bodybuilders, Ellis Cashmore suggests they are 'the mightiest transgressors of the traditional feminine ideal' (Cashmore, 2000, p. 158), in that they emphasise strength, muscularity, hardness and toughness rather than such stereotypically female qualities as softness, gentleness and fragility. Furthermore, as Anne Bolin states, the female bodybuilder subverts 'the notion that the muscularity that embodies power and privilege is the "natural" purview of men' (Bolin, 1996, p. 52). If men cannot claim this muscularity as an exclusively and naturally male trait, their claim on the associated power and privilege is also open to question. Actual female bodybuilders rarely appear in warrior woman roles, though Cory Everson, six times Miss Olympia, guest stars as Atalanta in an episode, 'Ares', from the first season of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995). Atalanta's costume highlights her spectacular body, distracting Hercules with her cleavage during an arm-wrestling match. Yet this body is repeatedly possessed and misused by the malevolent male god Ares, Atalanta permitted to act and fight as 'herself' only in tokenistic fashion.

While actress Sandahl Bergman, a trained dancer, is not heavily muscled and remains conventionally attractive and 'feminine' (and blonde), I suggest she shares the 'powerful signifiers of strength, resilience, and activity' Cashmore identifies in female bodybuilders (Cashmore, 2000, p. 158). John Milius notes of Bergman, 'She's powerful looking. Her body is not just sexy; it is capable of strong movements. You believe she could cut somebody's head off' (qtd. Sammon, 1982, p. 26). The combination of power, eroticism and violence embodied by Valeria may complement the representation of Conan, yet also transgresses reactionary formulations of femininity and challenges the strong, trained body as an inherently masculine construct (cf. Tasker, 1993, p. 30). This is especially evident in the scene where Valeria protects the helpless Conan from the mound spirits after his crucifixion on the Tree of Woe. Conan's covered motionless body is contrasted with Valeria's exposed, active figure, her hair flowing freely in the wind. She crouches over Conan's prone form, knife in hand, ready to defend him with violence. In this sequence, at least, Valeria displaces and replaces Conan as the dominant warrior-protector figure, representing a heroic femininity shielding a compromised masculinity from malevolent forces.

Conan's relationship with Valeria is marked by a tension between closeness and separation. Alongside her abilities as a thief and warrior, Valeria also represents a longing for domesticity, stability and a sustainable heterosexual union which restricts Conan's ability to achieve his full masculine potential through vengeance upon Thulsa Doom. Conan leaves Valeria alone in their bed, a prime signifier of domesticity, to embark on his quest for Doom's Mountain of Power, abandoning the domestic space in favour of territory marked as predominantly masculine. Having explicitly assumed the price of saving Conan from the Tree of Woe and the mound spirits, Valeria is killed by Doom's snake arrow, a clear extension of his masculine and demonic power. A similar serpent arrow slays one of Conan's male allies in Howard's story 'The People of the Black Circle', first published in 1934 (Howard, 2006, p. 342). Its use on a woman can be read in terms of phallic assault and Doom's next snake arrow is also intended for a young female. It could be argued that Valeria also pays the cost of assuming—and presuming—the traditionally masculine traits of the warrior, reflecting contemporary male anxieties over economically and socially independent women. The female with 'masculine' traits challenges traditional gender roles and embodies a domesticity that is incompatible with the hero's mission and associated male potency, necessitating her removal from the narrative. Yet Conan remains dependent on Valeria even after her death. During the

last battle with Doom's soldiers, she returns briefly from Valhalla, clad in shining armour and, by implication at least, saves Conan from an opponent's death blow. From this perspective, *Conan the Barbarian* implicitly questions the traditional or reactionary masculine ideal, highlighting Conan's super-masculine form yet denying him the independence and self-sufficiency associated with figures such as Hercules. Valeria represents an unresolved tension between a resentment of female 'intrusion' into a traditionally male sphere—the non-domestic realm of action and violence—and a tentative recognition of their competence in this field and ability to make a significant contribution.

Valeria is evoked and, to a degree, subverted in *Beastmaster III: The Eye of Braxus* (Beaumont, 1996). Shada (Sandra Hess) is another blonde warrior woman, who knocks hero Dar (Marc Singer) and his sidekick Seth to the ground and makes sexual overtures towards the former, caressing his bare chest. She is, however, a mercenary, employed by the villain, her red costume evoking danger alongside sexual aggression. Seemingly amoral, Shada redeems herself by saving Dar's life, and he later entrusts his injured brother to her protection. Dar's relationship with Shada evolves into one of equality and mutual respect, sidelining their tentative heterosexual bonding. Unlike Valeria, Shada is not punished for her assumption of masculine qualities, and she leaves Dar's homosocial group to serve as a protector of her people.

Red Sonja (Richard Fleischer, 1985) is based on a character created by Robert E. Howard and stars Brigitte Nielsen as the eponymous heroine. Sherrie A. Inness places Howard's Sonja in a US popular cultural tradition of tough, strong women dating back to the nineteenth century, such as Calamity Jane, Annie Oakley and, later, Wonder Woman (Innes, 2004, p. 2). In the film, Sonja's mastery of the sword is encapsulated in a low-angle medium shot, her blade thrust towards the camera and made disproportionately large with foreshortening. Yvonne Tasker regards Nielsen as an androgynous figure (Tasker, 1993, p. 14). While I do not see this quality in Sonja, she is described in such gender-loaded terms as 'swordsman' and 'master', suggesting a masculinisation of the character. A warrior of her skill cannot be conceived in gender-neutral, let alone feminine terms, as the qualities of the fighter are still perceived as inherently male. Tasker states that the active or action heroine is also notable for the emphasis on her sexuality, 'her availability within traditional feminine terms' (Tasker, 1993, p. 19). Sonja, however, is marked by sexual unavailability, linked to her rape shown in flashback. While Tasker does not discuss this aspect of *Red Sonja*, she notes how rape-revenge narratives associate the heroine's prowess in action with an underlying

and enduring vulnerability (Tasker, 1993, p. 21). Sonja would not and could not have become a warrior were it not for the murder of her family on the order of Queen Gedren (Sandahl Bergman) and her violation by Gedren's soldiers. The film suggests Sonja's new spirit and fighting prowess derive from an external force rather than from within. As she lies in the dust, an ethereal white figure materialises in the darkness and a female voice states that Sonja has been granted the power of vengeance. This figure could be read as a mystical embodiment of female solidarity and retribution, yet its status is never clarified and the architect of Sonja's trauma is also a woman. The image of Sonja being anointed with a glowing sword reinforces the idea that the power is granted her for a specific purpose rather than being an intrinsic part of her character.

Tasker notes how the film 'follows Sonja's journey to a "normal" sexual identity, or at the very least the rejection of lesbian desire' (Tasker, 1993, p. 30). Sonja rejects the 'perverse' sexual relationship offered by Gedren, marking her disgust on the queen's face in the form of a large scar. Having flinched from male contact, Sonja is linked with Prince Kalidor (Arnold Schwarzenegger), whose muscular form dominates his scenes and the film's promotion. While Sonja consistently rejects Kalidor's proffered help, he appears when required. The scene with bandit chief Brytag demonstrates the film's strategy of showcasing and endorsing Sonja's skill while reaffirming her need for male assistance. Sonja slays Brytag in single combat yet cannot escape his men without Kalidor's intervention, pausing mid-flight to acknowledge and smile at his bravery and swordsmanship. Her initial response to his romantic overtures is a challenge to combat where they fight to mutual exhaustion, which could be read as displaced sexual passion. Kalidor argues that the equation of prowess in combat with romantic worth is illogical, and their second 'duel' swiftly transforms into a kiss. Having slain Gedren, Sonja can literally drop her guard against the 'normal' advances of a worthy male lover. Sonja's relationship with Kalidor enables her reincorporation into the realm of heterosexuality and, by extension, patriarchy.

The television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), starring Lucy Lawless, also highlights a heroic swordswoman. Given the large body of Xena scholarship, I will discuss the show only briefly, based on a sampling of episodes from the first and last seasons along with her earlier appearances in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–9). Xena's debut in the latter, 'The Warrior Princess', depicts the character in entirely negative terms. She initially wears regular female attire, by the standards of the show, though her predominantly red dress connotes both eroticism and danger. A ruthless and skilled fighter, Xena is also a deceiver,

maiming her horse as a ruse, a manipulator and a seducer, turning Hercules's best friend, Iolaus, against him. A discarded lover is sent on a suicide mission to kill Hercules, purely as bait to draw the demigod, and she lets men do her fighting when Hercules is involved. In one scene, Hercules walks past burning wreckage and corpses, the recognised mark of Xena. At this point, Xena is distinguished from scheming *peplum* villainesses largely by her hands-on involvement, and evident delight, in carnage.

Xena's second appearance, 'The Gauntlet', marks the re-formation (as opposed to reformation) of the character, albeit in contrived and tokenistic fashion. Leading a raid on a village, she articulates a policy of killing only armed male opponents, her face showing distaste when a subordinate murders a helpless, pleading old man. The main issue at stake seems to be Xena's loss of control over her all-male forces rather than a growing sense of moral enlightenment. The scene where she protects a baby can be read in terms of her awakening maternal instinct (cf. Lodge, 2009, pp. 218–33), yet this action relates more directly to the reassertion of her authority. In a key sequence, Xena is usurped as leader and forced to walk the gauntlet. Stripped of her armour, she is clad only in a basque-style garment, effectively her underwear, leaving her the vulnerable object of a hostile male gaze. This de-masculinisation/re-feminisation of Xena is underlined by a brutal physical assault, with multiple punches and blows to her body depicted in emphatic slow motion.

Xena's brutal (re)education in devious, abusive patriarchy appears to be a transformative experience, yet the nature of her shifting representation remains unclear. Hercules, unaware of Xena's recent ordeal, refers to her as a 'cold-hearted evil bitch' and she rapidly endorses this perspective, seeking his head in combat to regain the respect and leadership of her army. A rapid turnaround has Hercules and Xena join forces and depart side by side. Rather than resolve all the issues raised, this fadeout merely confirms 'The Gauntlet' as an exercise in equivocation. In the next episode, 'Unchained Heart', Hercules and Xena are now firm allies, though Iolaus shows token scepticism about her reformation, only to be convinced when she saves his life. Xena (finally) expresses regret for her past misdeeds and places atonement over her romantic feelings for Hercules. The final shot has Xena ride away from Hercules and her past life, framed against a natural landscape which contrasts with the grim enemy fortress they just routed, underlining the start of her transition from darkness and brutality into light and harmony.

Xena: Warrior Princess continues the narrative of redemption set up in 'Unchained Heart'. While the traits of the female warrior are couched

initially in negative terms, their reconfiguration is initiated in the opening episode, 'Sins of the Past'. Placing her sword and armour in the ground, literally burying her past, Xena wears a flimsy white dress, newly 're-feminised' according to patriarchal orthodoxy, but also newly vulnerable, as in 'The Gauntlet' (cf. Lodge, 2009, pp. 223–4). She then witnesses young women victimised by male slavers and realises that positive action, drawing on her old skills, rather than neutral passivity, will facilitate her desired transition. This transformation is depicted as arduous and often traumatic. In 'Dreamworker' Xena's guilty conscience is manifested as the shades of her victims and she is forced to confront her old self, unrepentant and unredeemed. While the latter is her double, this 'bad Xena' has blank black eyes, suggesting a soulless, inhuman nature and underlining her fundamental difference and distance from Xena as she is now. The reformed Xena disarms, wounds and slays numerous male opponents yet only as a last resort, preferring to humiliate a Cyclops by dropping his trousers, clichéd signifier of maleness and male authority. Xena is offered reincorporation into patriarchy via conventional femininity, marked by domesticity, family and heterosexual union, as in 'Chariots of War' (exchanging her armour for a dress), yet declines this restrictive and compromised status. The series underlines Xena's legitimacy as a heroic warrior through aural and visual references to the 1982 *Conan the Barbarian*, including variations on the latter's main musical theme and shots of Xena engaging in seaside swordplay, as does Conan, and striking near identical poses (*figs. 8.1, 8.2*). These references feature in the opening titles, reiterating her heroic status with every episode.

The dark-haired Xena is contrasted with and complemented by the blonde Gabrielle (Renée O'Connor), her companion in adventure. In 'Sins of the Past', Gabrielle offers herself to the slavers to save others, showing courage, initiative and selflessness that impresses Xena. Gabrielle is in turn inspired by Xena, seeking to emulate the latter yet also questioning her more contentious traits, such as the determination to be strong all the time ('Chariots of War'). Xena is initially reluctant to instruct Gabrielle in combat, claiming in 'Dreamworker' that wisdom is more important to survival and taking life carries a heavy burden. Amanda D. Lotz argues this mutual exchange of positive attributes enables them to contend with dilemmas, priorities, desires and decisions that resonated with contemporary research into the arduous daily demands placed on women in relation to both work and private life (Lotz, 2006, p. 82; cf. Ross, 2004, pp. 231, 232).

Fig. 8.1 Conan the Barbarian (1982)

Fig. 8.2 Xena: Warrior Princess

The two-part series finale, 'A Friend in Need', highlights the wounding of Xena with arrows and a demonic fire whip. This could be read as patriarchal retribution for her sustained 'transgression' of conventional gender roles. The whip strips the clothes from her body, framed in revealing long shot, a sexualised form of punishment and humiliation that stresses both her femininity and her vulnerability to male aggression. Reduced to spirit form, Xena can no longer hold a weapon—the warrior denied her sword. Her physical body, left hanging in cruciform position, is fragmented further through framing, editing and lighting, building to the revelation that she has been beheaded. This loss of corporeal integrity is countered through the efforts of Gabrielle, who now bears the same warrior traits as Xena. It is notable that Xena's final redemption is linked to the articulation of her feelings for Gabrielle, whom she describes as her 'soulmate'. Gabrielle kisses Xena on the mouth, depicted as the kiss of life yet framed in lingering close-ups with clear sexual overtones. Xena chooses not to reclaim her corporeal body, sacrificing her physical form to release 40,000 lost souls, remaining in Gabrielle's mind and heart but not at her side. This could be read as a compromise, toning down

and even negating the show's subversion of gender roles and boundaries and heterosexual orthodoxy. The mutual attraction is expressed yet sidelined and overridden by Xena's final act of atonement; she has not been reclaimed by hetero-normativity, yet neither is she permitted an openly and actively homosexual relationship (see Lotz, 2006, pp. 79, 173; Brown, 2011, pp. 201–3). Sara Crosby notes that Xena's death can be read as resistance to or transcendence of patriarchy, yet sees it rather as the triumph of a misogynist patriarchal order previously rejected by Xena and depicted by the show as irrational, brutal and criminal (Crosby, 2004, pp. 153, 166, 167, 171). However, compared to the compromised warrior women in *Conan the Barbarian* and *Red Sonja*, and the demonization of lesbianism in the latter, *Xena: Warrior Princess* is positive and progressive, albeit in tentative fashion. The penultimate story, 'Soul Possession' shows Xena and Gabrielle reunited in future incarnations, the jokey, self-reflexive tone soft-pedalling the sexual implications of this coupling.

