*Upon the all-bounteous earth*

*And across the endless sea*

*Walks the immortal brilliance*

*Of heroic deeds.*

—PINDAR, *ISTHMIANS*, 4.40

# 3 calliope

## GREEK AND ROMAN MYTHOLOGY

When the immortal Homer sang his glorious poems just shy of three thousand years ago, he could not possibly have imagined that someday his poems about Ulysses, Achilles, and the Trojan War would be re-created on something called a "silver screen." But the twentieth century A.D. still found the whole fabulous world of Greek mythology captivating, and it would have been unwise for movie producers to have left this magical source of heroes and monsters untapped. For centuries, the gloriously mysterious atmosphere surrounding such names as Helen of Troy, Perseus, Hercules, Jason, Orpheus, and Medusa created indelible impressions on the minds and eyes of artists. Those impressions were bound to emerge in the ultimate artistic medium of the Atomic Age. And so from the silent *Homer's Odyssey* (1911) to Pasolini's often strident *Medea* (1970), from the human reality of *Helen of Troy* (1955) to the magical land of *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963; TV, 2000), from Disney's pastoral centaurs in *Fantasia* (1940) to the destructive reptile in *Gorgo* (named for the Gorgons, 1961), Greek mythology has deservedly played its part in the history of the cinema.

Besides the numerous films that have used mythological names or characters—for instance, *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Ulysses* (1967), *Penelope* (1966), *Kronos* (1957, 1973), *Neptune's Daughter* (1949), and *Black Narcissus* (1947)—approximately eighty films have been devoted entirely to Greek and Roman myths. The surreal stories, powerful heroes, primordial profundity, and pervading feeling of fantasy are four major elements that have made these vivid legends of ancient Greece popular enough to live on two

62 Most of what we see in the cinema is illusion, but Ray Harryhausen's films set in the ancient Greek mythical world require a number of extraordinary optical tricks. A sculptor by training, Harryhausen here puts the finishing touches on Kraken, the sea monster for *Clash of the Titans* (1981), which in the completed film seems to stand two hundred feet tall.

millennia after the peoples that fostered them have perished. In fact, Greek myth often thrives as a fascinating or profound cinematic source.

Generally speaking, most mythological films were produced either between 1897 and 1918 or between 1953 and 1981. Georges Méliès produced *La Sibylle de Cumae* (*The Sibyl of Cumae*, 1898), *L'Île de Calypso* (*Ulysses and the Giant Polyphemus*, 1905), and *Le Tonnerre de Jupiter* (*Jupiter's Thunderbolts*, 1903). *Le Tonnerre de Jupiter* shows a dwarfish Olympian throwing cardboard lightning bolts onto the stage. They explode, he does a few amusing flips, and the Muses appear behind him. Five more mythological films were made in France in 1909 and 1910: Emile Cohl's animated *Les Douze Travaux d'Hercule* (*The Twelve Labors of Hercules*, 1910); Gaum's *Hercules and the Big Stick* (1910), in which Hercules fights the Hydra, the Nemean Lion, and the Erymanthian Boar; Gaum's *Jupiter Smitten* (1910), with several metamorphoses; Pathé's *Hercules in the Regiment* (1909), in which bullets bounce off an invulnerable giant; and Le Lion's *Goddess of the Sea* (1909), which offers us Cupid and Neptune.

Because ancient history was not native to America as it was to Italy, most "ancient" films made by America's early cinematic imitators favored mythology over history. Following Edison's ballet *Cupid and Psyche* (1897), American audiences saw *In Cupid's Realm* (1908), *The Minotaur* (1910), *Neptune's Daughter* (1912), *The Story of Venus* (1914), *The*



*Centaurs* (animated, 1916), *The Golden Fleece* (1918), and *The Triumph of Venus* (1918). On the other hand, although Italy favored films based on its own ancient history, early Italian filmmakers still made a few mythological films, including Ambrosio's *Ero e Leandro* (*Hero and Leander*, 1910), and two Italian mythological silents became veritable classics: *La Caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*, 1911) and *L'Odissea* (1911).

Homer and the Trojan War has always been the best beginning. As early as 1911 a film version of the Trojan War had been produced in Italy, but *La Caduta di Troia* overemphasized the romance of the myth. First the Trojan Paris "steals" the beautiful Helen from Greece. We see the two lovers traverse the sea on a huge, Botticelli-inspired, scallop-shell bed pulled across the heavens by white-robed flying nymphs. After a brief battle before "the topless towers of Ilium," we see six hundred extras pull the famous Trojan Horse (a plywood cutout) into the doomed city. A model of the city burns in the finale while Menelaus, the Greek husband of Helen, slays Paris in a duel.

