Viewing *Troy*: Authenticity, Criticism, Interpretation

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When classicists view a film set in antiquity for the first time, their reaction to the film is never the same as that of the non-classically trained audience. The viewing process bypasses the usual modes of passive reception and sensual spectatorship that apply to the viewing of most contemporary Hollywood films and becomes by default an intellectual endeavor.[1] Because of the critical and pedagogical nature of their discipline, classicists approach the cinema with essentially the same mindset they apply to evaluating a colleague's article or even a student's term paper. Classicists are on the lookout for a variety of irregularities, scanning a broad spectrum of signals that do not belong to the vision of the classical world they have honed during decades of study, research, and teaching. Did the Greeks reside in huts or tents outside Troy? Could Achilles have been blond? Is that an accurate portrayal of a sexual encounter between Achilles and Briseis? And wasn't Agamemnon killed in his bath at home by his wife Clytemnestra and not in Troy by Briseis?

Academic concerns tend to dominate scholars' viewing experiences. For two or three hours we are responsible for knowing more about the

ancient world than we could possibly know. Many of the questions we ask ourselves are easily answered from our areas of general knowledge or fields of specialization, but some lie on the outer fringes of, or even completely outside, our familiarity. What actually happened during the Greek landing at Troy? How long did the historical Trojan War last? Our expertise is potentially challenged at every new line of dialogue or camera angle: art historians and archaeologists search their philological memory banks, and philologists search their visual memories.

When the viewing is finished, the classicist may expect a barrage of questions from students, colleagues, family, and even the press and ultimately may be asked for a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" judgment about the film's merit. With all its mistakes and oddities, can such a film be shown in class?

This is no way to watch a movie.

Viewing circumstances can be even less suitable. Films like *Troy*, Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), or Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) have such high-profile releases that a number of classicists attended premieres or early showings, sitting bundled together in small groups. Some may be pondering what this or that colleague knows or is thinking that they themselves do not. Professional prestige and even competition come into play, and if a junior faculty member attends a showing with a senior, the former's career is a consideration. A similar mindset will also interfere with the teacher who views one of these films with students who will expect from the scholar to know everything about the film's historicity and authenticity.[2]

This is no way to watch a movie.

The phrase "watch a movie" is itself loaded with cultural bias. In a professional sense, one views a film as a narrative or submits to the group experience of spectatorship. Experiencing cinema is an academic and intellectual exercise. In the popular sense, one "watches a movie" for the purpose of emotional stimulation, be it laughter, fear, tears, or Aristotelian catharsis. The "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" decision inevitably follows the latter experience; the former does not require it. In 2005 practically no one watches Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) or the expressionist silents of Weimar Germany in the popular sense; film scholars have long since determined them to be classics. Although students are entitled to make an aesthetic judgment about films produced two to four generations ago, such films have become monuments

and cannot be as easily dismissed as audiences can dismiss, say, Charles Herman-Wurmfeld's *Legally Blonde II: Red, White & Blonde* (2003) as disappointing, inferior, derivative, or plain dumb. Milestone films boast the patina of time, have survived the initial period of judgment, and no longer need to be tested in the popular sense, although even some "classics" can fall out of favor with film scholars. A classic like *Citizen Kane* can even reverse such a process. While not very successful in a popular sense for long after its initial release, the special attention awarded it in graduate film departments in the past few decades resulted in a surge in its popularity in the 1990s to the extent that in 1998 the American Film Institute voted *Citizen Kane* the greatest movie of all time.[3]

Classicists will recognize in this contemporary cinematic reception process patterns well established in the reception of classical literature during the past 2,700 years. Was Homer more popular than Hesiod? We know that they had their own popular face-off. Although the historicity of the *Contest Between Hesiod and Homer*, a poem dating to the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, is very questionable, the kernel of that poetic debate dates back at least to the sophist Alcidamas in the late fifth century B.C. The process described in the later poem was an equally unscientific survey, in which Homer defeated Hesiod in the popularity contest. Still, the Euboean Paneides, sponsor of the contest, determined Hesiod the victor on the basis of what we might describe today as "values."[4] Of course, the context of popular culture was much more confined and much less commercial in the late eighth to early seventh century B.C., the period of the poem's setting, and in the late fifth century B.C., but popular culture is by nature unscientific in its preferences. And we should also consider that, while the actual reasons for the preservation of the poem may be serendipitous, it did survive the collapse of Greco-Roman civilization whereas, for instance, the majority of the Epic Cycle on the Trojan War did not.