The warrior woman remains a contentious figure in pseudo-mythological action-oriented entertainment. This problematic status is reflected, I argue, in the character's relative rarity on both film and television. If the swordswoman has moved beyond the condemnation and/or mockery found in some *pepla*, there is, it seems, an ongoing cultural or rather patriarchal unease with notions of the strong, militarised woman, still read in terms of masculinisation. This reactionary, gender-inflected perspective manifests clearly in *Red Sonja*, where the heroine's power seems externally derived rather than intrinsic and is marked as a response to violent trauma, sexual and otherwise. Valeria in *Conan the Barbarian* appears punished for exhibiting the same traits as the title character and assuming a similar warrior status. In both cases, positive aspects of their representation, though not divorced from their bravery and skill in combat, are qualified and restricted to a significant degree. In *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, Xena's initial transformation from villain to heroine is rendered in contrived, tokenistic fashion, and it can be argued that her ultimate form is that of inspirational spirit rather than a heroic fighting body capable of positive action. Nevertheless, in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, the female warrior is largely freed of the negative or ambivalent attributes of previous representations, the positive qualities of Xena transposed onto the body of Gabrielle.

Part III
This Thing of Darkness

9
White Man's Burden?

In *White*, Richard Dyer notes how in most Western cultures white people are not regarded as a distinct race as such but rather represent the entire human race, the human condition and therefore human normality (Dyer, 1997, pp. 3, 9). This transcendence of race is facilitated by a special quality, which Dyer characterises as spirit, manifested as energy, will, ambition, intelligence, leadership, foresight and perseverance (Dyer, 1997, pp. 18, 30, 31). These attributes, in turn, enable white people to initiate and dominate the areas of exploration, scientific research, business, industry and nation-building (Dyer, 1997, p. 31). This spirit may, sometimes, be found in non-white peoples, but never to the same extent or degree. If to be white is to be fully human, fully normal, to be deemed non-white, or black, is to be inferior and of a lesser race. Prior to the twentieth century, even tanned white male skin could be problematic due to its association with 'peasants and working-class labour' (Dyer, 1997, p. 49). Subsequently, it became valued for connoting manliness, health, leisure and affluence; it was also associated closely with the predominantly white bodybuilding culture.

The concept of race, and therefore of racial variety, foregrounds the body as a site of historical, social and cultural differences (Dyer, 1997, p. 30). Dyer cites nineteenth century racial thought, in both Europe and the United States, as exhibiting 'a profoundly felt need for an absolute racial distinction between black and white', manifested in the exaggerations of blackface minstrel acts and, later, film stereotypes (Dyer, 1997, p. 51). Charles Ramírez Berg argues that racial stereotyping results from a combination of categorisation, ethnocentrism and prejudice, and may be defined as 'a negative generalisation used by an in-group (Us) about an out-group (Them)' (Ramírez Berg, 2006, p. 15). Furthermore, these negative stereotypes 'flatten, homogenise, and generalise individuals within a group, emphasising sameness and ignoring individual agency and variety' (Ramírez Berg, 2006, p. 16). White is equated with honour and honesty or, at its most extreme, with light and goodness, therefore

black is darkness and malevolence (cf. Dyer, 1997, pp. 48, 58, 65). To a lesser degree, the notion is also applied to people within the same racial group in matters such as hair colour (cf. Dyer, 1997, p. 59), as with the virtuous and virginal blonde *peplum* heroine and the wicked, sexually forward dark temptress.

Discussing representations of non-whiteness, frequently if problematically referred to as 'blackness', Dyer identifies a number of characteristics: 'Black and white discourses on blackness seem to be valuing the same things—spontaneity, emotion, naturalness' (Dyer, 1986, p. 79). These qualities seem potentially positive yet, as Dyer notes, are often read through a male black stereotype, the Brute or Beast, where spontaneity equates with chaos and violence, and emotions are dangerously 'primitive' (Dyer, 1986, p. 89). As with the white body, the black body may connote vitality, strength and eroticism; unlike the white body, there is a consistent and systematic 'denial of all that bodily energy and delight as creative and productive, seen rather hysterically…as mere animal capacity incapable of producing civilization' (Dyer, 1986, p. 139). Put another way, the strong white body is inherently constructive and civilised, while the strong black body, though impressive in its raw power, is by nature bestial and destructive, capable only of unthinking aggression. Dyer also identifies a strategy of deactivation whereby a given black person or character's qualities may be praised but 'must not be shown to be effective qualities active in the world', let alone equal to the qualities of a white person (Dyer, 2004, p. 206). Yvonne Tasker notes that white-dominated societies do incorporate the black body within popular culture, 'primarily through the forums of sport and entertainment' (Tasker, 1993, p. 35). Here the black body is permitted to be visible, active and effective to a degree, albeit in spheres related to leisure rather than, say, commerce or politics, though under strict conditions and constraints over which the participants often have little or no control.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the classical world was associated, however contentiously (or illogically), with Caucasian whiteness (Dyer, 1997, p. 148). Celebrity bodybuilder and showman Eugene Sandow used white powder on his body to emphasise further the parallel with Greco-Roman sculpture (Dyer, 1997, p. 155). This whitening of the ancient world would be perpetuated in various media throughout the twentieth century, accompanied by prevailing racial distinctions and discrimination. Sarah Berry argues that the cinema, at least in Europe and the US, has from the start endorsed and popularised racial stereotyping (Berry, 2004, p. 188). Even in a film as

recent and egalitarian as *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), the near-naked body of black slave Juba (Djimon Hounsou) is inspected and pawed by buyer Proximo, while the body of the white hero is spared this humiliating, racially-tinged objectification.

In *Cabiria* (Pastroni, 1914), Caucasian actor Bartolomeo Pagano plays Maciste as a Nubian, his face and body covered in dark make-up. Maciste's large, powerful physique is highlighted throughout the film, both in static pose and heroic action. This heroism is, however, qualified and compromised by his status as a black man. Maciste is domesticated and, arguably, servile, sewing new clothes for the title character and serenading the romantic leads as the film closes. Moreover, he is captured, tortured and chained to a millstone for ten years. For all his physical and moral strength, it takes the intervention of Fulvius Axilla, his white ally and former master, before Maciste can break his chains. An intertitle states 'The joy of unexpected freedom increases his strength'. It seems Maciste is lacking the spirit Dyer associates with whiteness and must rely on Fulvius to invest him, temporarily, with this quality. When Maciste became a lead character, Pagano played him as Caucasian (cf. Reich, 2013, pp. 32–56). In *Maciste* (Vincenzo Dénizot, Romano Luigi Borgnetto, 1915) he is now an actual person living in modern Italy, defending an innocent girl from foreign predators. Footage from *Cabiria*, playing in a cinema, reinforces the notion that while the 'screen' Maciste can be or appear to be black, the 'real' Maciste active in the real world (Italy in particular) must be white (cf. Reich, 2013, p. 49). He blacks up to pose as a servant then pauses mid-skirmish to remove the make-up, reaffirming the whiteness of the true hero. In *Maciste all'Inferno / Maciste in Hell* (Guido Brignone, 1926), when the hero becomes a demon his skin darkens and he acquires more body hair, this supernatural Beast restored to his natural state of human whiteness by a child's prayer.

Dyer suggests that in situations where white males, usually working-class, perceive themselves lacking in social or economic power, 'an assertion of the value and even superiority of the white male body has especial resonance' (Dyer, 1997, p. 147). This concept has been applied to the *peplum* and Maggie Günsberg concurs that the heroic masculinity of the latter is routinely differentiated from 'non-white, non-western masculinity coded as "inferior"' (Günsberg, 2005, p. 118). Black performers may be glimpsed in numerous *pepla*, usually as slaves, servants, dancers or soldiers. The tavern sequence that opens *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (Cottafavi, 1961) features a black female servant and dancer, lusted after by white patrons, who skilfully evades and resists their clutching hands. In *The Strongest Man in the World* (Leonviola, 1961), a tyrant queen is

shown defiance by a black female slave whose calm, stillness and silence contrast with her mistress's agitated speech and movement; unusually the slave suffers no apparent punishment for this transgression. For the most part, black or non-white actors function as background figures in *peplum* films, rarely interacting with the white leads.

Dyer notes how, from the 1960s, non-white men became major figures in bodybuilding yet seldom featured in the promotion of body culture, even thirty years later (Dyer, 1997, p. 148). Black bodybuilders, such as Serge Nubret and Paul Wynter, 1960 winner of Mr. Universe, worked in *peplum* films but were never cast as the hero, being relegated to either sidekick or villain roles (cf. Dyer, 1997, p. 148). Dyer cites as a prime example *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi / Atlas in the Land of the Cyclops* (Leonviola, 1961) and the duel between Maciste (Gordon Mitchell) and Mumba (Wynter), arguing the former's whiteness and his attire, connoting civilisation and refinement, signify superiority over a black opponent clad in a leopard-skin loincloth (Dyer, 1997, p. 162). While Mumba's tailored garment—resembling a short skirt—and matching belt and gauntlets suggest a degree of civilisation to match Maciste's wardrobe, his behaviour conforms to the negative stereotypes outlined above. First seen in the darkness and gloom of a cave, as opposed to Maciste's introduction on a sunlit beach, Mumba is a Brute, holding a crying baby upside down while his white master threatens to stab it. By contrast, Maciste saves a small child from a lion, comforting it in his arms. Dyer notes that Mumba recognises white superiority; in a tug-of-war scene featuring white and black teams, he wagers on the former (Dyer, 1997, p. 179), though he gives orders to white guards, suggesting a relatively elevated position in an admittedly corrupt hierarchy. Mumba drugs Maciste to secure an advantage during their fight, implicitly acknowledging the latter's superior strength (cf. Dyer, 1997, p. 179). Smiling at Maciste's apparent helplessness, Mumba launches a prolonged assault on his body, only to be thrashed by the revived hero. Having failed to backstab Maciste, Mumba is overpowered and thrown to the sharks, devoured by stronger animal predators.

Maciste contro il vampiro / Goliath and the Vampires (Giacomo Gentilomo, 1961) features a black henchman whose heavy armour includes shoulder pieces that resemble a gaping red mouth with huge white fangs. His helmet and breastplate are also tipped with fang-like spikes, emphasising further his savage, bestial nature. He throws defenceless white women to the sharks and drains their blood into a goblet to feed his demonic master. The character also conforms to the stereotype of black man as sexual threat, menacing a blonde white woman in a

bedchamber. *The Amazon Women* (Leonviola, 1963) has a black villainess, a rarity in the *peplum*, known only as The Black Queen. She rules over white men and women, her domination and control of whiteness reflected in her predominantly white costumes and the white cat that sits on her lap. She also has an appetite for sado-voyeurism, focused on white female gladiators in mortal combat. This troubling yet tokenistic figure is neutralised in predictable, racially-tinged fashion, dying at the hands of the blonde white heroine, her polar opposite in both appearance and character.

Not all *pepla* featuring black characters conform to negative stereotypes, though few representations are unconditionally positive. In *Son of Spartacus* (Corbucci, 1962), rebellious centurion Randus (Steve Reeves) performs a mercy killing of a crucified black prisoner, respecting the man's wishes, and later leads a multi-ethnic band of followers, connoting racial unity and harmony. On the other hand, he kills many brutish black warriors, most of whom wear 'savage' leopard-skin headgear. A number of these are played by Caucasians in blackface, underlining the sense of a white-perpetrated mockery and demonization of blackness. Their lighter-skinned commander, who appears Middle Eastern, lusts after the white heroine and is deservedly punished by Randus's blade. The chief white villain, Crassus, talks of unleashing 'an avalanche of black warriors' on the rebel slaves, suggesting an undifferentiated, depersonalised mass marked by racial difference and associated destructiveness akin to a mindless force of nature. While these images and concepts risk evoking notions of white supremacy, if not fascism, the film resists a simplistic reading, showing that persecution and tyranny are not exclusive to one racial or ethnic group (cf. O'Brien, 2011, pp. 195–6).

The Strongest Man in the World pairs Maciste (Mark Forest) with a black sidekick, the equally muscle-bound Bango (Paul Wynter). Though loyal and courageous, Bango is associated with images of captivity (tied to a tree, chained in cruciform position) and passivity, hiding from his enemies while Maciste beats them off and prostrating himself before his rescuer. While the film explicitly condemns slavery, Dyer suggests that Bango craves servitude (Dyer, 1997, p. 179). Maciste explains that every man is born free yet Bango struggles to grasp this concept, referring to Maciste as padrone/master and relying on his guidance. This rather tentative promotion of equality is underpinned on other levels. Wynter's physique is highlighted on a par with Forest's, with heroic low angles and near identical poses. When Maciste and Bango are forced to fight, the latter is left unconscious in the dust, yet Wynter lifts and throws Forest with obvious ease.

The film's villains exemplify what might be termed excessive whiteness, manifested in their clothing, headgear and pallid skin. Living underground, they recoil from bright light and cover their faces for protection (a guard is punished by exposure to sunlight, which reduces him to a skeleton, surely the ultimate form of whiteness). They dance around the captive Bango, wear masks and play drums, subverting the racial stereotype of the savage black native; cruel and sadistic, they enslave and torture women and children. Their whiteness is contrasted with both Bango and the healthy tanned whiteness of Maciste and marked as irredeemably malevolent. Recaptured, Bango is chained and burned with a hot iron yet will not betray Maciste, and they subsequently join forces to destroy a giant wheel that symbolises the enemy's power and tyranny. Bango may not be Maciste's equal—is any man?—yet proves himself worthy to stand by his side. Incidentally, Wynter is third-billed on the Italian version of the film, behind Forest and Moira Orfei, a rare example of a black performer granted co-star status in a *peplum*.