The advertising for this film's release in the United States was sheer genius. It broke all attendance records in Chicago, where some viewers paid again and again for repeat showings. A theater manager in Washington, D.C., somehow persuaded the local schools to teach Homer's epic that very month; when he showed the film during Easter vacation, his theater was filled with students. Although it was considered a "spectacular" in 1911, this primitive, brief, and low-budget film seems humorous and crude today. But at the turn of the century, when films about the ancient world were at one of the peaks of their popularity, the excitement of seeing the Trojan Horse, Helen, and Paris on the screen for the first time overcame the technical inadequacies of *La Caduta di Troia*. Within the next three years, director Giovanni Pastrone would expand and improve his technique for his spectacular *Cabiria*.

Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927) is a satire set in a modern idiom and will be discussed in Chapter 8. *The Face That Launched 1000 Ships*, starring Hedy Lamarr, was an Italian production that was never released, though footage from it was used in *Loves of Three Queens* (1953). Lamarr took the title roles of Geneviève of Brabant, the Empress Josephine, and Helen of Troy in that film, the final third of which tells the story of Paris's abduction of Helen from Sparta, the war itself, the death of Achilles, and the death of Paris. Like most Italian productions in the immediate postwar era, *Loves of Three Queens* suffers from a low budget and low production values.

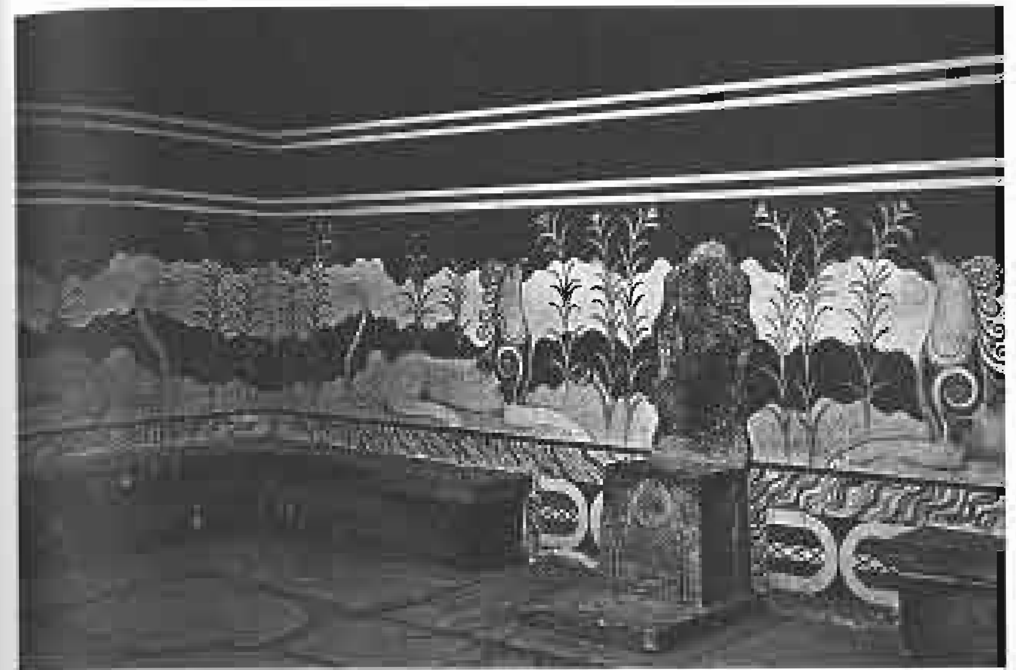
In 1956 Warner Brothers produced one of its few entries into the genre, *Helen of Troy*, an elaborate film retelling the same Greek myth. Director Robert Wise made his sole venture into the epic genre with this colorful spectacle; he said later that he would never do it again. The result has its merits, however, especially in retrospect nearly a half-century after its theatrical release. Like the Italian version of 1911, Wise's film overemphasizes the amorous qualities of heroine Helen rather than the heroic qualities of men like Achilles, Agamemnon, and Hector. This romantic concentration overshadows the martial and heroic themes immortalized in Homer's *Iliad;* perhaps Wise should have been

reminded that Homer's treatment of the myth has lasted for millennia. The film becomes rather tedious when Helen (Rossana Podestà) and Paris (Jack Sernas) constantly talk love, eat love, sleep love, and make love. Neither the chemistry between the actors nor Hugh Gray's dialogue is strong enough to support these romantic scenes.

But the CinemaScope, WarnerColor, cast-of-thousands action scenes are terrific, if slightly anachronistic. The thinly clad Greeks with their stout, round shields march on the mighty bastions of Troy under the cover of tall, wooden siege towers and a huge battering ram. (The siege towers are un-Homeric, but they were used in other Bronze Age battles.) The Trojans desperately fight back with flaming arrows. The Greek attack suddenly bursts into flames and their long flight back to the ships is a memorable spectacle.