Popularity also often seems to be unwarranted or inexplicable to those with whom what is popular is, well, not popular. It was not the scholarly poetry of Callimachus that thrilled Roman nobles but Aratus' *Phenomena*. Ovid's popularity was hardly dimmed, if not actually advanced, by the imperial dislike Augustus seems to have had for him.

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2   On film, history, and students see Ron Briley, "Reel History: U.S. History, 1932–1972, as Viewed through the Lens of Hollywood," *The History Teacher*, 23 (1990), 215–236.

3   For the unscientific method of the AFI voting procedure see, for instance, the CNN news release at http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9806/17/afi.top.100.final.
4   For a recent rhetorical and historical analysis of this poem see Neil O' Sullivan, *Alcidamas, Aristophanes, and the Beginnings of Greek Stylistic Theory* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1992), 63–105, and cf. note 246. The setting's historicity is briefly discussed in *Hesiod: Theogony*, ed. M. L. West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 43.

The consensus of scholarly opinion still finds the texts of Seneca's tragedies incapable of being performed, but Elizabethan dramatists mined them for both their lurid narratives and their richness of expression and rendered them into stage dramas that were popular for decades.[5] So let us imagine, which is all we can do, how Homer would have reacted to learning that the silly but delightful short mock-epic *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, the *Batrachomyomachia*, was printed in 1486, two years before Demetrius Chalcondyles published the *editio princeps* of the *Iliad*.

Popularity is also fleeting, although it can sometimes take an extended period to fleet. While the quasi-historical ramblings in Justin's *Epitome* of Pompeius Trogus and Valerius Maximus were considered so intriguing in the early eighteenth century that the Habsburg court librettist Metastasio could boast of employing them as reliable historical sources for his *Ciro riconosciuto*, an opera about the ancient Persian King Cyrus, nearly three hundred years later these authors have been widely discredited and entirely lost their popularity and their influence on popular culture.

The tragedian Euripides provides a well-known paradigm for the vagaries of popularity. Euripides' reason for accepting, in 408 B.C., King Archelaus' invitation to Macedonia, where he died after two years, was later attributed to his dislike for Athens, either for political or professional reasons.[6] Perhaps one of the reasons for the latter speculation was the relative paucity of victories he had won at the annual tragic contest during the Festival of Dionysus in contrast to Aeschylus and Sophocles. Biting literary criticism and personal attacks in the comedies of Aristophanes furthered Euripides' reputation of lacking popularity in fifth-century Athens. At some point the legend developed that he found quiet refuge by hiding away in a cave on the nearby island of Salamis. Nonetheless, by the Hellenistic period his reputation had been reclaimed along with the popularity of his works, and nearly five centuries after his death Seneca admired him to the extent that he modeled four of his nine dramas after Euripidean originals. But then came about fifteen centuries in the Latin-speaking West when Euripides was utterly neglected. Not until the resurgence of Greek tragedy in the form of opera under the royal patronage of Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great, and the Habsburg Joseph II in the mid-eighteenth century did the dramas

of Euripides, albeit mostly his later, more romantic, plays, again achieve popularity on stage.

Essential for any comparison of the reception history of classical texts with contemporary reception of cinema is not the factual basis of ancient biographical detail about authors like Hesiod, Homer, or Euripides but the popularity of the fictional or legendary material associated with them. In Homer's case, only his popularity counts – unsurprisingly, given the absence of virtual any reliable information about himself and the immense influence of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Dante and Chaucer, for instance, both treat Homer with reverence although neither had read a word of his poetry.[7]

Whether in ancient Chalcis or today on the Internet, all judgments on artists and their output, be they by royal preference, a panel of peers and critics, or a vote of the general public, are subjective, unscientific, and, in the minds of most of the unsuccessful participants, unfair, but that is just the point. Popularity is often inexplicable and offensive, even despicable, to any number of artists, intellectuals, and academics and so is dismissed as the result of a vulgar preference, as the unlearned opinions of the masses.[8] The historian Thucydides provided an early example of this when he articulated his observation that the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus was succeeded by "Hippias, and not Hipparchus, as is vulgarly believed."[9] That Thucydides then recounts at length – by his own admission and with an almost Herodotean self-satisfaction of having scooped the correct story – the homoerotic motivation of the two tyrannicides suggests that it was important to him to demonstrate the inaccuracy and innate unworthiness of popular opinion.