Director Antonio Leonviola highlights another white-black male friendship in *The Amazon Women*, between hero Taur and sidekick Ubaratutu (Harry Baird). Like Bango, the latter has an imposing, muscular physique, yet his depiction is problematic. Where Taur is shrewd and brave, Ubaratutu is gullible and nervous, in manner and body language. When Taur embarks on a rescue mission, Ubaratutu flees, his retreat underscored with comedy music. His scenes in action are often played as slapstick, as when he stuns Taur by accident and concusses himself with a gong. This depiction of the black male, which could be read as racially-inflected mockery, is countered by scenes where his representation seems wholly positive. Ubaratutu pulls the bars from his cell and participates in the decisive battle, his strength and fighting prowess no longer comically compromised. He carries the injured Taur to safety (the black man's burden?), tends his wounds and nurses him back to health. There are recurring images of the black man alert and active while his white friend is prone and passive. Ubaratutu even resets Taur's dislocated shoulder, restoring his friend's heroic physique to full working order. These scenes occur in a domestic environment and the men occasionally act like an established couple, jointly caring for two young children. The film does not dwell on the homosocial/homosexual implications of this set-up, yet the friendship between Taur and Ubaratutu, underlined by their manly/brotherly embrace, overshadows the negligible relationship between Taur and the white heroine, which barely qualifies as perfunctory.

The humorous *peplum Sons of Thunder* (Tessari, 1962) features an unusual focus on racial difference, embodied by the relationship between

blonde hero Crios (Giuliano Gemma), a Titan made mortal, and Rator (Serge Nubret), a slave and eventual ally (cf. O'Brien, 2011, p. 197). Lacking bodybuilder dimensions, Crios exhibits athleticism complemented by a keen intelligence. He is contrasted with the muscle-bound Rator, who is marked as representing brutish brawn. Rator is first seen in chains, emphasising both his physique and a paradoxical helplessness, an image evoking the iconography of enslavement. For all his strength, he inhabits the society of tyrant king Cadmus at spear-point, chained, behind bars or as entertainment. Ordered to fight for Cadmus's amusement, Rator quickly dispatches three white opponents yet is beaten by Crios's superior combat skills. The latter's mercy towards Rator is undercut by his stamping on and kicking at the prone man, the white victor punishing further his vanquished black opponent. Rator is subsequently hunted by dogs, the black man seen as the white man's sport and quarry, though a humorous riff on the theme from *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957), as he vandalises a bridge to frustrate his pursuers, downplays the grimmer implications of the sequence. *Sons of Thunder* sidesteps its dubious racial politics in favour of a 'buddy' relationship that transcends ethnicity, class and the human-Titan divide; its initiation is marked by a joint cliff-top dive to safety suggested by Rator (cf. O'Brien, 2011, p. 197). Crios cannot beat Cadmus's forces single-handed and is aided by his Titan brothers and Rator. The defeat of evil is thus a collective endeavour, enabling Rator to progress, belatedly, from being the saved to the saviour. By implication, he becomes an honorary Titan, though his membership of this heroic homosocial group is not clarified (cf. O'Brien, 2011, p. 197).

A number of sword-and-sorcery films follow the *peplum* strategy of giving the Caucasian hero a black sidekick. *The Beastmaster* (Don Coscarelli, 1982) features Seth (John Amos), a muscular, shaven-headed warrior who fights with a wooden staff, which could connote his 'primitive' status compared to sword-wielding hero Dar (Marc Singer) or his closeness to nature. In *Beastmaster III: The Eye of Braxus* (Beaumont, 1996), Seth (Tony Todd) is linked romantically with a white woman, a strategy unthinkable in a *peplum* film and still unusual in mainstream US cinema. Seth's lover caresses his long staff in suggestive fashion, though their relationship is in the past (and possibly the future), outside the film's diegesis and therefore less provocative in its interracial coupling. The 2011 *Conan the Barbarian* has the seafaring Artus, who acts as an occasional sounding board and spokesman for Conan but otherwise serves little narrative, thematic or symbolic function.

Maria Wyke identifies an alternative, progressive representation of black masculinity in the 1960 *Spartacus*, citing the gladiator Draba

(Woody Strode) (Wyke, 1997, p. 68). In his early scenes, Draba is marked by stillness, impassivity and watchfulness, observing the batch of new recruits, Spartacus included. Draba's first words rebut Spartacus's proffered camaraderie: gladiators have no names or friends and thus there is no possibility of solidarity, let alone collective endeavour. Yet he continues to watch Spartacus train and is later bested by him in mock combat. A visiting Roman lady objectifies Draba in terms of his size, beauty and colour, requesting that he and the other picked gladiators fight near-naked. This racially-tinged 'appreciation' of the black body is here linked with the institution of slavery, alongside Roman decadence and callousness. During the fight between Draba and Spartacus, low angles emphasise the former's greater stature, while his trident and net enable a longer reach than his opponent's short sword. Another Roman lady refers to Draba as 'the trident', again reducing the (black) human to functional object deployed for her entertainment and implied sexual pleasure. Draba's hesitation over killing the defeated Spartacus becomes outright refusal, and he instead turns his weapon—and body—against the jeering spectators, dying for this act of defiance. A high-angle medium long shot highlights Draba's pain and determination in his last moments as his right arm grips the leg of Marcus Crassus (Laurence Olivier), the film's key embodiment of Roman power, oppression and corruption. Discussing *The Strongest Man in the World*, Dyer states that Maciste shows a 'moral enlightenment' that Bango initially lacks (Dyer, 1997, p. 179). In *Spartacus* it is Draba who exhibits a similar quality, rather than the white Spartacus. Wyke links Draba with the Civil Rights struggle, suggesting his part in inspiring the slave revolt 'acknowledges the central role of black activism in the emerging protest movements' (Wyke, 1997, p. 68). Yet whatever Draba's symbolic significance for the revolt, he is denied an active role, let alone a position of leadership. It is notable that Spartacus's rebel commanders are all Caucasians, and, furthermore, there appear to be just a handful of black rebels, glimpsed fleetingly, in his overwhelmingly white army.

The television film *Spartacus* (Robert Dornhelm, 2004), retains the figure of Draba in modified form. The initial antagonism between Spartacus (Goran Visnjic) and Draba (Henry Simmons) is played down, the latter's first words now addressed to a different character, with Spartacus serving as an onlooker and mediator. Draba displays more emotion than in the 1960 version, yet a man rather than a symbol, nor is he the first gladiator shown to defy the Romans. Draba's death is also depicted differently; rather than falling to the ground, he is pinned against a wooden wall with three spears in his back, his face obscured. The heroic, martyred body is

now dominant, valorising a desire for freedom that extends far beyond one individual. In the 1960 film, Draba's body is last seen hanging from a beam; here it is suspended from railings until Spartacus cuts it down, a gesture of respect but also, perhaps, a sign that this body has served its purpose. The racial distinctions and racism of Roman society are stressed. Crassus equates whiteness with mental superiority and Batiatus orders a second black gladiator killed for Draba's defiance. The slave revolt includes a number of black gladiators, including Nordo (Chris Jarman), who becomes part of Spartacus's inner circle. He is also, like Spartacus, granted a noble death in battle. The film's construction of blackness can be read as progressive, though Spartacus's multiracial, multi-ethnic 'tribe' that stands for democracy and equality is eventually destroyed by Roman forces.

Spartacus: Blood and Sand (2010) features the black character Doctore (Peter Mensah), who recalls Strode's Draba in terms of his height, build, shaved head and qualities of stillness and watchfulness. Doctore is a gladiator turned trainer (his title means 'instructor'), serving the Roman culture of enslavement that Draba violently rejects, and his relationship with Spartacus is initially that of drill sergeant and rebellious recruit. In the final episode, 'Kill Them All', Doctore is granted his freedom and regains his birth name, Oenomaus. While Spartacus views Oenomaus as an honourable man, the latter attempts to thwart the slave rebellion, believing his interests lie with the Roman establishment, before switching sides at the urging of Crixus, a white gladiator. Returning for *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012), Oenomaus distances himself from

Fig. 9.1 *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012)

Spartacus, neither rebel nor Roman freeman. In episode one, 'Fugitivus', he lingers in the shadows and describes himself as an animal without honour, invoking less positive black male stereotypes. In episode two, 'A Place in This World', Oenomaus has become a pit fighter, the lowest form of combat, affirming his self-imposed status as more beast than man. His head and shoulders are painted white (*fig. 9.1*), a provocative and ambiguous image that can be read variously as the ghost of his former self, his reappropriation by the white-dominated fight culture, a shame-tinged form of concealment, his readoption of Roman culture or the stigma of an honourable man brought low by his own deeds. This 'whiteface' becomes cracked, suggesting the true Oenomaus cannot be contained by a false identity. In episode three, 'The Greater Good', he is captured, whipped and chained in cruciform position, appearing to long for death rather than Christ-like salvation or transcendence.

The injured Oenomaus is brought to Spartacus's hideout in episode six, 'Chosen Path', yet remains a marginal figure. Unconscious most of the time, he is talked about but not permitted to speak for himself. Over subsequent episodes, he is tentatively incorporated into Spartacus's group, serving as observer and commentator as he resumes his role of Doctore in the context of resistance and revolution rather than oppression and exploitation. In the penultimate episode, 'Monsters', he is seen in action against Roman forces, emphasised in a medium shot as he slays an enemy with a battle cry and spilled blood. Injuries to his hand and eye confirm his allegiance to Spartacus's cause while compromising his ability to function as an effective combatant. In 'Wrath of the Gods', the final episode, he stands disfigured yet unbowed, but subsequently falls in battle. Oenomaus is granted heroic status, underlined with slow motion and top-lighting, his true face, rather than the ghostly whiteface, framed in lingering close-up. He is, however, excluded from the crucial struggle between Spartacus and Crassus, narrated in the follow-up *Spartacus: War of the Damned* (2013), where his qualities of honour and inspiration are cited in tokenistic fashion (he makes a fleeting spectral appearance in the final episode). Having progressed from Roman collaborator to social outcast to freedom fighter, Oenomaus is rendered unable to complete this transition. As the primary black male character in *Spartacus: Vengeance*, he embodies many positive traits yet also the qualifications and restrictions identified by Dyer. Despite his strength, skill and integrity, Oenomaus is only briefly permitted to be an effective positive force in the world and is denied long-term equality with Spartacus and the three white rebels, Crixus, Agron and Gannicus, who stand at his side. From this perspective, his representation marks minimal progression on Strode's Draba fifty years later.

The Man from Judea

Racial difference in the *peplum* and related films is largely associated with ideas of blackness, the supposed opposite of whiteness. I end this chapter by looking at the *peplum* career of Iranian actor Ilush Khoshabe and the ways in which it challenges this ostensibly simplistic distinction. Though hardly 'black', Khoshabe was Middle Eastern in appearance yet tended to be cast as 'white', whether playing Vulcan, Maciste or even Ali Baba. As the films' heroic protagonist, he acquired a quality of whiteness by default, as such roles were not, in theory, open to non-white stars. Khoshabe's first *peplum* was *Vulcano, figlio di Giove / Vulcan, Son of Jupiter* (Emimmo Salvi, 1962), which bills him as 'Rod Flash Ilush'. Vulcan is presented in the Steve Reeves-Herculean mould, dark-haired and bearded, white-skinned but tanned. In one scene he uses a chain as a weapon, evoking Reeves's hero at the climax of *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958). Khoshabe's more (stereo)typically Middle Eastern features are sometimes noticeable but not prominent. It is notable that his love interest, Cuban actress Bella Cortez, has dark hair and complexion. While Cortez's darker skin could be seen as reaffirming Khoshabe's (relative) whiteness, just as his anglicised screen name suggests an American identity, the film itself depicts whiteness as an essentially neutral quality. Indeed excessive whiteness and blondeness are associated with the villainous gods Mars and Venus, both devoid of redeeming features. Khoshabe retained the bearded and tanned look in *The Seven Tasks of Ali Baba* (Salvi, 1962). While hero and setting are firmly Middle Eastern, Ali Baba is still played as a 'white' *peplum* hero, complete with a Herculean club. *Gli invincibili fratelli Maciste / The Invincible Brothers Maciste* (Roberto Mauri, 1964) is another variation on the Herculean figure, first seen toting a large stone block on his shoulder and leading the defeat of a subterranean tyrant queen.

An exception to this tactic is found in *Hercules, Samson and Ulysses* (Francisci, 1963), which bills Khoshabe as 'Richard Lloyd'. The film subverts Khoshabe's previous whiteness, darkening his skin and making him clean-shaven to contrast the more with Kirk Morris's Hercules, who is bearded, tanned and muscular but notably lighter and slighter than the Steve Reeves incarnation (*fig. 9.2*). While this suggests a conventional white and non-white polarization, the representation of the characters is by no means straightforward as they progress from opposition to alliance. Samson is introduced twenty-five minutes into the film (twenty in the abridged US version), concealed in a shadowed doorway, his body largely covered in contrast to Hercules's exposed torso. Wary of

Fig. 9.2 Hercules, Samson and Ulysses (1963)

Philistine spies, Samson is only an observer here, not engaging with Hercules and his fellow Greeks, shipwrecked on the coast of Judea. Hercules is already established as an active agent, fighting a sea monster and a bull. Both heroes are marked as men of incredible strength, leading Hercules to be mistaken for Samson, yet while each slays a lion, only Hercules's fight is shown. At this point, the film is highlighting Hercules as the primary hero, Samson (and his deeds) off-screen for significant periods.

The belated revelation of Samson's strength and fighting prowess is arguably a deliberate strategy to make its anticipated display all the more impressive. Feared by the tyrant king Seren, Samson is marked as divinely inspired and given a semi-mythical or supernatural aura. Halfway through the film he battles armoured Philistine cavalry, his extraordinary spear throws underscored with uncanny electronic tones. In *Hercules*, similar tones marked the hero's superhuman discus throwing as potentially problematic; here they emphasise rather that Samson's superhero status is both warranted and effective in the service of good. When Samson and Hercules first meet, over an hour into the film, it is as antagonists, due largely to the machinations of others. While Hercules lands the first punch, they are depicted as evenly matched as they throw, catch and crash into masonry. They seal their new alliance by jointly dragging the deceitful Delilah through the dust, then combat Philistine troops with synchronised boulder throwing and temple

toppling, expressing further their equality in terms of physical and mental strength. Samson looks to Hercules for advice yet makes his own decisions and is an intelligent military strategist. As the film closes, Hercules cautions Samson to beware Delilah, displaying a maturity and judgement his friend appears to lack. Yet if Samson misjudges both Hercules and Delilah, Hercules underestimates the Philistine threat and so finds himself at the mercy of Seren. Together, Samson and Hercules embody the complete mythical hero, whereas Romulus and Remus, in *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961), must be violently split in order for the former to realise his full masculine potential. It is Samson, rather than Hercules, who kills Seren with his final spear throw of the film. Samson is not represented as white yet embodies a heroic masculinity associated with whiteness. Rather than conform to standard *peplum* depictions of non-whiteness, he represents a negotiation of racial identity which evokes stereotypes but is not contained by them.