Hugh Gray, who was the historical adviser for MGM's *Quo Vadis?*, brought to *Helen of Troy* some of its more authentic moments. And some of the film's best scenes can be credited to Homer himself: Achilles (Stanley Baker) grovels in the dirt as he grieves for the dead Patroclus (*Iliad* 17, 18), Achilles quarrels bitterly with Agamemnon (*Iliad* 1), Achilles drags Hector's (Harry Andrews) body in the dust (*Iliad* 22), and Hector bids a touching farewell to his wife and infant child (*Iliad* 6). Massive amounts of props and extras magnify the effect of the sequence in which the Greeks unload all the supplies, cattle, carts, and horses from their numerous beached ships to prepare for the siege.

In the film's best scene by far, the Trojans bring the wooden horse into the city. The huge horse—one of the largest movable props ever built for a film—was made of balsa wood, and the actors reportedly had to pretend it was hard to pull. To the accompaniment



63/65 A court scene from *Helen of Troy* (facing page, 1955). Helen (Rossana Podestà) stands on the bottom step with Paris (Jack Sernas); to their right are Cassandra (Janette Scott), Hecuba (Nora Swinburne), and King Priam (Cedric Hardwicke). The inverted columns with their bulb-topped capitals do indeed belong to thirteenth-century Bronze Age Greece, as does Priam's throne. Two views from the palace of King Minos at Knossos on the island of Crete show the reconstruction of the grand staircase and the restoration of the stone throne. Paris's armor, however, is that of a sixth-century B.C. warrior. The delicate frescoes in the upper right are in Minoan-Mycenaean styles.

66 The throne at Knossos as excavated in 1900. It lacks most of the painting and finery of the throne as viewed today: it is not just the cinema that creates an illusion of historical accuracy.

67 This vase from Athens, which shows Achilles slaying the Amazon Penthesileia, dates from the late sixth century B.C., six hundred years after the Trojan War, but Achilles' *thorax* (chest armor) served as a model for Paris's armor in *Helen of Troy.*



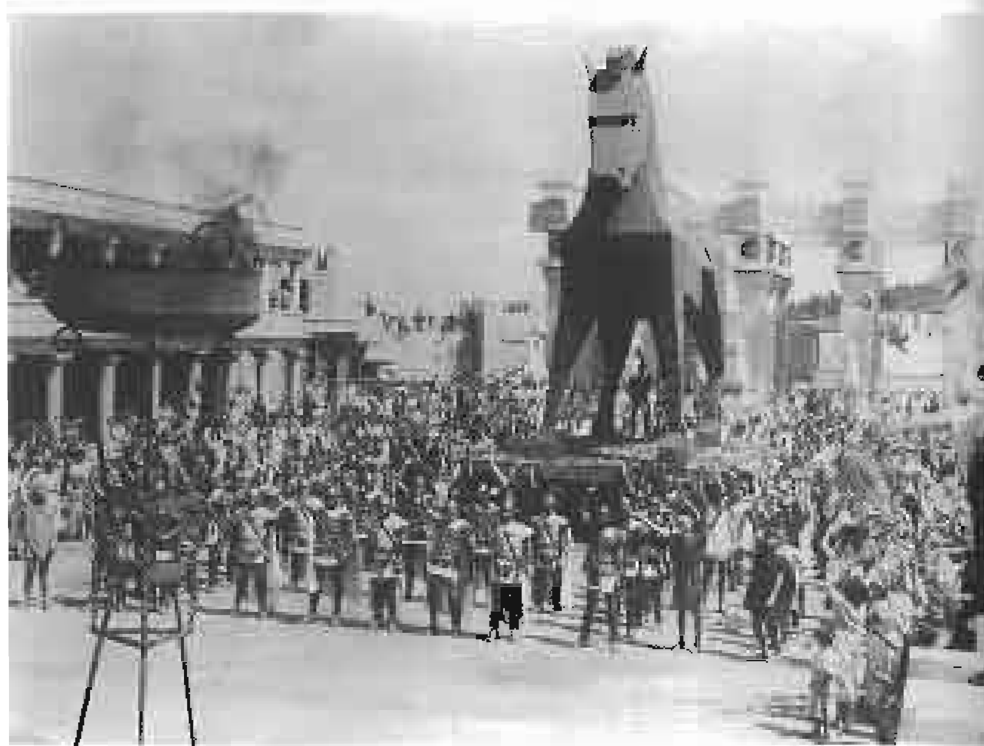
of Max Steiner's sharp, bold scoring, the fatal gift is pulled slowly past Troy's torchlit ramparts. Behind it frenzied dancers whirl. The whole scene creates the marvelously wild atmosphere that only sudden peace after ten years of war could produce. Throughout the center of the city soldiers drink wine from their helmets, red smoke eddies to the sky, festoons hang from every conceivable spot, and women are passed from man to man over the heads of the crowd, the hungry soldiers occasionally lowering a tempting women to kiss her passionately between her deeply cleft breasts. Cinecittà rarely looked so Dionysiac!