Both popular opinion and the popularity of an artistic product almost necessarily lack the historical accuracy and scholarly rigor that intellectual evaluation and critical standards require. We have only an imprecise understanding of the composition of the ancient Athenian audiences who attended the original performances of fifth-century tragedy, but it is reasonable to assume that these audiences were primarily composed of adult male citizens. This suggests a limited demographic of educated – relative to the rest of the population – and mature men, far different from the all-inclusive, multi-demographic audiences who watch contemporary cinema. But the spectrum still ranges from the highly

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5   In general cf. Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

6   Cf. Mary R. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 90–91.

7   Dante, *Inferno* 4.88–90; Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* 1.141–147.

8   Cf. William Warner, "The Resistance to Popular Culture," *American Literary History*, 2 (1990), 726–742.

9   Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 6.54.1–4.

educated, sharply critical, and thoroughly experienced to the uneducated, gullible, and youthful: sophisticated cinephiles are different from uneducated or casual movie-goers.

Probing several points along the classical tradition in this way should help us broaden our perspective of spectatorship insofar as a film like Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* is concerned. The primary purpose of producing a commercial artistic project costing almost $200,000,000 is not to please either academics (least of all classicists) or film critics who like to think that their reading of the *Iliad* in college qualifies them as Homeric scholars. The primary purpose is to create a successful product, that is, a work popular enough to earn back the investment and many millions in profit. To accomplish that, the product has to inspire considerable initial interest; epics do not qualify for the status of "sleepers" whose reputation slowly spreads via word of mouth. The pre-release advertising campaign of a blockbuster like *Troy* is itself a multi-million dollar project. The release itself involves another large investment when a film opens on as many as several thousand screens simultaneously. All who have large stakes in the outcome hope that television and newsprint critics will complement the enthusiasm generated among initial audiences viewing the film in theaters. In many instances there are also simultaneous and subsequent merchandising campaigns, all aimed at generating additional millions of dollars. Simultaneous sales usually include posters, books, toys, and other retail products; for the highest-profile releases there are tie-ins with fast-food franchises. After-market sales include DVDs, soundtrack CDs, and, in rare instances, theatrical re-releases.[10] Each of these is a multi-million dollar enterprise.

This summary is not intended to be an amateur business primer for anyone interested in developing a Hollywood property based on an ancient text or narrative. It is intended to highlight how unimportant the classicist is in any part of the business of popular filmmaking. As a result, while it is inevitable that classicists will analyze, criticize, and make professional judgments about a film like *Troy* in the process of viewing the film, especially for the first time, it is important for us to put such analyses, criticisms, and judgments in perspective. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, and *de gustibus non est disputandum*. But errors in authenticity, anachronisms, improprieties, and other faults, or the judgment that the filmmakers have failed to generate the same depiction of the

Trojan War that scholars have developed after years of research and thought, do not mean that the film is neither good nor successful. At the very least, such a conclusion is an unfair criticism of a commercial product that has not been designed to meet scholarly standards; in the extreme, it also reveals ignorance of the progress that scholarship in popular culture has made in the past three or four decades.

If classicists could transform themselves briefly into journalists, policemen, lawyers, or soldiers while viewing such well-received films as *Citizen Kane*, Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973), Billy Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), or Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), they would soon realize that no professional could watch a popular film without identifying numerous errors, inconsistencies, improprieties, and downright impossibilities in the depiction of what falls under the purview of their professional knowledge and experience. On the other hand, a filmmaker who pays painstaking attention to technical detail, as Tyrone Guthrie did with his *Oedipus Rex* (1957), does not necessarily create a great or successful film. By far the most influential sequence of Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*, hailed as "the thinking man's epic," was its most unhistorical moment, the rousing shouts of "I'm Spartacus!"[11]