10
Doom's Children

Conan the Barbarian (Milius, 1982) is notable for its contrast and opposition of white and black masculine forms, which may be explored in relation to wider issues of its era, including those associated, however loosely, with the Reagan presidency. Ronald Reagan's Republican administration (1981–1989) promoted ideas and images of masculine toughness that drew in part on the male body, though Reagan was not the creative progenitor of this ideal, rather a refraction of a larger cultural movement. This valorisation of male strength was echoed and seemingly endorsed by American action films such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985). Susan Jeffords argues further that, in 1980s US action cinema, 'masculinity is defined in and through the white male body and against the racially marked male body', identifying the heroism and individualism promoted by the Reagan administration specifically with the white body (Jeffords, 2000, p. 148). By implication at least, these same values are denied the non-white body, marked as an alien entity that lacks true masculinity. This approach may be criticised as over-generalised and overly simplistic, suggesting as it does that racial tensions within America were being addressed and worked through in action films in regular, consistent and antagonistic fashion. It is, however, notable that the heroic white male body, frequently exposed for the camera, assumed especial significance in American cinema and the wider popular culture of this era, while the non-white body was often depicted as problematic if not overtly hostile. *Conan the Barbarian* and its sequel *Conan the Destroyer* (Fleischer, 1984) are part of this debate, with their emphasis on racial difference, what separates Conan from non-white men, and foregrounding of racial disunity.

The Reagan administration promoted itself in terms of a tough, strong-willed masculinity, contrasted with the supposedly 'soft' leadership of Jimmy Carter's Democrat presidency (Jeffords, 2000, pp. 8, 11). J. Hoberman notes how Reagan's media stunts for his presidential campaign included stripping to the waist, aged sixty-nine, and engaging in physical

labour, inviting the press to document his well-preserved physique and associated strength (Hoberman, 2003, p. 207). As Jeffords states, Reagan's public image and many American films of the era promoted 'spectacular narratives about characters who stand for individualism, liberty, militarism, and a mythic heroism' (Jeffords, 2000, p. 16, cf. Flanagan, 2011, pp. 87, 97). True freedom was identified with and located in a heroic warrior figure reluctant to fight, but ready and willing to do so where necessary.

Arnold Schwarzenegger's screen persona, which first emerged in *Conan the Barbarian*, has been related to the Republican administrations led by Reagan and George Bush (cf. Cornea, 2006, p. 284). This association requires qualification in terms of Schwarzenegger's public image during the early 1980s, when *Conan the Barbarian* was produced and released. A declared Republican, Schwarzenegger became a high-profile party activist later in the decade but did not gain American citizenship and full voting rights until 1983 (Leigh, 1990, pp. 100–1). Furthermore, while film heroes such as Rambo were perceived to fit and indeed embody the Reagan masculine ideal, this representation of Conan is more problematic. Don Herron suggests the cinematic Conan lacks the self-sufficiency and associated toughness of Robert E. Howard's literary creation (Herron, 1984, p. 177). The decision to depict Conan's origins, showing the character as a small, physically slight child dependent on parental protection, introduces an element of vulnerability absent from the stories. The 2011 *Conan the Barbarian* (dir. Marcus Nispel) also features an origins story—Conan literally born on the battlefield—yet emphasises his extraordinary fighting prowess from childhood, as when the teenage Conan slays four adult opponents single-handed. In the 1982 film, capture and enslavement are not balanced by rebellion and escape, the adult Conan still reliant on the intervention of older, more powerful figures. The contentious nature of any Reagan-Conan association is reflected most keenly in the crucifixion sequence and its aftermath, the Barbarian depicted in terms of helplessness and dependence. In *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, the hero undergoes symbolic crucifixion twice in rapid succession, tied to a wooden crane, then an electrified metal bed frame. Unlike Conan, Rambo endures the pain *and* retains the inner strength and determination to affect his escape. Whatever the contradictions of his character, Rambo here conforms to the ideals of the Reagan-era superhero in a way Conan does not.

White Supremacy?

While *Conan the Barbarian* intersects only partially with Reagan-centred notions of masculinity, the film's reception invoked another, more

controversial ideological comparison. Critic Roger Ebert expressed reservations about the climactic encounter between Conan and his arch-enemy Thulsa Doom, played by African American actor James Earl Jones: 'it was, for me, a rather unsettling image to see this Nordic superman confronting a black, and when Doom's head was sliced off…I found myself thinking that Leni Riefenstahl could have directed the scene, and that Goebbels might have applauded it' (Ebert, 1982). This invocation of the Nazi-sponsored film-maker and associated images of Aryan supremacy recalls the response to *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (Cottafavi, 1961). In the latter instance, the Nazi or fascist connotations are linked clearly with the film's villains, differentiated from and vanquished by Hercules. Ebert's reading of *Conan the Barbarian* draws an explicit parallel between the heroic title character and the Nazi ideal, a more contentious comparison. Ebert also suggests that the film's literary origins invoke a historical context that imbues the scene with specific associations: 'when Conan appeared in the pulps of the 1930s, the character suggested in certain unstated ways the same sort of Nordic super-race myths that were being peddled in Germany' (Ebert, 1982). While Ebert does not develop this aspect of his argument, he seems to assert that Conan's literary origins both coincided and overlapped with the rise of the Nazi superman, rendering any subsequent representation of the character—in whatever medium—open to accusations of promoting fascist or neo-fascist imagery and ideas.

There is evidence of anti-Semitism in Howard's private correspondence (Joshi, 2010, p. 53). However, linking perceived fascist undercurrents in *Conan the Barbarian* with Howard's published stories and the context of their production is problematic in terms of the author's stated views. Howard was opposed to fascism, which he rejected as anti-individualism, anti-liberty and anti-intellectual, and condemned the dictatorships that rose in Italy and Germany during the 1920s and 1930s (Joshi, 2010, p. 79; Sheaffer, 2006, p. 162). While his attack on the fascist powers is not explicitly political or ideological, and could be said to sidestep or disregard fascism's more contentious doctrines, to equate Howard and by extension his literature with fascism is both misleading and misrepresentative.

Ebert's comparison may be overly simplistic, not to say misplaced, yet *Conan the Barbarian* is not so easily divorced from Nazi-tainted ideas of the superman. Director John Milius acknowledged possible fascist parallels in the film and appeared to encourage the comparison: 'Conan would have been a big hit in Germany in the 30s as it is a deeply Nietzschean concept' (qtd. Turner, 1982, p. 152). Quotations in film periodicals

are not firm evidence of a film-maker's intentions, yet the association of *Conan the Barbarian* with Nazi Germany and Nietzsche, famous for his theories of the Übermensch, or superior man, seems calculated to provoke the kind of response found in Ebert's review. This strategy is found in the film itself, which opens with a quotation from Nietzsche: 'That which does not kill us makes us stronger.' The credits play over images of Conan's father forging a sword, invoking arguably the German mythological hero Siegfried and his representations in Richard Wagner's opera, and, more directly, Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924), a film reputedly admired by Adolf Hitler. Discussing *Conan the Barbarian* and its imitators, Richard Dyer argues: 'it very often mobilises a sub-Nietzschian rhetoric of the Übermensch that, however inaccurately, is strongly associated with Hitlerism and crypto-fascism' (Dyer, 1997, p. 150). While questioning the link between Nietzsche's ideas and Nazism, Dyer also suggests that to invoke Nietzsche is to invite comparisons with German fascist ideology, as the two are inextricably connected in the public consciousness. This assessment of the film's allegedly Nietzschean qualities does not, however, address its representation of racial difference, which forms the crux of Ebert's criticism.

As with the debates on fascism, there is a case for arguing that any perceived racist undertones in *Conan the Barbarian* can be attributed to the source material as much as the political or social climate prevalent at the time of the film's production. Herron suggests Howard's fiction offers stereotypical depictions of black Americans typical of his era, implying the author is no more or less guilty than other writers of the 1920s and 1930s (Herron, 1984, p. 123). L. Sprague de Camp concurs: 'If a racist, Howard was, by the standards of his time, a mild one', the author holding conventional Texan views of Negroes and Mexicans as ethnic groups but praising individuals (Sprague de Camp, 2010, p. 27). Benjamin Szumskyj identifies a positive representation of a non-Caucasian in Howard's work in the form of African American boxer Ace Jessel, who is invested with qualities similar to those found in Conan (Szumskyj, 2006, p. 199). On this evidence, there are tensions and ambiguities in Howard's representations of non-Caucasian characters but they are neither simplistic nor unconditionally negative or derogatory. This ambivalence is also found in *Conan the Barbarian*.

Public debate on race and racism in the United States is commonly associated with the civil rights era of the 1960s, when the issue of endemic, institutionalized and legally sanctioned racial discrimination assumed major cultural and social significance. This raises an obvious yet important question: to what extent should race be connected to an

early-1980s film such as *Conan the Barbarian* if the true era of racial consideration in America was two decades earlier? It is arguable that *Conan the Barbarian* does not refract or address the race issue in America, any more than America was eager to have a conversation about race at this time. Discussing the late 1970s, Harvey R. Greenberg argues that America was more preoccupied with issues including Three Mile Island, the weak dollar and international humiliations such as the Iran hostage crisis (Greenberg, 1991, p. 83). In the 1980s, the race debate came more to the forefront with the advent of *The Cosby Show* (1984–92) on television in the middle part of the decade, along with Alfred Uhry's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987) and the subsequent film version (Bruce Beresford, 1989), which won four Academy Awards. While in-depth analysis of race relations in post-1960s America lies outside the scope of this book, I argue that the early 1980s were marked by a degree of racial tension, if not the outright civil unrest of the 1960s. In terms of the cinema, this tension is evidenced by Paramount's decision to withdraw *White Dog* (Samuel Fuller, 1982) from domestic distribution after protests from the National Assocation for the Advancement of Colored People that this racially charged drama was itself racist, prompting the threat of an organised boycott. Furthermore, while there is no evidence that Ronald Reagan's personal feelings on race are reflected in *Conan the Barbarian* or any other film of the era, this racial discord can be linked to a degree with the Reagan administration.

During the early years of his presidency, Reagan seemed less than progressive in his attitude to civil rights, in terms of both new legislation and existing law. Steven A. Shull argues that Reagan consistently attempted to cut back on federal protections for civil rights, opposing affirmative action and 'aggressive enforcement of civil rights laws' (Shull, 1993, pp. xiii, 3). In January 1982, he was associated with an attempt to prevent the IRS denying tax exemption status to private schools that discriminated on grounds of race (Dallek, 1984, p. 79; Shull, 1993, p. 56). Nor did Reagan give vocal support to an extension of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which greatly advanced black registration in the South (Dallek, 1984, pp. 80–1). When questioned on his civil rights record, he claimed his actions were, as Shull states, 'consistent with his general objective of reducing the scope and intrusiveness of government in all policy areas' (Shull, 1993, p. 3). Despite this stance, the Reagan administration is rarely characterised as overtly racist. What it did achieve, however, could be termed a form of passive racism through inaction: 'the application of the general antigovernment, antiregulation, laissez-faire philosophy to civil rights issues halted progress and eroded previous gains'

(Shull, 1993, p. 105). Though not actively dismantling existing legislation, Reagan's attitude to civil rights was, in effect, regressive. This is of course a partial view of the Reagan administration's approach to racial equality, yet it seems reasonable to surmise that the support, promotion and development of civil rights legislation and by extension the interests of ethnic minorities were rarely prioritised in its agenda.

Though filmed in Spain for an Italian executive producer with a multinational cast and crew, *Conan the Barbarian* can be read as a refraction of racial tensions in early 1980s America. Furthermore, this sense of racial and ethnic difference and disunity dominates the film, manifested as antagonism and violence. Conan's first opponent as a pit fighter is a voiceless black 'savage', wearing a mask that obscures his features while emphasising his glowering eyes and snarling teeth. Denied personality, this dehumanised figure conforms to the stereotype of the Beast, attacking Conan repeatedly with his sharpened 'fangs'. *Conan the Destroyer* highlights another black villain, Bombaata (Wilt Chamberlain), who serves as a wicked queen's left hand, or *sinister* man. Dressed in black armour, including a spiked helmet, he recalls black henchmen seen in the *peplum* and, like the pit fighter in *Conan the Barbarian*, fights in an 'animalistic' way, biting Conan's ear during their climactic duel. *The Sword and the Sorcerer* (Pyun, 1982) features a black witch, who hisses, wails and chants—but does not speak—in the service of evil magic. As with the pit fighter, she is denied both a voice and an identity, being marked as a subhuman figure. I should note that problematic depictions of racial difference were not confined to the Conan films or the wider sword-and-sorcery genre during this era, though the negative stereotyping of Indians in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Steven Spielberg, 1984) drew little comment from mainstream US critics, Ebert included.

Conan the Barbarian and *Conan the Destroyer* do not equate racial difference or non-whiteness solely with notions of blackness. The former features a number of characters marked as Asiatic or oriental, and their presence has antecedents in the *peplum*. For example, *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan / Samson and the 7 Miracles of the World* (Riccardo Freda, 1961), set in thirteenth-century China, has the hero aiding the natives in their struggle against Mongol oppressors. The Chinese characters, though enslaved and brutalised, are not all helpless victims. Princess Li Ling shrewdly plays on the Mongol leader's desire for power legitimised through marriage; rebel leader Cho, a commoner, is a Eurasian (in the English dub at least), his mixed-race heritage manifested as courtesy and courage. Peripheral Asiatic characters in *Conan the Barbarian* include a sword master whose unintelligible speech evokes a comedy-tinged

stereotype, yet despite his small size and slight build he knocks a much larger white man to the ground with a spin-kick (an equivalent figure is found in *Red Sonja* [Fleischer, 1985], who also addresses Sonja's misplaced hostility towards men). A Mongol general is a powerful warrior who solicits Conan's first words. The primary Asiatic figures are Conan's ally Subotai (Gerry Lopez) and the eccentric yet benevolent Wizard (Mako).