Some of the characterizations in *Helen of Troy* are equally convincing. Stanley Baker's Achilles presents an imposing, Homerically "dark" impression of awesome menace, and Sir Cedric Hardwicke's aged Priam and Janette Scott's fiery, prophetic Cassandra are true to images that have survived for nearly three millennia. On the other hand, other characterizations fall short of that standard: Paris fights too readily, courageously, and ably—not at all the coward portrayed in the *Iliad;* Menelaus (Niall McGinnis) and Agamemnon (Robert Douglas), the kings of Sparta and Argos, are too wicked and ignoble; and Helen lacks the complexity of the Homeric figure, who in the *Iliad* is torn between her love for Paris and for Menelaus. Here she curses Menelaus at every opportunity.

*Helen of Troy* was involved in a legal dispute and was not distributed or rereleased, shown on cable, or released in video format until 1996. Now viewers can appreciate how the film could have been improved if it had treated Homer's original story line with more respect, if it had swung the balance from vapid romance toward complex heroism. The film ignores the quintessential strength of the *Iliad*—the complex, catastrophic anger of Achilles—and turned a classical epic into 1950s romantic fiddle-faddle. Any film is the stylistic prisoner of the era or decade in which it is produced, so perhaps a more profound, less formulaic *Iliad* still awaits us.

In the Italian boom of ancient sword-and-sandal epics in the early 1960s, two new versions of the Trojan War appeared. *The Fury of Achilles* (1962) accurately follows the story of the *Iliad,* minus the divine interventions, from Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon to the funeral of Hector. It suffers, though, as do most films of its type, from poor dubbing, mediocre acting, and perfunctory characterizations. *The Trojan Horse* (1962) rearranges the plot of the *Iliad* to put Aeneas (Steve Reeves)—best known for escaping from burning Troy and making his way to Italy, ultimately to found the city of Rome—at the center of the entire struggle. The titular vehicle of infiltration is here again, this time planned by a well-played Ulysses (John Drew Barrymore). The action in this muscleman epic offers the expected fun, particularly at the absurdly contrived funeral games of Patroclus.

While Homer's *Iliad* has earned four film treatments, his later work of adventure and fantasy, the *Odyssey,* has earned five. (This excludes, of course, the film of James Joyce's *Ulysses.*) Following Le Bargy's *The Return of Ulysses* (1908), *Homer's Odyssey* (*L'Odissea,* 1911) featured the company of Milan's La Scala. Less primitive than its Iliadic counterpart, the film includes surprisingly sophisticated special effects sequences in which the giant Cyclops eats one of Ulysses' men and throws a huge boulder at his ships. Many of the more



68 Despite the warning to "beware of Greeks bearing gifts," these Trojans in *The Trojan Horse* (1962) cheer their apparent victory as the wooden horse, pregnant with death, stands ominously in their midst. More Minoan-Mycenaean bulb-topped columns can be seen on the porch at the left.

popular episodes of Homer's epic are included—Penelope's unraveling her tapestry at night; Ulysses' encounters with the Sirens, Calypso, and Nausicaa; the suitor's throwing the stool at Ulysses; the bow contest; and the secret of Ulysses' bed. Most intriguing are the few shots of Ulysses' patron deity, Athena. She fades in and out and changes Ulysses' clothes with the magical powers available only to a goddess or special-effects technician. Rarely seen today, this silent version of the *Odyssey* still preserves the poem's original spirit of heroic fantasy.

The Lux–Ponti–De Laurentiis coproduction of *Ulysses* (1955) remains the finest of all film versions of the Homeric poems. Like the *Odyssey, Ulysses* begins in Ithaca, where faithful but ambiguously widowed Penelope (Silvana Mangano) awaits some news of her lost husband. Downstairs we hear a blind bard (shades of Homer) sing amid fairly authentic Mycenaean decor; he sings of the Greek exploits at Troy. This song produces the flashback of Ulysses (Kirk Douglas) at Troy; he is being cursed by Cassandra for violating Neptune's temple. The gloomy lighting and archaic flavor of these opening scenes in a Mycenaean/Geometric-period megaron dissolve into a grubby Ulysses sleeping on a sandy



beach. Shipwrecked and lost in a storm, he has suffered a loss of memory. Beginning appropriately in medias res, *Ulysses* now places its hero at the colorful Phaeacian court of Alcinous. All the Phaeacians are dressed as Minoans, with tight-waisted pleated skirts for women and rich robes with long, curled and braided hair for the men.