Even if the approval of the academic guardians of classical antiquity were required for a film about the Trojan War, there would still remain a very wide range of what constitutes historical accuracy or authenticity. Homer's *Iliad* describes both Bronze-Age and Late-Geometric artifacts and presents its story through a poetic vision, while the mound presently being excavated by teams from the universities of Tübingen and Cincinnati at Hisarlık has been claimed recently to represent Homer's Troy vividly or not at all.[12] If a film could have been made in the 1870s, it would have been regarded as authentic if it reflected Heinrich Schliemann's Troy, but by only a few decades later it would have become inauthentic. The cinema was not yet invented, but there was an "authentic" opera of 1770, *Paride ed Elena* (*Paris and Helen*). Its

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10   *Gladiator* was re-released in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Germany, the Netherlands, and Taiwan in March, 2001. More than 500,000 copies of the DVD were sold in the United Kingdom in 2000, surpassing the sales of any other film.

11   Despite the fact that *Spartacus* was produced well over forty years ago, the "I'm Spartacus" scene still reverberates, most recently in a Pepsi Cola commercial first aired during the 2005 Academy Awards. Other examples are David Seltzer's *Punchline* (1988), Tom Hanks's *That Thing You Do* (1996), Frank Oz's *In and Out* (1997), Martin Campbell's *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), and perhaps Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992). The scene was spoofed in Terry Jones's *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979).

12   See Joachim Latacz, *Troy and Homer: Towards a Solution of an Old Mystery*, tr. Kevin Windle and Rosh Ireland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Dieter Hertel, *Troia: Archäologie, Geschichte, Mythos* (Munich: Beck, 2001).

composer and librettist, Christoph Willibald Gluck and Ranieri de' Calzabigi, portrayed Paris as a historically accurate Phrygian and Helen as a historically accurate Spartan, even to the point of changing their artistic style to conform to what they considered historical truth. Gluck explained his decision to do so in this way:

> I was obliged to find some variety of color, seeking it in the different characters of the two nations of Phyrgia and Sparta, by contrasting the roughness and savagery of one with the delicacy and tenderness of the other. I believed that since singing in opera is nothing but a substitute for declamation, I must make Helen's music imitate the native ruggedness of that nation, and I thought that it would not be reprehensible if in order to capture this characteristic in the music, I descended now and then to create a coarse effect. I believed that I must vary my style in the pursuit of truth.[13]

If we go almost exactly one century further back, we come to John Dryden's rendition of *Troilus and Cressida* of 1679. In 1699 Dryden would publish his translation of Book 1 of the *Iliad*, but here he was retelling the tale told toward the end of antiquity by Dares and Dictys, both of whom claimed to be eyewitnesses to the Trojan War. Dictys claimed to be a companion of the Cretan Idomeneus, while Dares has the same name as the Phrygian priest of Hephaestus mentioned at *Iliad* 5.9–10. Throughout the medieval period in Europe, Dares and Dictys were considered to be more accurate in describing the Trojan War than Homer. Despite the reintroduction of Homer's text into Europe by Petrarch and Boccaccio in the middle of the fourteenth century, Dares and Dictys had already influenced Benoît de Sainte-More, who then invented the romance of Troilus and Bressida, soon to be renamed Cressida in the wake of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*.

The influence of the Troy tale as told by Dares and Dictys was pervasive and long. Their versions were rendered into a variety of vernacular languages and lasting from the end of antiquity to Shakespeare and Dryden (and trickling on beyond them), so long in fact that it cannot be attributed merely to the medieval mindset. Even before the medieval period, the Second Sophistic produced several powerful anti-Homeric exercises in rhetoric. The *Heroicus*, for instance, attributed to Flavius Philostratus, derives its superior accuracy in relating actual events of the Trojan War from the ghost of Protesilaus, who was the first Greek killed during the landing at Troy. In view of Petersen's film, it is particularly telling that the *Heroicus* features Protesilaus as an important and authentic source, for the landing at Troy was an event not represented in the *Iliad*; it is a major and ambitious sequence in *Troy*. Similarly, Dio Chrysostom in his eleventh ("Trojan") oration (11.95–96 and 123–24) anticipates Petersen's narrative transgressions by having Hector kill not Menelaus or Ajax, as does Petersen's, but Achilles and claiming also that the Greeks never did conquer Troy.