Subotai is first seen crouched and chained to a rock, begging for food as Conan looms over him. He soon abandons this submissive position, standing up to identify himself by name, profession (thief) and skill (archer). His smaller stature, short black hair and 'oriental' moustache form an obvious physical contrast with Conan, yet Subotai easily keeps pace as he runs alongside his new companion. He knows the wider world better than Conan, taking the lead in obtaining information and suggesting courses of action. It can be argued that this sense of equality is compromised, Subotai transitioning to the more conventional non-white role of loyal sidekick. Yvonne Tasker argues that Chinese men are often desexualised in US films, in contrast to the white hero (Tasker, 1993, p. 69). Subotai is an example of this strategy, having only fleeting physical contact with two women (both white) and, unlike Conan, is not seen, or permitted, to act on his sexual desire. He does, however, serve as Conan's rescuer and protector after the latter is crucified, and wears the same black-and-white war paint as Conan and Valeria, a reaffirmation of equality and solidarity as they raid Thulsa Doom's stronghold. At Valeria's funeral he cries on Conan's behalf, as Cimmerians do not shed tears, and they jointly prepare for and participate in the battle with Thulsa Doom's riders. Having saved a princess from Doom's arrow, Subotai is removed from the film's diegesis. The cornering and dispatch of Doom is Conan's personal mission, accompanied by the white princess. Subotai's absence is justified on a narrative level, by a leg injury, yet also reflects the film's equivocation over his status as a non-white action hero.

The Wizard serves as the film's narrator, proclaiming himself Conan's chronicler. Though off-screen for the first hour, his aural presence is a privileged position. This is Conan's story, yet the Wizard is the teller of the story, the man who alone can relate the hero's saga. Revealed as shaven-headed and diminutive, the Wizard wears a necklace of claws and a coat that resembles animal hair or bird plumage. This could connote primitiveness yet equally his closeness to and harmony with nature and the natural elements. Confronted by the armoured Conan, the Wizard adopts an aggressive stance, affirming his status and supernatural

powers. They bond through laughter, sharing a fire and meal. The Wizard aids Conan's recovery from crucifixion, drawing protective symbols on his hands and face and they exchange respectful nods as Conan rides off on a mission. The Wizard's assumption of warrior traits, donning armour and wielding a spear, is played for humour, even his slaying of an enemy, yet confirms his worth as ally to Conan. This affirmation is also found in *Conan the Destroyer*, in more qualified form. Now named as Akiro, his role as narrator is reduced to brief opening and closing comments, and he is reintroduced as the prisoner of cannibals, carried on a pole like an animal. Rescued by Conan, Akiro reaffirms his commitment to the latter with gestures and words, framed in a high-angle shot that suggests a subordinate position, the skulls to his left a reminder of the fate narrowly averted. Conan needs Akiro to fight another wizard, Toth-Amon, anticipating a conflict between oriental and Caucasian magic, though Toth-Amon's whiteness is complicated by his facial disfigurement and shape-shifting abilities. While Akiro provides vital information, he cannot match Toth-Amon's magic, suggesting the latter is the stronger wizard, and it is Conan who defeats him with a combination of wrestling, swordplay and logical deduction. Confronted by an elderly wizard, Akiro dominates the frame in a two-shot with Conan as he uncovers the truth of an ancient prophesy. His reassertion as a wise and powerful wizard can be read as tokenistic, though he defeats his aged rival in a brief contest of magic and instructs Conan on how to defeat an awakened god-monster.

The major non-white protagonist in *Conan the Barbarian* is Thulsa Doom, a more complex figure than either the pit fighter or Bombaata, conforming to some negative black stereotypes yet subverting others to a significant degree. A sorcerer linked with the supernatural, Doom also represents technology, in the form of armour and steel weaponry. Intelligent and thoughtful, he stands for strength and leadership, commanding thousands of white followers. This representation of blackness is hardly progressive, given Doom's association with unnatural, destructive and therefore illegitimate sources of power (his name serves as an unsubtle clue). It is, however, a departure from the simplistic 'brutes' or 'beasts' found elsewhere in the Conan films and the earlier *peplum* cycle. Doom's transformation into a giant snake suggests he is both subhuman, not so much animalistic as animal, and superhuman, a shape-shifter transcending the physical restrictions that bind ordinary men, much as Conan transcends the limitations of the regular body. In terms of Christian mythology, his association with the snake is satanic, as in the Garden of Eden, while Greco-Roman myth has the infant Hercules

attacked by two serpents, strangling them with his bare hands. *The Sword and the Sorcerer* also equates snakes and serpentine imagery with a supernatural villain. Snake men appear in Howard's King Kull story 'The Shadow Kingdom' (1929), among others, and Dennis Rickard suggests 'they illustrate that Howard saw in serpentine beings the incarnation of evil' (Rickard, 1984, p. 82). Doom's association with snake imagery, not to mention his phallic tower, could also invoke the stereotype of the Black Stud, signifying inexhaustible and insatiable sexual potency. Yet Doom is an asexual figure; presiding over a vast orgy chamber, he remains a passive spectator and his acquisition of 'children' is achieved through other means.

Discussing 1970s blaxploitation films, Tasker links the 'aggressive articulation of black masculinity' to 'a long visual history through which white western culture has sought to project its fears and desires onto the black body' (Tasker, 1993, pp. 37–8). I argue that *Conan the Barbarian*, if not part of an ongoing debate at the time of its production and release, also exhibits a projection of long-standing white anxieties, in this instance onto a black male body which is both powerful and nebulous. Thulsa Doom represents a form of perverted, racially-tinged patriarchy, brainwashing the children of wealthy high-status Caucasians into abandoning and killing their parents, and presenting himself as their new father. Other actors considered for the role of Doom include Sean Connery (Sammon, 1982, p. 37). From this perspective, the casting of Jones could be considered 'colour blind', his ethnicity not an issue for the film-makers, yet the representation of his character makes a corresponding colour blindness on the part of the viewer problematic. On another level, by casting a black actor more apparently other in ethnicity alongside Schwarzenegger, it lessens the degree to which the latter's Austrian nationality, heavy accent and built musculature is itself other.

Doom's cult members are mostly dressed in white robes, with pointed headgear. Whatever the film-makers' intentions, this image evokes, to a degree, the robes of the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist organisation which has existed in the United States, in various configurations, since the late 1860s. The association becomes especially pronounced in the film's denouement, where the night-time setting and shots of massed followers clutching torches recall images of Klan rallies. The Ku Klux Klan parallel could be read as ironic or satirical, given that this cult is led by a black man who inspires and demands blind obedience to the point of murder and suicide. His white guards wear masks that resemble stylised Negro faces, an evocation of racial stereotypes that, again, may be interpreted as subversive. Doom refers to Conan as 'boy', a diminutive

employed by white Americans to address black adult men, still in use many years after the abolition of slavery. It is, however, notable that Doom's disciples disassemble upon the actions of Conan, a white man, enforcing notions of dominant patriarchy in interesting and contentious ways. Doom's children can follow their leader only into death, whereas they ultimately follow Conan into life, or rather his actions and example permit them to survive and return to their pre-Doom state.

Doom's relationship to Conan is ultimately that of the Bad Father, seeking to displace and replace Conan's actual father, killed many years before. Doom claims—and usurps—credit for Conan's hard-won acquisition of super-masculine potency, both physical and mental: 'Look at the strength of your body, the desire in your heart. *I* gave you this!' Far from being independent, self-sufficient and, above all, self-made, Conan has been moulded from childhood under Doom's guidance. As the object of Conan's long-planned revenge, Doom is also his inspiration and, it seems, benefactor. In their final meeting, he makes this assumed paternal relationship explicit: 'For who now is your father if it is not me?' Doom places his hand on Conan's shoulder, both a reassuring gesture and their first physical contact, while the latter's expression reveals a new uncertainty. The background of the frame shows Conan poised between dark and light, while Doom's hand emerges from darkness into light, underlining the ambiguity of their relationship and the uncertainty of the correlation of white and black with good and evil. The sequence opens with a dissolved match cut from Conan, in daylight, to Doom, at night, both positioned centre frame and back to camera, emphasising difference and similarity. Conan's decapitation of Doom could be read as repudiating the latter's claim of paternity and reaffirming the separation and antagonism of white and black. I argue that *Conan the Barbarian* does not resolve this opposition in a straightforward manner. The transformation of Conan the boy into Conan the Barbarian is dependent on his relationship, however antagonistic, with Thulsa Doom, who teaches him forcibly how the strength of the flesh as represented by Conan's body is the ultimate expression and affirmation of extraordinary masculine potency. Doom's own body, usually clothed and subject to supernatural transformation, is supplanted by the naturally built, mature, fixed body of Conan, tested on numerous occasions. While Conan establishes his legitimate ownership of this body, its creation lies as much with Doom. From this perspective, Conan is indeed a child of Doom who replaces the father figure with the latter's tacit approval and acceptance, the racial—and racist—divide identified by Ebert shown as neither fixed nor impermeable, let alone morally absolute. Despite Conan's defeat of

Thulsa Doom, white masculinity is revealed as a problematic, troubled construction, while non-whiteness, though coded as other, is recognised as a quality important to the survival and development of white masculinity, and the realisation of its potential.

The tensions and contradictions in the representation of racial difference, and gender, in *Conan the Barbarian* are addressed and, to a degree, resolved in *Conan the Destroyer*. The sequel features a black female sidekick, the bandit Zula (Grace Jones), who has 'animalistic' qualities associated with black stereotypes, displaying a fierce snarl, wearing a fur tail and revealing herself—in the abstract—as a ruthless sexual predator. Emerging from water, she shakes her 'tail' accompanied by a musical trill. Tasker argues that the casting of singer-actor Grace Jones is crucial to this representation, as the latter's established persona, in various media, 'involves the simultaneous assertion of and challenge to…racist fantasies' (Tasker, 1993, p. 21). Tasker notes a clear contrast between Zula—black, scantily clad, sexual—and Princess Jehnna, who is white, blonde, modestly dressed and virginal; thus 'the mythicised notions of sexual innocence and experience are mapped onto racial constructions of female sexuality' (Tasker, 1993, p. 29). I would add, however, that Zula's sexual voraciousness is not demonstrated within the film's diegesis, while the teenage Jehnna exhibits both sexual curiosity and revealing nightwear. Their first scene together establishes a tentative bond, Jehnna instructing Conan to help Zula escape from hostile villagers. Zula is briefly re-feminised, in terms of gender stereotyping, with a fear of rats, whereas Jehnna seems indifferent to the creatures. Zula can also be compared with the evil Queen Taramis, who is white yet dark-haired and often dresses in black. The blackness embodied by Taramis may intersect with stereotypes of skin colour, but here she proves the polar opposite of Zula: cold, arrogant, supernatural, deceitful and murderous. Her predatory nature is encapsulated by an outfit that highlights a large black bird of prey swooping across her chest.

Zula's prowess in combat and exposed, unarmoured body give her immediate kinship with Conan, who treats Zula as an equal and makes an explicit comparison with his lost love Valeria: 'She has the same spirit.' It is notable that the relationship between Conan and Zula remains that of companions in adventure, with no hint of a romantic liaison. When Conan's white male sidekick, Malak, makes inept amorous advances towards Zula, she shows disdain for his overtures and the scene is played for comedy. In this instance the division between white and black remains distinct. Tasker argues this strategy is typical of US action cinema, where anxieties relating to spectacular or excessive

black female sexuality 'can be displaced onto the spectacle of the action which drives the narrative' (Tasker, 1993, pp. 33–4). Zula is, however, permitted to retain her status as a warrior, her assumption of 'masculine' traits not incurring the same fate, or punishment, as Valeria in *Conan the Barbarian*.

It is notable that there is no solidarity between Zula and Bombaata, their negligible relationship marked by verbal and physical combat. In contrast to his treachery, she represents loyalty and integrity. At the film's conclusion, Zula separates from Conan, becoming head of the newly-crowned Jehnna's royal guard, incorporated into a social order that channels her fighting skills and aggressive tendencies into a socially ordained and constructive role. Proven ability and strength of character transcend ethnic difference and, on this level, racial boundaries and tensions are eliminated. There are, of course, limitations to this representation of black femininity. Unlike Thulsa Doom, Zula presents no challenge or threat to a white-dominated patriarchy, and accepts without question her subordinate position to Conan for the purposes of their quest. Yet however qualified or compromised, her depiction is positive and arguably even progressive compared to representations of blackness in later films and television series exploring racial difference in a mythical or classical setting. For example, the television series *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012) and *Spartacus: War of the Damned* (2013) feature Naevia (Cynthia Addai-Robinson), a slave turned warrior and rebel. Her romantic relationship with white gladiator Crixus can be read as progressive, but other aspects of her representation are problematic. Marked as brutalised and violated, Naevia is reconfigured as a fighter and trainer, yet this shift in identity and status is undermined by mental fragility and instability. In *Spartacus: War of the Damned*: 'Men of Honor' she pulps a man's head in psychotic rage, her face in spasm. While this could be interpreted as psychological realism, the action seems less a repudiation of her past trauma than an expression of its continuing effect, not least because the attack is shown as unjust. Naevia's mistake prompts violent conflict between Crixus and fellow gladiator-rebel Gannicus, and she spurs her lover to break with Spartacus and march on Rome, leading to his undignified death in battle. From this perspective, Naevia serves as a divisive, destructive influence on the primary heroic male characters. Her own death on the battlefield, mocked and backstabbed by Julius Caesar, is no more ennobling than that of Crixus.

11
This Is Sparta!

300 (Snyder, 2007) highlights the relationship between the idealised, heroised white male body and the 'alien', antagonistic non-white body. Sparta as embodied by King Leonidas stands for freedom, democracy, reason and justice; Persia, in the form of King Xerxes, opposes and negates these positive qualities. As several scholars have commented, this depiction of Sparta is problematic with regard to historical record. Often portrayed as the valiant underdog in the struggle against imperialist Persia, Sparta was a militaristic state based upon a rigid class system, with an equally inflexible xenophobic outlook (cf. Schmalfuss, 2010, p. 211). Paul Cartledge states that Sparta was dependent on a systematic exploitation of a native Greek underclass, the Helots, which amounted to virtual slavery (Cartledge, 2006, p. 12). Adolf Hitler cited Sparta as a model state, and inspiration, for Nazi Germany, not least in its willingness to commit mass murder on racial grounds (Kiernan, 2007, p. 27). Tom Holland notes how the Spartan warriors who fought at Thermopylae 'were regarded by Hitler as representatives of a true master-race, one bred and raised for war' (Holland, 2005, p. xix). Reviewing *300* for *Time Out*, critic Trevor Johnston posed the question: 'Any ideological connotations to the fact we're supposed to be cheering on the white guys as they scythe their way through turban-wearing Persian hordes?' (Johnston, 2007). This comment touches on the representation of national, racial and, above all, ethnic difference that is crucial to the film's construction of Spartan masculinity.