Ulysses soon gets his memory back, and we relive with him the great adventures with the Cyclops Polyphemus, the Sirens, Circe, and Hades. Each adventure is treated with impressionistic brushstrokes that employ some of Homer's profound lines. Huge, hairy Polyphemus (played by the ex-Olympic wrestler Umberto Silvestri) is a perfect combination of the horrible, the grotesque, the clever, and the laughable. With realistic effects by the innovative Eugen Shuftan, Polyphemus grabs one of the little Ithacans and maws his bloody limbs. "These Greeks are stringy meat," he bellows in a deep voice. We laugh even as we are shocked by the gruesomeness. The audacious Ulysses soon makes wine for Polyphemus —a gift for which the grateful Cyclops "will eat Ulysses last" (*Odyssey* 9, 369–70). Never mind that wine needs fermentation; Ulysses leads his men in a feverish rhythmic chant as they stomp on basket after basket of purple grapes, and the gullible giant clumsily claps his hands in bizarre syncopation. The frenzied scene climaxes in the brutal blinding of Polyphemus. As Ulysses sails away to safety and Polyphemus randomly hurls gigantic chunks of cliff into the surf, the Greek brashly taunts the son of Neptune: "Remember the stringy Greeks! Who is mightier now—the god with his trident or the man with his grapes? Roar on, sightless drunkard, roar on! I am Ulysses, sacker of cities, destroyer of Troy, Son of Laertes, and King of Ithaca!" With his red beard and rugged chest, Kirk Douglas embodies the reckless yet crafty Ulysses: sometimes too bold, sometimes too cruel, not perfect, but human, Douglas is a Homeric Ulysses.

The siren episode also deserves the highest praise. To portray a music "so haunting that it led men to their death," director Mario Camerini put Alessandro Cicognini's intensifying choral music to the lamenting recitation by Penelope and Telemachus. Thus the Sirens lure Ulysses in the beckoning voices of his wife and son, exploiting the vulnerability of a man who has not seen his beloved wife and child in well over a decade. Lashed to the mast, he struggles against thick ropes while listening to the loud, tantalizing cries of wife and son; all this is set before the beeswax-eared sailors who row silently and swiftly behind him.

In contrast, the scene on Circe's island offers the amusing spectacle of Ithacans changed into pigs by a puff of smoke, then suffering the kicks of an uncomprehending Ulysses, who has called for his men doesn't recognize them in their porcine guise. "What are these pigs doing here?" he says, with comic frustration. Mangano plays Circe as well as Penelope, a cinematic strategy that accents the sorceress's mysterious power over Ulysses.

The Homeric enchantress Calypso is conflated with Circe for the sake of economy. Circe, like Calypso in the epic, offers Ulysses immortality, "the greatest gift offered to mankind," if he will stay with her. When Ulysses refuses, Circe raises the stakes by showing him the entrance to Hades. He does not descend to the edge of the Underworld as in the *Odyssey,* but several shades of past acquaintances appear to him in an effectively

69 Polyphemus, the monophthalmic carnivore, as portrayed by the ex-Olympic wrestler Umberto Silvestri in *Ulysses* (1955). His rough movements, gravelly voice, and bizarre humor ("These Greeks are stringy meat!") create an unforgettable impression.

smoky and deathly atmospheric tableau. Achilles' ghost moans one of the most profound lines in Homer: "I'd rather slave among the wondering barbarians than be king among all the dead" (*Odyssey* 11, 489–91). Ajax and Agamemnon rue their respective deaths by suicide and faithless wife. Death is horrible, yet Ulysses decides to remain a mortal—"I hope if men ever speak of me, it will be as one of them"—and prepares to sail home.

By telescoping the Hades, Circe, and Calypso sequences, the film adapts a broad range of Homer's dramatic and philosophical aims in an economical form appropriate to cinema. The strategy is artistically innovative yet true to the spirit of the source. Greco-Roman mythology has survived for so many years because it has always been flexible and allowed for artistic variation. *Ulysses* deserves to be appreciated with the same tolerance and understanding as Monteverdi's *Orfeo* or Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: all three works of art are entitled to the same mythopoetic license.