Clearly, authenticity is an ephemeral aspect of knowledge, subject to change from one generation or chronological period to the next. For that reason alone authenticity is a poor criterion by which to judge either the validity or the quality of a film like *Troy*. And this does not even take into consideration the reports we have from people who have served as historical advisors to films set in antiquity, which inform us that film directors will follow an advisor's manual only insofar as it does not interfere with their artistic vision or their budgetary constraints.[14]

All this leaves classicists who view a film like *Troy* with several possibilities of judgment which are less dependent on their expertise but which demand a measure of familiarity with film, its history, and its place in modern culture. But, once divorced from their classical training and methodology, many flounder. At professional colloquia and conferences and in private conversations one hears the tell-all clichés of the modern movie-goer even from the mouths of the educated elite: "It was boring." – "It was too long." – "So-and-So can't act." – "It's not like the book." None of these criticisms is any more useful than to say: "It was not authentic." They reveal more about the spectator than about the spectacle. Boredom is a passive experience of inactivity that comes from disengagement. Finding a film boring usually suggests that the viewer has failed to find the film's approach, voice, intent, rationale, or style. But it is always our task as scholars to understand an artist's intent. An additional misstep is to assume that the director of such a large-scale film is not an artist worthy of serious consideration or, worse, that a director, even one who has a body of work of highly regarded and artistically innovative or challenging films, has now made one that is utterly devoid of any artistic merit. Complaints about the length of a film are often a by-product of boredom. Conversely, the extremely successful *Lord*

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13   Quoted from Patricia Howard, *Gluck: An Eighteenth-Century Portrait in Letters and Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 98.

14   Cf. my discussion in *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 2nd edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 29–32, and Kathleen M. Coleman, "The Pedant Goes to Hollywood: The Role of the Academic Consultant," in *Gladiator: Film and History*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 45–52.

of the Rings trilogy not only lasted for nearly nine hours but was also expanded on its DVD releases by several additional hours. William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) ran for nearly four hours but won a record number of Academy Awards and earned back several times its production costs.

As for acting, spectators have unrealistic expectations if they want an actor to portray the Achilles or Hector they have envisioned for themselves when they read the *Iliad*. For some viewers of *Troy*, Brad Pitt and Eric Bana did just that; for others they did not. For the latter group of viewers, Pitt or Bana "can't act." But there is no rational basis for that judgment. The task of the actor attempting to portray a legendary literary character is different from that of the actor who portrays a contemporary or more recent historical person, as when Anthony Hopkins portrays the title character of Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) or Will Smith plays Muhammad Ali in Michael Mann's *Ali* (2001). Both actors were nominated for Academy Awards in the "Best Actor in a Leading Role" category. At the very least, the spectator should attempt to understand the characterization the actor was attempting to create and should also assume that the actor's performance was satisfying to the director. Of course there are film productions so flawed by personality clashes or fundamental artistic misconceptions that the innate problems of the project spill over into its screenplay and performances, but high-profile releases are rarely so.

In most instances the sole narrative requirement of a major Hollywood release based on a work of literature is that the film tell a compelling story, not necessarily the original story and not a story fully appropriate to the text in every detail. A film is not even required to have the same theme as the original, nor should it be. Why not? Film is not only a different medium, it is also a different art form. It has different structural components and methods of organization, there are different economic and time-related production pressures, the end product is usually much sooner viewed than the original is read, and it is received by a very different type of audience and perceived in an emotional rather than an intellectual context. A producer, director, and screenwriter are artists who have worked in film, studied film, thought about film, and then read the original text and reacted to it as commercial artists responsible for an important project; they may also have seen previous film adaptations of their text.[15] They respond to all of this by developing

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15   For example, visual motifs from the prelude to the chariot race of Fred Niblo's version of *Ben-Hur* (1925) served as models for the same sequence in Wyler's version. Wyler had been one of Niblo's assistant directors at the chariot race.

their own cinematic version of the text, making their own artistic decisions.

So a far more appropriate response to a film set in antiquity is to examine it with some of the same analytical tools with which one approaches a work of ancient literature. Textual analysis is unnecessary in most instances, at least until the DVD appears with additional footage; at that point there are indeed textual matters to consider. But Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963) that we view today offers only about half of the footage originally shot for what its director had hoped would be two four-hour epics. Various drafts of a script also require textual analysis, but they, too, are only rarely available.[16]

I conclude with an examination of a single sequence in *Troy*. My goal is to attempt to offer an example of how we may appreciate a sequence which classicists would by nature and training automatically dismiss as un-Homeric. Instead, I consider Petersen's unique adaptation of the first book of Homer's *Iliad* as a positive, even avant-garde contribution to the tradition of the Trojan War rather than as an ill-conceived, poorly acted, poorly written, overly long, inauthentic rendition of one of the integral passages of the *Iliad*. The first book of the *Iliad* is such an integral part of the story that filmmakers would be hard pressed to explain its omission.