Maggie Günsberg's distinction between superior white masculinity and inferior non-white masculinity (Günsberg, 2005, p. 118), while contentious if applied to the *peplum* or the Conan films, is not so problematic in the case of *300*. The film also appears to endorse Richard Dyer's observation that qualities praiseworthy in a white body, whether strength or sensuality, become negative attributes in a black body; here the latter is linked consistently and insistently with lust, appetite, brutality, animal instinct and destruction (cf. Dyer, 1986, p. 139). The first

Fig. 11.1 *300* (2007)

Persian to appear in *300* is an emissary to Sparta (*fig. 11.1*). Seated on horseback, framed from a low angle, his imposing form suggests both power and aggression. Though dressed in fine robes, connoting civilisation, his snarling features evoke a primitive, animalistic quality. This is underlined and arguably confirmed by the collection of human skulls—heads of vanquished kings—he holds in his right hand. The emissary serves as a manifestation and forewarning of the Persian beast to come. A gloating Persian officer's dark face turns pitch black as a scene ends. Non-whiteness is depicted as a malevolent force, evoking negative connotations of blackness.

300 is at odds with depictions of racial difference in other recent classical epics. In *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), Maximus (Russell Crowe) becomes best friends with the Numidian Juba (Djimon Hounsou), who is treated as an equal and often dressed in the same costume, the blue tunic of the gladiator. Juba is first seen in fleeting medium close-ups, from Maximus's point-of-view, offering assurance and advice, and healing the latter's wound. They first fight in the arena chained together, an enforced 'brotherhood' that rapidly transforms into a genuine bond, signalled when they slay an opponent with synchronised sword thrusts. Both express a longing for home and family. In a shared medium close-up, Juba gazes upwards, uncertain yet hopeful, while Maximus looks downwards, reflective, knowing he will see his wife and son again only in the afterlife. Juba's representation can be read as tokenistic, and he becomes marginalised after the 'Battle of Zuma' sequence, yet he is at least a positive stereotype—the loyal sidekick—marked by courage and honour. In *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2004), while Aristotle describes the Persians as 'an inferior race', which could be construed as Greek snobbery and propaganda, they are not dehumanised or demonised and retain their dignity. *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott, 2005) depicts the Muslims on equal

terms to the Christian heroes, being intelligent, articulate and courageous. A sense of mutual respect between enemies entirely absent from *300* enables compromise and an honourable surrender for the Christians defending the besieged Jerusalem. Prior to the raising of the crescent, a symbol of Islam, Muslim leader Saladin places a fallen crucifix back on a church altar.

It can be argued that the Spartan traitor Theron (Dominic West) serves as a counter to *300*'s opposition of whiteness and non-whiteness. He is indisputably white, a citizen of Sparta and powerful politician, yet also a villain in league with the Persians. From the start, however, Theron is contrasted with Leonidas, the film's key embodiment of heroic masculinity. Both are bare-chested yet Theron's torso is draped with a toga, emphasising his political rather than military status. His hair is longer, his beard shorter and more styled, suggesting an excessive concern with appearance; when Leonidas refers to Athenians as 'boy lovers' he glances at Theron, bringing the latter's sexual proclivities into question. His grin is markedly insincere and a veiled threat to Leonidas's son reveals the level of his treachery. First seen alongside the Persian emissary, Theron is a Persian under the skin, emerging from the shadows to taunt and abuse Leonidas's wife, Queen Gorgo, and carrying Persian coins, the mark of Xerxes, which fall to the ground along with his dead body. Theron's tokenistic status as a bad white man is underlined by the lack of a single non-white figure characterised as moral, honourable, benevolent or even neutral.

In *The 300 Spartans* (Maté, 1962), Xerxes is played by a white English actor, David Farrar. This reflects a common casting strategy in Hollywood epics of this era, where cultured and cruel villains were often played by actors who were British or could sound British, such as Laurence Olivier in *Spartacus* (Kubrick, 1960), the Irish Stephen Boyd in *Ben-Hur* (Wyler, 1959) and the Australian Frank Thring in *The Vikings* (Fleischer, 1958). *300* depicts Xerxes as a black giant, played by Brazilian actor Rodrigo Santoro. In real life, Santoro is relatively light-skinned, with southern European rather than Afro-Brazilian features; here his height is increased, skin darkened and voice deepened in post-production. I argue that Santoro is, effectively, 'blacked up' to play Xerxes, in a form comparable to Bartolomeo Pagano's Maciste in *Cabiria* (Pastrone, 1914), made over ninety years earlier. Where Maciste is benevolent and heroic, albeit subservient to the Roman hero, Xerxes is malevolent. The CGI technology that enhances the hyper-masculine Spartan bodies is here employed to different and more extreme ends, creating an implausibly large—or larger than life—human figure (Xerxes was also enlarged in

ancient representations, reflecting his 'divinity' and status). This underlines Xerxes's claim of divinity, the overwhelming odds faced by the Spartans and, above all, the concept of blackness as threat. His first encounter with Leonidas constructs a series of clear contrasts. The Spartan king walks to the meeting unaccompanied and unarmed, while Xerxes is carried on a vast gold throne by hundreds of slaves, his troops poised with bows drawn. Leonidas has a full head of hair and a beard, denoting mature masculinity; Xerxes is shaven and smooth-skinned, a male who plays down his manliness. Leonidas has a natural, 'manly' stance; Xerxes strikes an affected, effete pose. Leonidas would willingly die for his men; Xerxes will sacrifice countless thousands for his personal glory. On a more general level, Spartans are warriors by breeding, training and conviction, while Persian forces are slaves who fight under the whip.

If Leonidas epitomises the Spartan virtues, Xerxes is associated with indulgence and appetite. Suzanne Turner notes: 'By contrast with the moral and physical austerity of the Spartans, Xerxes' body signifies luxury, corruption and effeminacy' (Turner, 2009, pp.133–4). Favouring jewellery over armour, Xerxes is a mirror opposite to Leonidas: brown-skinned, hairless, passive and androgynous, his features enhanced with make-up. This representation reflects, to a point, attitudes found in the historical Persia of Xerxes's time. Holland stresses how 'Xerxes, tall and handsome, *looked* a king. This was a crucial consideration: the Persians were a people so obsessed by physical appearance that every nobleman kept a make-up artist in his train' (Holland, 2005, p. 206). Yet the bejewelled, painted Xerxes of *300* does not necessarily equate with the historical figure, nor was the latter defined solely by his appearance. Discussing the real Xerxes, Holland argues the Persian ruler had proven himself as a soldier, leader and king: 'In the hunt and on campaign, leading from the front, he would have given ample evidence of his personal bravery' (Holland, 2005, p. 206). In *300*, Xerxes is a notable non-combatant, contrasting with the Spartans who can only realise and express their full masculine potency through battle and sacrifice. Measured against the Spartan body, Xerxes is both superhuman and less than a man. His multiple gold body piercings can be read as a misuse or abuse of his physical form at odds with the Spartan reverence for the perfected yet unadorned physique. Leonidas's last spear throw marks a different piercing of Xerxes's flesh, one that destroys the Persian king's public image as a gilded living god. This is reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's Afghanistan-set story *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888), and the 1975 film directed by John Huston, where soldier-turned-monarch Daniel Dravot's

claim to divinity is exposed as a sham when his reluctant bride bites his face, drawing mortal blood. While Xerxes is not killed or vanquished, in slicing open his face Leonidas exposes the frail and inferior mortal behind the facade, anticipating ultimate Spartan victory.

There is a case for arguing that *300*'s representations of white and non-white masculinity are not intended to be read as endorsing a racist or fascist ideology and should therefore not be taken seriously. Many critical responses to the issues discussed do not treat them as matters of great consequence (cf. Romney, 2007; Bradshaw, 2007). In the film itself sporadic narration by Spartan warrior Dilios provides a subjective framing device. This enables the story to be seen as Spartan propaganda post-Thermopylae, intended to inspire the senate and the Spartan-led Greek army gathered at Platea for the decisive battle with the Persians, with inevitable elaboration, fabrication and exaggeration (Dilios states repeatedly that Xerxes's army consists of all Asia). Alastair Blanshard notes how the conflict between Hercules and Egyptian king Busiris was represented in vase paintings emphasising ethnic difference: 'Hercules stands tall, proud and muscled; the Egyptians, fat and soft and with shaved heads, cower before him' (Blanshard, 2005, p. 106). This scenario is, however, both mythical and comic in intent. *300* offers no critical distance or even commentary on Dilios's perspective or, by extension, its attendant subtexts. The heroic masculinity and willing sacrifice of the Spartans evoke images and ideas of white male supremacy—especially in combative terms—associated with fascist ideology, legitimised and validated by the film's representation. Contentious aspects of Spartan society, for example eugenics, are depicted without question. Their non-Caucasian opponents are linked with physical and mental inferiority, decadence and corruption, darkness and grotesquerie. *300* appears to subscribe unconditionally to reactionary and fascist depictions of white masculine potency and authority. This is not to suggest its makers—or original author Frank Miller—were working to a calculated fascist or racist agenda. Rather, in drawing uncritically on reactionary concepts of white superiority, non-white degeneracy and physical appearance as moral measure, the film perpetuates these discredited stereotypes as acceptable if presented in the form of 'mere' entertainment.

Coda

It is interesting to speculate what Gerald Mast would have made of *300* (Snyder, 2007). This classically-inflected parade of gleaming muscular bodies has much in common with the *peplum*, a genre Mast dismissed as a betrayal of Italian cinema's more culturally worthy products. Though not especially cheap by *peplum* standards, *300* would probably qualify as equally trashy on Mast's criteria, its spectacle just as empty. I would argue that *300*'s monotonous, if distinctive visual palette, and equally monofaceted valorisation and demonization of white and black male bodies, lacks the visual and thematic interest of many *pepla*. For example, *The Amazon Women* (Leonviola, 1963) is a second division *peplum* starring not Steve Reeves but Joe Robinson, a British actor and stuntman best known for fighting Sean Connery in a lift in *Diamonds Are Forever* (Guy Hamilton, 1971). It was produced towards the tail end of the cycle and can be read as reactionary in both its gender and racial politics. For all the film's limitations, it features at least two notable scenes. During a combat sequence, two female gladiators drop their weapons, weep and embrace, and take their own lives rather than kill each other. Furthermore, their actions connote defiance, strength and friendship rather than stereotypical feminine weakness. The hero's muscular black sidekick, Ubaratutu, is captured and placed on a revolving dais for covert inspection by the villainous Black Queen, striking bodybuilding poses at her command. His face and chest are washed with red lighting, evoking a strip club or brothel. The voyeuristic peepshow element is underscored by cutaways to the queen's eyes gazing through a slit in the décor, and mirrors that offer additional views of the spectacular physique. Whatever the racial implications of this scene, it provides an interesting reversal on notions of the male as spectator and the female as spectacle. The scene also refracts body culture's promotion of the built male physique as a heroic achievement in and of itself, highlighting rather than countering the erotic undercurrents of its open, passive display. Put another way, it is minor-league *pepla* such as *The Amazon Women*, as much as the Steve Reeves heavy-hitters, that have inspired my interest in the mythological action film and shaped the arguments in this book.

My aim has been to reassess the muscular male body and the classically-inflected action film in response to readings of this form as reactionary, especially in relation to femininity and non-whiteness. Citing the *peplum* as a straightforward valorisation and idealisation of white masculinity is a restrictive interpretation countered by the variations found in this genre. The displayed male body is marked by contradictions and tensions, and the opposition of male strength, potency and power versus female vulnerability, dependency and powerlessness is unsustainable. *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958) draws on the virtuous Prodican model of the demigod yet fails to displace or contain the passivity and homoeroticism associated with the built male body. Furthermore, the very perfection of Hercules renders him a threat and thus an isolated outsider. *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961) constructs a sustainable masculinity, marked by vulnerability, qualification and containment, while *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (Cottafavi, 1961) depicts the demigod in terms of domestication and familial responsibility alongside the elimination of allegorical menaces. In the latter instance, fascist undercurrents are invoked and displaced from the hero, refracting a new if qualified willingness within Italy to engage with and debate the country's recent fascist past. The American response to the *peplum* in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Chaffey, 1963) depicts Hercules in terms of marginalisation, displacement and impotence, linked with concepts of youthful masculine toughness and leadership as embodied by John F. Kennedy. Post-*peplum* variations, such as *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, alter the character's surface trappings while retaining a notable Reeves-Prodican influence. If the 2005 *Hercules* (dir. Young) explores darker aspects of the demigod, *The Legend of Hercules* (Harlin, 2014) is in essence an old-school *peplum* with added cut-cost digital effects.

The enlarged Herculean form compares in interesting ways with the crucified body, not least in the intersection and interaction between the classical and Christian worlds. While the *peplum* references the cruciform figure, Hollywood epics such as *Ben-Hur* (Wyler, 1959) and *El Cid* (Mann, 1961) place it centre stage, the heroic body both punished and resurrected. In *Spartacus* (Kubrick, 1960) crucifixion marks both oppression and non-religious triumph; a mortal man rather than the son of God is now the symbol of freedom and deliverance. Later versions and variations stress the spirit and courage required to face crucifixion, rather than the act itself, in the pursuit of liberty and equality. In *Conan the Barbarian* (Milius, 1982), the crucified body is denied martyrdom and nobility, emphasising rather the muscular protagonist's arduous path to heroic masculinity in the material world. *300* stresses the act of sacrifice as desirable, even essential, in itself.

The *peplum* appears to couch femininity in conservative patriarchal terms, yet the 1958 *Hercules* depicts it as problematic, marked by incomprehension, distance and subversion. The Amazons' challenge to gender boundaries and promotion of sexual desire over duty is contained but not suppressed. *The Giant of Marathon* (Tourneur, 1959) offers more nuanced and ambiguous representations of women, especially in the play between blonde heroine and dark temptress, while *Goliath and the Barbarians* (Campogalliani, 1959) challenges enduring stereotypes with its positive depiction of interracial romance. If Queen Antinea in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is the *peplum*'s ultimate malevolent matriarch, threatening the family, the world and masculinity itself, she is countered by Deianeira, Hercules's wife, who stands for tranquillity, respect, equality and parenthood. The warrior woman is a contentious figure, her supposed co-option of masculine traits seen as transgressive and unnatural. While Valeria in the 1982 *Conan the Barbarian* at least questions traditional gender roles and status, in unresolved fashion, *Red Sonja* (Fleischer, 1985) sees its heroine renounce her warrior status as she embraces heterosexual orthodoxy. Xena, though seemingly punished for her challenge to patriarchy, facilitates the creation of a heroic, uncompromised warrior woman in the form of her companion and soulmate.