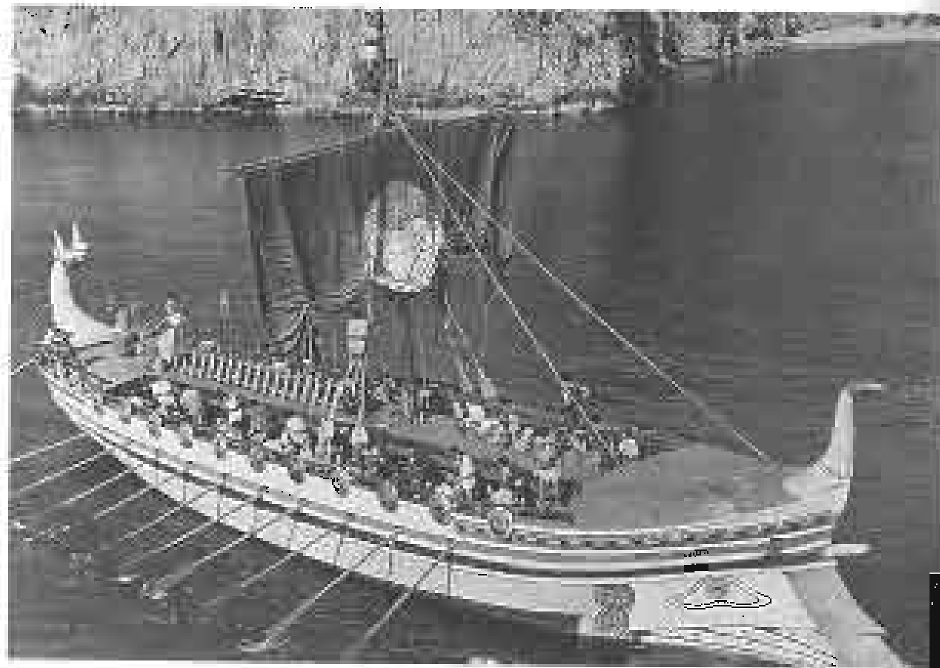
While no film should be expected to transfer a four hundred–page epic poem onto the screen, *Ulysses* preserves the archaic, mysterious aura of the *Odyssey*, along with the adventurous character of its hero and the fantastic oddity of his encounters at sea. Each of the famous episodes is rearranged slightly—the nature of the Sirens' music, for example, or the omission of the "No Man" ruse in the Cyclops sequence. But Ben Hecht,

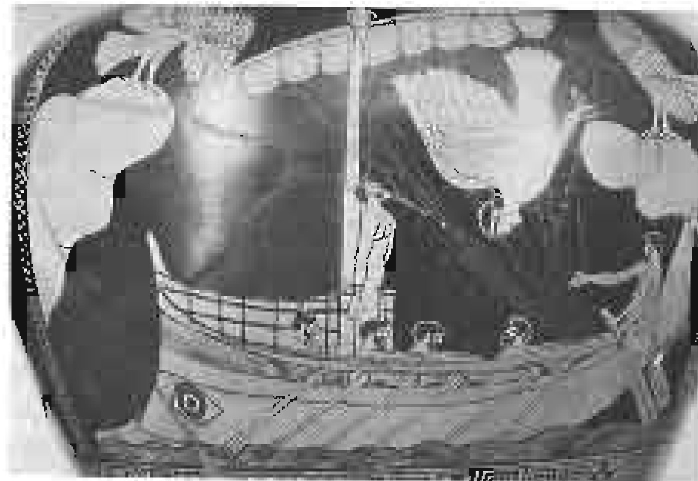
70 This early-fifth-century B.C. Greek vase depicting Ulysses blinding the cyclops Polyphemus contains a serious narrative mistake: the cyclops has two eyes! It is not just the cinema that can be accused of historical inaccuracies.

Hugh Gray, and Irwin Shaw combined to write one of the most entertaining and apothegmatic scripts of its kind. By no means a flawless film (the dubbing is weak, as are some of the minor characters), *Ulysses* still ranks high. A bit shallow on the surface and crude in realization, it captures the spirit of the earliest fantasy novel of Western civilization.

Mario Bava produced an Italian made-for-television film version of the *Odyssey* in 1969. Bava himself had long experience in the genre, starting simply as a crew member on the Steve Reeves *Hercules*, progressing to assistant director on the sequel *Hercules Unchained*, and then advancing to cinematographer and director on such other early Italian sword-and-sandal films as *Giant of Marathon*, *Esther and the King*, and *Hercules in the Haunted World*. His codirector was Franco Rossi, who later directed the Italian television version of *Quo Vadis?* (1985), *A Child Called Jesus* (1987), and a version of the *Aeneid*. In 1997 Francis Ford Coppola led a team of producers and created an ambitious made-for-television *Odyssey* that ran for four hours in May 1997. Directed by Andrei Konchalovsky, most of whose prior work had been in Russia and Europe, and starring Armand Assante, the film reverently works through episode by episode, ignoring the in medias res structure of the original and employing special effects that are only on occasion genuinely "special." For the voyage through Hades the television screen is filled with burning bits, but the scene is more a theme-park boat-ride through a fiery Christian Hellish inferno than the sobering gloom of the Homeric Land of the Dead. The brightest moment of the miniseries is the brief appearance by Hermes (Freddy Douglas), who, though the wings on his winged sandals do not move, let alone flutter, does hover nicely above Calypso's (Vanessa Williams) rock-top cavern, impudently delivers his message, then skyrockets back into the distance as quickly as he appeared from it.