Preceding *Troy* there were several films about the Trojan War. I here examine three of them: Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* (1955), Marino Girolami's *L'ira di Achille* (*Fury of Achilles*, 1962), and John Kent Harrison's *Helen of Troy* (2003) for television. Wise's *Helen of Troy*, the first project of the twentieth century about the *Iliad* to be introduced into the popular culture after World War II, abbreviates Book 1 significantly.[17] The narrator establishes the length of the siege of Troy: "As time went on they looted and raped the surrounding villages." (Petersen chose not to use a narrative voice-over, a cumbersome technique in a visual medium that inserts an additional layer between the story and the audience.) Then the Greek generals carouse in a tent, Agamemnon and Achilles quarrel over a nameless concubine, Achilles delivers an ultimatum, Agamemnon laughs at him, and Achilles calls Agamemnon

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16   I analyze the drafts of *Gladiator* in "*Gladiator* from Screenplay to Screen," in *Gladiator: Film and History*, 1–15.

17   Earlier films like Giovanni Pastrone's *La caduta di Troia* (1911), Georges Hatot's *Le jugement de Paris* (1922), Manfred Noa's *Helena* (1924) and *La regina di Sparta* (1931) were all non-Iliadic. John Erskine's novel *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1925), which Alexander Korda filmed two years later, takes place after the Trojan War has ended. Jean Giraudoux's drama *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* (*The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*, 1935) converts Hector into a pacifist, as, to a certain extent, does Petersen's film.

and his followers "Dogs! Jackals!" and swears never to fight for Greece again. This all takes up one minute and eleven seconds. It is a scene charming in its conciseness, silly in its lack of Homeric profundity, but effective in conveying the most transparent reason for the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon and Achilles' refusal to fight any longer for the Greek cause.

In the Italy of the 1950s and 1960s, scores of films set in antiquity, often called "sword-and-sandal" films or *pepla*, were produced and distributed by small consortia. One of them brought together a trio of B-film figures: director Girolami, writer Gino De Santis, and American bodybuilder-actor Gordon Mitchell. *L'ira di Achille* begins just as the *Iliad* does – literally, by paraphrasing Homer's opening line ("Oh heavenly goddess, tell me of the many woes brought on the Greeks by the wrath of Achilles"), and then chronologically, by putting on screen the attack on Lyrnessus to capture, among others, Chryseis and Briseis. The film ends, as the *Iliad* almost does, with the conversation between Priam and Achilles and the ransom of Hector's corpse. Thirty-four minutes into the film, Briseis raises a dagger and jabs it into an unwary Achilles' shoulder. But the stab fizzles away, and Achilles explains that "the vagrant gods protect all of me, except one spot . . . I do not know where the fatal spot is." This adds some mystery to the part of the myth, although not Homer's, that Achilles is invulnerable except in one place. The music softens, Achilles and Briseis fall in love, and a few minutes later Chryses enters the Greek camp and demands the return of his daughter Chryseis. We are now forty-three minutes into the film. Chryses offers a wagon of treasure, a kind of redistribution of Agamemnon's ransom for Briseis in Book 9 of the *Iliad*, but Agamemnon responds by reminding Chryses that he, too, had lost a daughter when he had to sacrifice Iphigenia. He threatens Chryses and banishes him from the camp. Halfway through the film comes the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon from Book 1. Achilles protects Calchas, Calchas explains the problem (to the viewers as much as to the Greeks), Agamemnon returns Chryseis but demands recompense, ultimately Achilles' Briseis. Achilles goes for his sword, Athena (in double exposure) stops him, and Achilles withdraws from the war.

Here we have a reasonably authentic realization of the *Iliad* that consumes as much as one-fifth of the film, nearly 25 minutes of 118. But the dialogue is stiff and badly dubbed, and whereas fidelity to Homer is unsurpassed, the cinematic quality is low. This is a subjective opinion, but it will hardly be contradicted by any sober critic or scholar. Girolami provides a wonderfully instructive example of how a film that offers a

sincere attempt at rendering an ancient text into film can fail cinematically and so demonstrates better than many other films that authenticity does not guarantee artistic or commercial success.