White-dominated discourses on blackness have tended to emphasise negative traits supposedly innate to the non-white character, depicted as primitive, violent and animalistic. These qualities are manifested in black *peplum* villains, yet the depiction of black sidekicks, though tentative and problematic, is rarely simplistic and often positive. The more feted Draba, in *Spartacus*, is inspirational but qualified, exhibiting a racially-tinged tension and restriction also manifested by Doctore/Oenomaus in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010) and *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012). In *Hercules, Samson and Ulysses* (Francisci, 1963), the non-white figure of Samson, marked clearly as Middle Eastern, is imbued with a *peplum* hero's attributes, normally associated with whiteness, representing a negotiation of and challenge to these stereotypes. Thulsa Doom, in *Conan the Barbarian*, both conforms to and subverts racial clichés, his relationship with Conan stressing ambiguity and interdependence, and questioning the very concept of a fixed racial divide. While Doom is a villainous figure, the heroic Zula in *Conan the Destroyer* (Fleischer, 1984) embodies reconciliation and accommodation, a notable contrast to the racial schism of *300*.

2014 has seen the release of two Hercules feature films, *The Legend of Hercules*, discussed in chapter four, and *Hercules* (dir. Brett Ratner), still in post-production at the time of writing, a cinematic clash of Herculean

muscle not witnessed since the heyday of the *peplum* cycle. In *Hercules*, the demigod is played by wrestler-turned-action hero Dwayne Johnson, whose dimensions are suitably Herculean, if lacking the defined musculature and statuesque form of the Steve Reeves version. The trailer reveals this Hercules as tanned, dark-haired and bearded in the Reeves tradition. The Nemean Lion, seen in the 1958 *Hercules*, makes an appearance, alongside the Erymanthian Boar, Cerberus and the Lernaean Hydra, underlining the nominal fidelity to Greco-Roman myth. Hercules wields his trademark club and wears the familiar lionskin, which, unlike its equivalent in *The Legend of Hercules*, is both highlighted and adorned with the creature's head, serving as an ersatz hat. The most obvious link to the 1958 *Hercules*, and the wider *peplum* genre, is the image of Hercules in chains. The opening shot depicts Hercules bowed and on his knees, illuminated by a shaft of sunlight. A slow tilt up Hercules's body reveals both his spectacular physique and his chained arms. In overhead shot, he looks up to the heavens and shouts, perhaps unnecessarily, 'I am Hercules!' While the trailer cuts off at this point, there seems little doubt that the cinematic Hercules is once more unchained. It remains to be seen whether this big-screen resurgence can achieve the enduring popular appeal and cultural resonance of earlier incarnations.

Bibliography

Anonymous (1963), 'Duel of the Titans', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. XXX, nos. 348–59, p. 89.

Anonymous (1959), 'Hercules', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. XXVI, nos. 300–11, p. 71.

Anonymous (1962), 'Hercules Conquers Atlantis', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. XXIX, nos. 336–347, p. 112.

Anonymous (1963), 'Hercules in the Centre of the Earth', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. XXX, nos. 348–59, p. 21.

Anonymous (1960), '"Hercules" the favourite', *The Guardian*, 8 December 1960, p. 21.

Anonymous (1963), 'Jason and the Argonauts', *New York Times*, 8 August 1963 [nytimes.com, accessed 13 September 2011].

Anonymous (1961), 'The Year', *Films and Filming*, January 1961, vol. 7, no. 4, p. 29.

Balsamo, A. (1996), *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press).

Bergfelder, T. (2000), 'The Nation Vanishes. European co-productions and popular genre formula in the 1950s and 1960s', *Cinema & Nation*, ed. M. Hjort and S. MacKenzie (London: Routledge), pp. 139–52.

Bergfelder, T.; Harris, S. and Street, S. (2007), *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press).

Berry, S. (2004), 'Hollywood Exoticism', *Stars: The Film Reader*, ed. L. Fischer and M. Landy (London: Routledge), pp. 181–97.

Bertellini, G. (2002), 'Dubbing *L'Arte Muta*', *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943*, ed. P. Garofalo and J. Reich (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 30–82.

Blanshard, A. (2005), *Hercules. A Heroic Life* (London: Granta Books).

Bolin, A. (1996), 'Bodybuilding', *The Encyclopedia of World Sport*, ed. D. Levinson and K. Christensen (Oxford: ABC Clio), pp. 50–54.

Bondanella, P. (1992), *The Cinema of Federico Fellini* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

Bondanella, P. (2009), *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York and London: Continuum).

Bondanella, P. (2002), *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York and London: Continuum).

Bordwell, D. (2002), 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', *The European Cinema Reader*, ed. C. Fowler (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 94–102.

Bosworth, R. J. B. (1998), *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London and New York: Arnold-Oxford University Press).

Bosworth, R. J. B. and Dogliani, P. (eds.) (1999), *Italian Fascism. History, Memory and Representation* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd.).
Bradford, E. (1980), *The Year of Thermopylae* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan).
Bradshaw, P. (2007), '300', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2007 [guardian.co.uk, accessed 16 July 2010].
Brittan, A. (1989), *Masculinity and Power* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell).
Brown, J. A. (2011), *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi).
Brown, T. (1988), *JFK: History of an Image* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd).
Bulfinch, T. (1984), *Myths of Greece and Rome*, compiled by Bryan Holme (London: Penguin).
Burke, F. (2011), 'The Italian Sword-and-Sandal Film From *Fabiola* (1949) to *Hercules and The Captive Women* (1961): Texts and Contexts', *Popular Italian Cinema. Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society*, ed. F. Brizio-Skov (London and New York: I.B. Tauris), pp. 17–51.
Burke, F. (2011), 'The Last Days of Pompeii', *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*, ed. L. Bayman (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Press), pp. 193–94.
Caldwell, L. (1991), *Italian Family Matters: Women, Politics and Legal Reform* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan).
Cartledge, P. (ed.) (1998), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Cartledge, P. (2006), *Thermopylae. The Battle That Changed the World* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Macmillan).
Casadio, G. (2007), *I mitici eroi. Il cinema 'peplum' nel cinema italiano dall'avvento del sonoro a oggi (1930–1993)* (Ravenna: Longo Editore).
Cashmore, E. E. (1987), *The Logic of Racism* (London: Allen & Unwin).
Cashmore, E. (2000), *Making Sense of Sports* (3rd edition) (London and New York: Routledge).
Chapman, R. and Rutherford, J. (eds.) (1996), *Male Order. Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence and Wishart).
Cohan, S. (1997), *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).
Cohan, S. and Hark, I. R. (eds.) (1993), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge).
Connell, R. W. (1995), *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity).
Connell, R. W. (2005), *Masculinities Second Edition* (Cambridge: Polity).
Corber, R. J. (1997), *Homosexuality in Cold War America* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press).
Cornea, C. (2006), 'Arnold Schwarzenegger', *Contemporary American Cinema*, ed. L. R. Williams and M. Hammond (Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press), pp. 284–86.
Cornelius, M. G. (2011), 'Beefy Guys and Brawny Dolls: He-Man, the Masters of the Universe, and Gay Clone Culture', *Of Muscles and Men: Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. M.G. Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland), pp. 154–74.
Costantini, C. (ed.) (1995), *Fellini on Fellini* (London: Faber and Faber).
Cotterell, A. (1979), *A Dictionary of World Mythology* (London: Guild Publishing).
Crainz, G. (1999), 'The Representation of Fascism and the Resistance in the Documentaries of Italian State Television', *Italian Fascism. History, Memory and*

Representation, ed. R. J. B. Bosworth and P. Dogliani (Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd.), pp. 124–40.
Crosby, S. (2004), 'The Cruellest Season: Female Heroes Snapped into Sacrificial Heroines', *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, ed. S. A. Inness (Gordonsville, Virginia: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 153–78.
Cuordileone, K. A. (2005), *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York and London: Routledge).
Dalle Vacche, A. (1992), *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
Dallek, R. (1984), *Ronald Reagan. The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press).
Dean, R. D. (2003), *Imperial Brotherhood* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press).
De Cecco, M. (1972), 'Economic Policy in the Reconstruction Period, 1945–51', *The rebirth of Italy 1943–50*, ed. S. J. Woolf (London: Longman), pp. 156–80.
Della Casa, S. (2006), *Uomini Forti / Iron Men* (Rome: Istituto Luce). Documentary.
DiLullo, T. (text) (2007), *300. The Art of the Film* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse).
Downing, T. (1992), *Olympia* (London: British Film Institute).
Duel of the Titans (1963), Press Book and Merchandising Manual (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures).
Durgnat, R. (1962), 'Hercules Conquers Atlantis', *Films and Filming*, October 1962, vol. 9, no.1, p. 35.
Dyer, R. (1991), 'Charisma', *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. C. Gledhill (London: Routledge), pp. 57–59.
Dyer, R. (1992), 'Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-Up', *The Sexual Subject. A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. M. Merck (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 265–76.
Dyer, R. (1986), *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London and Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd.).
Dyer, R. (2007), 'Italian Cinema', *The Cinema Book. Third Edition*, ed. P. Cook (London: BFI), pp. 231–32.
Dyer, R. (2007a), *Pastiche* (London and New York: Routledge).
Dyer, R. (2004), 'Paul Robeson: Crossing over', *Stars: The Film Reader*, ed. L. Fischer and M. Landy (London: Routledge), pp. 199–212.
Dyer, R. (1996), 'Vittorio Cottafavi', 'The Peplum', *The Companion to Italian Cinema*, ed. G. Nowell-Smith, with J. Hay and G. Volpi (London: British Film Institute), pp. 39, 94–95.
Dyer, R. (1997), *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge).
Dyer, R. and Vincendeau, G. (eds.) (1992), *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge).
Eatwell, R. (2003), *Fascism. A History* (London: Pimlico).
Ebert, R. (1982), 'Conan the Barbarian' review, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 1 January 1982.
Ebert, R. (2006), '300', *Chicago Sun-Times* 9 December 2006 [http://rogerebert.suntimes.com; accessed 16 July 2010].
Eleftheriotis, D. (2001), *Popular Cinemas of Europe* (New York and London: Continuum).
Elley, D. (1984), *The Epic Film* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

Elliott, A. B. R. (2011), 'From Maciste to Maximus and Company', *Of Muscles and Men. Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. M. G. Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland), pp. 58–74.

Eng, S. (1984), 'Barbarian Bard: The Poetry of Robert E. Howard', *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology*, ed. D. Herron (Westport, Connecticut and London, England: Greenwood Press), pp. 23–64.

Eyles, A. (1963), 'Jason and the Argonauts', *Films and Filming*, October 1963, p. 26.

Flanagan, K. M. (2011), 'Civilization…ancient and wicked', *Of Muscles and Men. Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. M.G. Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland), pp. 87–103.

Fofi, G. (1979), 'Maciste sugli schermi', *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano. Secondo volume: tutti i film dal 1956 al 1965*, ed. G. Rondolino (Torino: Giulio Bolaffi Editore), six unnumbered pages between pp. 253–54.

Forbes, J. and Street, S. (2000), *European Cinema* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave).

Forgacs, D. and Gundle, S. (2007), *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).

Forth, C. E. (2008), *Masculinity in the Modern West. Gender, Civilisation and the Body* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Fowler, C. (ed.) (2002), *The European Cinema Reader* (London and New York: Routledge).

Frayling, C. (2006), *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris).

Frumkes, R. (ed.) (1994), 'An Interview with Steve Reeves', *The Perfect Vision*, vol. 6, issue 22, July 1994 [reproduced on drkrm.com].

Galinsky, G. K. (1972), *The Herakles Theme. The Adaptations of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield).

Gantz, T. (1993), *Early Greek Myth. A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins).

Garofalo, P. and Reich, J. (eds.) (2002), *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

Gates, P. (2006), *Detecting Men. Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press).

Gilmore, D. D. (1990), *Manhood in the Making, Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).

Ginsborg, P. (1990), *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943–1988* (London: Penguin Books Ltd).

Ginsborg, P. (2003), *Italy and Its Discontents 1980–2001* (London: Penguin).

Goodrich, J. (2006), '…From Acorns Grow. Robert E. Howard Revealed in *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*', *Two-Gun Bob. A Centennial Study of Robert E. Howard*, ed. B. Szumskyj (New York: Hippocampus Press), pp. 25–38.

Greenberg, H. R. (1991), 'Reimagining the Gargoyle: Psychoanalytic Notes on *Alien*', *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, ed. C. Penley, E. Lyon, L. Spigel and J. Bergstrom (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 83–104.

Günsberg, M. (2005), *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

Hall, M. (2010), 'Crash Go the Civilisations: Some Notes on Robert E. Howard's Use of History and Anthropology', *The Robert E. Howard Reader*, ed. D. Schweitzer (Breinigsville, Pennsylvania: Borgo Press), pp. 82–93.
Hall, S. (2002), 'Tall Revenue Features: The Genealogy of the Modern Blockbuster', *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. S. Neale (London: BFI Publishing), pp. 11–22.
Hall, S. and Neale, S. (2010), *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press).
Hansen, M. B. (2000), 'The mass production of the senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism', *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. C. Gledhill and L. Williams (London: Arnold), pp. 332–50.
Hansen, M. (2010), 'Vernacular Modernism. Tracking Cinema on a Global Scale', *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. N. Durovicova and K. Newman (New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge), pp. 287–314.
Harryhausen, R. (1989), *Film Fantasy Scrapbook* (London: Titan Books).
Harryhausen, R. and Dalton, T. (2005), *The Art of Ray Harryhausen* (London: Aurum).
Harryhausen, R. and Dalton, T. (2003), *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life* (London: Aurum).
Hellmann, J. (1997), *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press).
Hercules (1959), UK Press Book (London: Archway Film Distributors).
Herron, D. (ed.) (1984), *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology* (Westport, Connecticut and London, England: Greenwood Press).
Hoberman, J. (2003), *The Magic Hour: Film at Fin De Siècle* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
Holland, T. (2005), *Persian Fire. The First World Empire and the Battle for the West* (London: Little, Brown).
Howard, R. E. (2006), 'The People of the Black Circle', 'A Witch Shall Be Born', *The Complete Chronicles of Conan* (London: Gollancz), pp. 289–355; 356–92.
Hunt, L. (1993), 'What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic', *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, ed. P. Kirkham and J. Thumim (London: Lawrence & Wishart), pp. 65–83.
Inness, S. A. (ed.) (2004), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (Gordonsville, Virginia: Palgrave Macmillan).
Jason and the Argonauts (1963), Press Book (California: Columbia Pictures Corporation).
Jeffords, S. (1993), 'Can Masculinity Be Terminated?', *Screening the Male. Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. S. Cohan and I. R. Hark (London: Routledge), pp. 245–62.
Jeffords, S. (2000), *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press).
Jeffords, S. (1989), *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).
Johnson, I. (1963), 'Queen of the Nile', *Films and Filming*, July 1963, vol. 9, no. 10, p. 29.
Johnston, T. (2010), '300', *Time Out* London, issue 1909, March 21–27 2007 [timeout.com, accessed 16 July 2010].