The Homeric poems were part of a large epic genre that included other well-known ancient Greek myths. After the Trojan War cycle, the best known mythological





71/72 The *Argo* on its way to find the Golden Fleece in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). The ship is actually a twin-engine fishing barge with ancient trappings. Aft is the intentionally misplaced figurehead of Hera. A model for the ship can be seen on a fifth-century B.C. vase painting: Ulysses is lashed to the ship's mast while the Sirens swoop about the ship. *Jason and the Argonauts* copied the sail, mast, apotropaic eye, prow curve, rudder, railings, oars, and rigging for the *Argo*.

cycle concerned the romantic adventure tale of Jason, his quest for the Golden Fleece, and his encounter with the alluring sorceress Medea. An early Italian sword-and-sandal import, *The Giants of Thessaly* (1960) was the first sound film to retrieve the Golden Fleece from Colchis, but this Ricardo Freda import has little to do with the Greeks' legends, contaminating the original myth with such absurdities as talking sheep on the island of the Lemnian Women, the embittered hag/sorceress Gaia, and a stowaway named Atalanta, who is condemned to death until Orpheus—the expert in all matters of love—turns the condemnation to Love itself. The film even steals a page from Homer's (second) book, when a campily magnificent hirsute cyclops is killed by a toothpick-sized spear that Jason heaves into his lone eye.

By far the most profound film version of this myth is Pasolini's stark and symbolic *Medea* (1970), a metarealistic depiction of the struggle between a barely civilized Greek and a naturalist cult in Colchis. Appended to his film version of Euripides' play, this powerful mythological excursion will be discussed in Chapter 7, along with other ancient Greek dramas based on myths—*Oedipus Rex, Electra, Hippolytus, The Bacchae, Antigone, Iphigenia,* and *The Trojan Women.*

Columbia's *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) is based on the *Argonautica*, by the Hellenistic poet Apollonius of Rhodes, but the famous story about the quest for the Golden Fleece is romanticized indiscriminately. The infamously cruel Oriental sorceress Medea (Nancy Kovack) is portrayed as a helpless, large-breasted, dancing Kewpie doll, and Jason (Todd Armstrong) is utterly colorless and physically unimpressive. But in spite of these severe flaws in characterization and casting, several aspects of the film excel in conception and execution.

The gods and goddesses of ancient Greece are shown in their lofty-columned palace on Mount Olympus. Bravo just for the attempt! The deities look down at the earth through a small pool of water, and they play chess with men's fates on a huge table. The treatment of these deities is tongue-in-cheek, an approach that offended many film critics, who apparently did not realize that the epic poets Homer and Ovid *(Metamorphoses)* depicted the gods with similar irreverence. Hera (Honor Blackman) and Zeus (Niall McGinnis) argue humorously as the bickering Mr. and Ms. Thunderbolt; their upper-crust British tone is appropriately haughty. Unfortunately, the only other Olympian god featured is Hermes (Michael Gwynn, who also played in *Barabbas, Cleopatra,* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*). Among the mortals, Nigel Green (Hercules) and Lawrence Naismith (Argus) carry the transitional scenes.

Without question, *Jason and the Argonauts* is best known for the superb special effects of Ray Harryhausen. Thanks to him, the film surpasses all its predecessors in re-creating the fantastic aspects of Greek myth. With his unique SuperDynamation, Harryhausen brings to life such creatures as the huge, bronze, Cretan robotic Talos, who creaks with every move and metallically stomps after the Lilliputian Argonauts. When Jason loosens a bolt in the giant's bronze Achilles' heel and lets out his liquid *ichor,* Talos cracks

73 The unsurpassed Harpies from *Jason and the Argonauts*. Their eerie screech, slimy green skin, fluttering wings, and aggressive attacks on blind Phineus are representative of Ray Harryhausen's ability to create live images of Greek myth. The temple in the rear is the actual temple of Neptune (fifth century B.C.) at Paestum in southern Italy.

into pieces of patina and crashes to the earth. At the climax of the film Jason slays a writhing, hissing, seven-headed dragon, but King Aeëtes immediately sows its seven teeth in the earth and calls on Hecate, Goddess of the Night, to avenge the Hydra. Amazingly (and unmatched in any other version of the Jason myth), seven skeleton-swordsmen spring up. To the accompaniment of eerie woodwind music from Bernard Herrmann's score, this skeleton battalion marches on the stunned Greeks, attacking, hacking, and leaping with incredibly lifelike movements, until Jason leaps into the sea for safety. Earth-born men were part of Apollonius's poem, but they were flesh and blood, not skeletons; this was an idea that Harryhausen had conjured for an earlier film, *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1958). Apollonius himself, a master of scholarship and contrivance, would probably have borrowed these terrifying skeleton warriors from *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* if he had had the opportunity.