Harrison's *Helen of Troy* was part of the spate of films that followed the success of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. Here the dominant and plot-driving romantic triangle of Paris, Helen, and Menelaus is preceded by Theseus abducting Helen and followed by Agamemnon raping her. It also precludes any romance between Achilles and Briseis, who does not appear at all.

Petersen's *Troy*, on the other hand, uses the psychological tensions of the first book of the *Iliad* to eliminate the importance of the gods from his retelling of the story and to concentrate on the romantic relationship between Achilles and Briseis and the dislike between Achilles and Agamemnon. Like the vast majority of the different versions of the Trojan War myths, Petersen's broadens the scope of the tale well beyond the *Iliad*. He shows the Greeks landing on the shore of Troy and Achilles storming the temple of the sun god Apollo. Achilles' faithful Myrmidons present him with Briseis, a priestess of the god and a member of the royal Trojan household. In their initial encounter in Achilles' hut, Briseis accuses him of impiety and warns him of Apollo's vengeance, but Achilles only scoffs. Immediately after, Achilles is summoned to Agamemnon's tent, where the other Greek kings are paying homage to Agamemnon. When Achilles enters, Agamemnon dismisses everyone else. The two disagree about who deserves the glory of the initial victory, Agamemnon claiming it for himself, Achilles pointing out that it was the soldiers who won the battle for him. Achilles then generously offers him the gold from the temple he sacked ("take what you wish"). Agamemnon responds: "I already have" and summons two men to bring in Briseis. Achilles draws his sword, but Briseis herself interferes ("Stop!") and pleads for an end to violence. Achilles does indeed stand down, although he points his sword at Agamemnon and threatens him, if without the Homeric animal curses.

Petersen is not ignorant of the narrative of the *Iliad*. He knows as well as anyone that in Homer it is Athena who appears to stay Achilles' sword. But he chose to emphasize the role of Briseis in order to de-emphasize the importance of the gods. Briseis not only takes command over Achilles but also announces to the spectators of the film who are familiar with the *Iliad* that she is replacing Athena. In this way Petersen makes it clear that his version of the Trojan War is a battle between humans and that the tensions and emotions among the leading characters are human. Twenty minutes later, the duel between Paris and

Menelaus breaks off when a defeated Paris crawls away from Menelaus and in desperation and exhaustion grasps the legs of his mightier brother, Hector. In Homer's version, in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, Aphrodite miraculously picks up the defeated Paris and deposits him with Helen in Troy while Menelaus is amazed to find his opponent missing. Again Petersen specifically removes the gods from his narrative and emphasizes the human element, in this instance the close relationship between Hector and his younger brother.

In addition, Petersen uses his version of Book 1 of the *Iliad* to establish the fondness that Achilles is beginning to feel for Briseis. At first, Achilles merely assured Briseis that she had nothing to fear from him, but now the arrogant and hated Agamemnon has taken her from him. This loss of face forces Achilles to defend her and value his possession more. It also establishes Briseis' hatred for Agamemnon, whom she will kill near the end of the film.

Petersen is innocent of the charge that he trivializes the *Iliad* by establishing romantic relationships. One of the film's closing credit screens claims that *Troy* was only "inspired by Homer's 'The Iliad'." More importantly, romance has been part of the Trojan tale for several thousand years. Among the Cyclic Epics, the *Cypria* incorporated the romantic relationship between Paris and Helen; the late ancient versions by Dares and Dictys include a romance between Achilles and Polyxena; the late medieval adaptations by Benoît de Sainte-More and Boccaccio feature the romances between Achilles and Bressida, then Cressida. Earlier films equally featured the romantic elements of the tale. Popularity has always demanded, and still demands, the romance that the *Iliad* lacks.

The significance and quality of Petersen's version of the Trojan War is open to discussion. My purpose with the preceding pages is not to limit debate but quite the opposite, to open up such a discussion by directing our attention away from the accusation of inauthenticity, an easy default mode of criticism, to a more appropriate and sophisticated kind of judgment.

Troy
From Homer's *Iliad* to Hollywood Epic

Edited by

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