Jones, A. (1982), 'Conan', *Starburst*, vol. 4, no. 9, 1982, pp. 20–23 (London: Marvel Comics Ltd.).
Joshel, S. M.; Malamud, M. and McGuire Jr, D. T. (eds.) (2001), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins).
Joshi, S. T. (2010), 'Barbarism vs. Civilisation: Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft in Their Correspondence', *The Robert E. Howard Reader*, ed. D. Schweitzer (Breinigsville, Pennsylvania: Borgo Press) pp. 51–81.
Kasson, J. F. (2001), *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man. The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang).
Kezich, T. (2007), *Federico Fellini. His Life and Work* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris).
Kiernan, B. (2007), *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).
Kirkham, P. and Thumim, J. (eds.) (1993), *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (London: Lawrence & Wishart).
Knight, G. (1984), 'Robert E. Howard: Hard-Boiled Heroic Fantasist', *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology*, ed. D. Herron (Westport, Connecticut and London, England: Greenwood Press) pp. 117–33.
Lagny, M. (1992), 'Popular Taste: The peplum', *Popular European Cinema*, ed. R. Dyer and G. Vincendeau (London: Routledge), pp. 163–80.
LaSalle, M. (2007), '300', *San Francisco Chronicle* 9 March 2007 [www.sfgate.com; accessed 16 July 2010].
Lehman, P. (ed.) (2001), *Masculinity. Bodies, Movies, Culture* (New York and London: Routledge).
Leiber, F. (1984), 'Howard's Fantasy', *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology*, ed. D. Herron (Westport, Connecticut and London, England: Greenwood Press), pp. 3–15.
Leigh, W. (1990), *Arnold: The Unauthorised Biography of Arnold Schwarzenegger* (London: Pelham Books).
Leprohon, P. (1972), *The Italian Cinema* (translated by R. Greaves and O. Stallybrass) (London: Secker & Warburg).
Liehm, M. (1984), *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Los Angeles: University of California Press).
Lodge, M. J. (2009), 'Knocked Up, Not Knocked Out: *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Pregnant Action Hero', *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture: Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home*, ed. L. M. DeTora (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company, Inc.), pp. 218–33.
Lotz, A. D. (2006), *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press).
Lucanio, P. (1994), *With Fire and Sword: Italian Spectacles on American Screens, 1958–68* (Metuchen, New Jersey and London: Scarecrow Press).
Lucas, T. (2007), *Mario Bava: All the Colors of the Dark* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Video Watchdog).
Lumley, R. and Foot, J. (ed.) (2004), *Italian Cityscapes. Culture and Urban Change in Contemporary Italy* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press).
Macnab, G. (2000), *Searching for Stars* (London and New York: Cassell).
Makins, M. (ed.) (1995), *Collins English Dictionary* (Glasgow: HarperCollins).
Maltby, R. (1995), *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Maritano, L. (2004), 'Immigration, Nationalism and Exclusionary Understandings of Place in Turin', *Italian Cityscapes. Culture and Urban Change in Contemporary Italy*, ed. R. Lumley and J. Foot (Exeter: University of Exeter Press), pp. 61–74.

Mast, G. (1976), *A Short History of the Movies. Second Edition* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill).

Mathijs, E. and Mendik, X. (eds) (2004), *Alternative Europe. Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945* (London: Wallflower).

Miller, F. (story and art) and Varley, L. (colours) (1999), *300* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse Books).

Milne, T. (1986), 'Video: *Ercole all conquista di Atlantide* (*Hercules Conquers Atlantis*)', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1986, vol. 53, no. 624, p. 19.

Monaco, J. (1981), *How to Read a Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Mordden, E. (1990), *Medium Cool: The Movies of the 1960s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf).

Morton, W. (1993), 'Tracking the Sign of Tarzan: Trans-Media Representation of a Pop-Culture Icon', *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, ed. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (London: Lawrence & Wishart), pp. 106–25.

Mosse, G. L. (1996), *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Moullet, L. (1962), 'La victoire d'Ercole', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, vol. XXII, no. 131, May 1962, pp. 39–42.

Mulvey, L. (1992), 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen. The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London: Routledge), pp. 22–34.

Murphy, P.F. (ed.) (1994), *Fictions of Masculinity. Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities* (New York and London: New York University Press).

Murphy, R. (ed.) (1986), *Sixties British Cinema* (Canterbury: University of Kent at Canterbury).

Murphy, R. (1992), *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing).

Ndalianis, A. (2007), 'Art Cinema', *The Cinema Book. Third Edition*, ed. P. Cook (London: BFI), pp. 83–87.

Neale, S. (2002), 'Art Cinema as Institution', *The European Cinema Reader*, ed. C. Fowler (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 103–20.

Neale, S. (2000), *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge).

Neale, S. (1993), 'Masculinity as spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema', *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. S. Cohan and I.R. Hark (London: Routledge), pp. 9–20.

Nisbet, G. (2006), *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press).

Nowell-Smith, G. (2007), 'Italian Neo-realism', *The Cinema Book. Third Edition*, ed. Pam Cook (London: BFI), pp. 233–37.

Nowell-Smith, G., with Hay, J. and Volpi, G. (1996), *The Companion to Italian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute).

Nowell-Smith, G. and Ricci, S. (eds.) (1998), *Hollywood & Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity, 1945–95* (London: British Film Institute).

O'Brien, D. (2011), 'The Giant of Marathon', 'Son of Spartacus', 'Sons of Thunder', *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*, ed. L. Bayman (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Press), pp. 183–84, 195–96, 196–97.

O'Brien, D. (2013), '*Hercules* versus *Hercules*: Variation and Continuation in Two Generations of Heroic Masculinity', *Popular Italian Cinema*, ed. L. Bayman and S. Rigoletto (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 183–99.
Osborne, R. (1998), 'Men Without Clothes: Heroic Nakedness and Greek Art', *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. M. Wyke (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 80–104.
Pacifici, S. J. (1965), 'Notes toward a Definition of Neo-Realism', *Yale French Studies 17*, ed. K. Douglas (New York, Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1965), pp. 44–53.
Paxton, R. O. (2005), *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Penguin Books).
Payne, S. G. (1997), *A History of Fascism 1914–45* (London: UCL Press Limited).
Peary, D. (1982), *Cult Movies* (London: Vermilion).
Pierce, J. B. (2011). '"To do or die manfully". Performing Heteronormativity in Recent Epic Films', *Of Muscles and Men: Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. M. G. Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland), pp. 40–57.
Ramírez Berg, C. (2006), *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press).
Reich, J. (2004), *Beyond the Latin Lover. Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).
Reich, J. (2013), 'The Metamorphosis of Maciste in Italian Silent Cinema', *Film History: An International Journal*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 32–56.
Restivo, A. (2002), *The Cinema of Economic Miracles. Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press).
Rickard, D. (1984), 'Through Black Boughs: The Supernatural in Howard's Fiction', *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology*, ed. D. Herron (Westport, Connecticut and London, England: Greenwood Press), pp. 65–85.
Romney, J. (2007), '300', *The Independent*, 25 March 2007 [www.independent.co.uk, accessed 16 July 2010].
Rondi, G. L. (1966), *Italian Cinema Today* (London: Dennis Dobson).
Rondolino, G. (ed.) (1979), *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano. Secondo volume: tutti i film dal 1956 al 1965* (Torino: Giulio Bolaffi Editore).
Ross, S. (2004), '"Tough Enough": Female Friendship and Heroism in *Xena* and *Buffy*', *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, ed. S. A. Inness (Gordonsville, Virginia: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 231–55.
Rotundo, E. A. (1993), *American Manhood* (New York: BasicBooks).
Sammon, P. M. (1982), 'Milius the Director'; 'Conan the Barbarian'; 'Cobb the Designer', *Cinefantastique*, vol. 12, no. 2 / vol. 12, no. 3, April 1982 (Oak Park, Illinois), pp. 22–27; 28–63; 64–71.
Schmalfuss, S. (2010), '"Ghosts of Sparta": Performing the God of War's Virtual Masculinity', *Performing Masculinity*, ed. Rainer Emig and Antony Rowland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 210–33.
Scott, A. O. (2007), '300', *The New York Times*, 9 March 2007 [www.nytimes.com; accessed 17 July 2010].
Segal, L. (2007), *Slow Motion. Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*; third revised edition (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
Shahabudin, K. (2009), 'Ancient Mythology and Modern Myths: *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961)', *Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture*, ed. D. Lowe and K. Shahabudin (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp. 196–216.

Sheaffer, S. (2006), 'El Borak, the Swift', *Two-Gun Bob. A Centennial Study of Robert E. Howard*, ed. B. Szumskyj (New York: Hippocampus Press), pp. 143–75.
Shull, S. A. (1993), *A Kinder, Gentler Racism? The Reagan-Bush Civil Rights Legacy* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe).
Siclier, J. (1962), 'L'age du peplum', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 131, pp. 26–38.
Simmons, D. (2011), '"By Jupiter's Cock!" *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, Video Games and Camp Excess', *Of Muscles and Men: Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. M. G. Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland), pp. 144–53.
Solomon, J. (2001), *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).
Sorlin, P. (1991), *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939–1990* (London and New York: Routledge).
Sorlin, P. (1996), *Italian National Cinema 1896–1996* (London and New York: Routledge).
Spinazzola, V. (1964), 'Le Carnaval Des Demi-Dieux.', ed. Pierre Philippe, *Cinema 64*, no. 85, April 1964, pp. 42–82.
Spinazzola, V. (1974), *Cinema e pubblico: Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia 1945–1965* (Milan: Bompiani).
Sprague de Camp, L. (2010), 'Robert E. Howard's Fiction', *The Robert E. Howard Reader*, ed. D. Schweitzer (Breinigsville, Pennsylvania: Borgo Press), pp. 24–38.
Studlar, G. (1996), *This Mad Masquerade. Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press).
Szumskyj, B. (2006), 'Cimmerian Gloves. Studying Robert E. Howard's Ace Jessel from the Ringside', *Two-Gun Bob. A Centennial Study of Robert E. Howard*, ed. B. Szumskyj (New York: Hippocampus Press), pp. 199–208.
Szumskyj, B. (ed.) (2006), *Two-Gun Bob. A Centennial Study of Robert E. Howard* (New York: Hippocampus Press).
Tannenbaum, E. R. (1973), *Fascism in Italy. Society and Culture 1922–1945* (London: Allen Lane).
Tasker, Y. (1993), 'Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the body, and the voice in contemporary action cinema', *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. S. Cohan and I. R. Hark (London: Routledge), pp. 230–44.
Tasker, Y. (1993), *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge).
Thompson, K. and Bordwell, D. (1994), *Film History. An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill).
Treveri Gennari, D. (2009), *Post-War Italian Cinema. American Intervention, Vatican Interests* (New York and London: Routledge).
Turner, A. (1982), 'In the Picture: Milius and Conan', *Sight and Sound International Film Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 3, Summer 1982, pp. 151–52.
Turner, S. (2009), '"Only Spartan Women Give Birth to Real Men": Zack Snyder's *300* and the Male Nude', *Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture*, ed. D. Lowe and K. Shahabudin (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp. 128–49.
Uhlenbrock, J. P. (1986), *Herakles: Passage of the Hero Through 1000 Years of Classical Art* (New Rochelle, New York: Aristide D. Caratzas).
Vincendeau, G. and Dyer, R. (eds.) (1989), *Popular European Cinema Conference. Catalogue* (Warwick: European Humanities Research Centre/Film Studies, University of Warwick).

Wagstaff, C. (1992), 'A Forkful of Westerns', *Popular European Cinema*, ed. R. Dyer and G. Vincendeau (London: Routledge), pp. 245–61.
Wagstaff, C. (1998), 'Italian genre films in the world market', *Hollywood & Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity, 1945–95*, ed. G. Nowell-Smith and S. Ricci (London: British Film Institute), pp. 74–85.
Ward, D. (1999), 'From Croce to Vico: Carlo Levi's *L'orologio* and Italian Anti-Fascism, 1943–46', *Italian Fascism. History, Memory and Representation*, ed. R. J. B. Bosworth and P. Dogliani (Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd), pp. 64–82.
Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (New York/ Avenel, New Jersey: Gramercy Books, 1989).
Weider, J. E. (ed.) (1951), *Your Physique*, vol. 15, no. 1, April 1951 (Montreal: "Your Physique" Publishing Co.).
Whitehall, R. (1963), 'Days of Strife and Nights of Orgy', *Films and Filming*, vol. 9, no. 6, March 1963, pp. 8–14.
Whitehead, S. M. (2002), *Men and Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity).
Willemen, P. (2010), 'Fantasy in Action', *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman (New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge), pp. 247–86.
Williams, M. (2010), 'The Idol Body: Stars, Statuary and the Classical Epic', *Film & History*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 39–48.
Williams, M. (2003), *Ivor Novello. Screen Idol* (London: BFI Publishing).
Wood, M. P. (2005), *Italian Cinema* (Oxford: Berg Publishers).
Wood, M. P. (2004), '"Pink Neorealism" and the Rehearsal of Gender Roles 1946–55', *The Trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema*, ed. P. Powrie, A. Davies and B. Babington (London and New York: Wallflower), pp. 134–43.
Wood, R. (1981), *Howard Hawks* (London: BFI).
Woolf, S. J. (ed.) (1972), *The Rebirth of Italy 1943–50* (London: Longman).
Wyke, M. (ed.) (1998), *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford: Blackwell).
Wyke, M. (2002), 'Herculean Muscle!: The Classicizing Rhetoric of Body Building', *Constructions of the Classical Body*, ed. J. I. Porter (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), pp. 355–79.
Wyke, M. (1997), *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (London: Routledge).

Index

Numbers in bold font refer to illustrations.