Talos, the Hydra, and the skeletal warriors are the most famous of Harryhausen's creations in *Jason and the Argonauts*, but two horrible green Harpies convey the most vivid



impression of any Greek mythological monsters seen on film. Shot before the mossy remains of the temple of Neptune at Paestum in southern Italy, this scene is memorable for the chaos created by the Harpies' bizarre screeching and their abrupt, irregular flying movements. Their skin is bumpy and slimy, their faces otherworldly, their voices thinner than paper. It took Harryhausen about two years to complete the SuperDynamation for *Jason and the Argonauts*, but the superiority of his fantasy creations are well worth the time and expense. Harryhausen's genius takes our impression of the Greek mythological world into a new dimension of visual reality. And he recognized his achievement with suitable pride: "Of the thirteen fantasy features I have been connected with, I think *Jason* pleases me the most."[1]

A timid update of the quest for the Golden Fleece is NBC's made-for-television movie *Jason and the Argonauts* (2000). Hallmark Entertainment, the production company responsible also for the network's *Odyssey*, again reduces Medea (Jolene Blalock), arguably the most dynamic and treacherous female character ever created in the history of Western drama, to a romantic wimp. She does not chop her brother to pieces, she is not responsible for Pelias's death, and, worst of all, the film concludes with her joyous marriage to Jason, with nary a hint of their infamous, infanticidal divorce. This grave omission negates the myth's great power and thereby reduces the film from mythological drama to happily-ever-after fairy tale.

Then again, as a fairy tale *Jason and the Argonauts* (2000) plays nicely. The quest for the Golden Fleece is by nature an episodic tale, and many of the episodes are imaginative and well executed. The poet Apollonius, in one of his sillier moments, tells us that while the other Argonauts slept, Hercules rowed the *Argo* by himself, using tree trunk–size oars. A clever variation in the film has the *Argo* appear to sail away to fool Aeëtes, but then we see Hercules at sea rowing the *Argo* all by himself—with regular-sized oars linked to all the other oars.

The serpent that guards the fleece was perhaps inspired by Disney's gigantic serpentine Hydra in *Hercules*, and the monstrous Neptune surely derives from the 1963 version of the myth. But thanks to *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, computer-generated monsters fare well in such made-for-television movies. The winged, grisly Harpies have the horrid countenances of gargoyles, and their shrieks mix beastly growls with bird-warblings. The latter are particularly appropriate, not just because the ancient Harpies were part woman and part bird but because the film's scene is set in a Mycenaean tholos tomb much like the one used for *Clash of the Titans*: any modern visitor to the "Tomb of Atreus" at Mycenae will hardly ignore the frequent and acrobatic entrances and exits of noisily warbling sparrows. Like its 1963 counterpart, this film eliminates the winged sons of Boreas, Zetes and Calais, who chase away the Harpies in Apollonius's epic, and replaces them with Hercules battering in the outer dome of the tholos and causing the falling ashlar masonry to crush the Harpies below. The computer-generated, bronze-hooved, fire-breathing bull offers some menacing moments to Jason, but the computer-generated earth-born warriors lack any personality at all. Jason makes quick work of them by bending over and letting them kill each other, as the ancient myth prescribes, and then it is on to the next commercial break.

74 Harryhausen's mythological beasts are often hybrids. For *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (1977) he created this robotic Minotaur named Minoton.

When the "ancient" film factory slowed to a crawl in the late 1960s, Harryhausen pushed on, trusting in his art and the perennial support of children's audiences rather than in market trends. In several Sinbad movies he inserted even more mythological creatures from ancient Greece, including a Cyclopean Centaur in *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973) and the robotic Minotaur ("Minoton"), as well as a voyage to the Land of the Hyperboreans, in *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (1977). Then, during the "ancient" renascence in the late 1970s, Harryhausen created his last hurrah, *Clash of the Titans* (1981), which features the heroic myth in which Perseus beheads Medusa. Once again Beverley Cross's *(Jason and the Argonauts)* screenplay focuses on a formulaic but engaging romance between the hero (Harry Hamlin) and a princess, in this case Andromeda (Judi Bowker).

This time the star-studded cast of gods on Olympus—Sir Laurence Olivier as Zeus, Claire Bloom as Hera, Ursula Andress as Aphrodite, and Maggie Smith as Thetis—have exchanged their human-viewing pool for a cabinet filled with voodoo-esque statuettes representative of the human race, and Burgess Meredith plays Perseus's delightfully impish but ever-irritated mentor Ammon. There is also a wonderfully devilish group of "Stygian Witches" (one of whom is played by Flora Robson), who are actually the ancient Greek mythological *Graiai*, demon-women who were born so old that they have to share their sole working eye, which Perseus ultimately steals from them.

Once again Harryhausen's creations carry the film. He begins with the giant merman Kraken (an inexplicably Teutonic beast), who rises from his underwater abode to destroy the city of Argos with a Hellenic tsunami. Then Harryhausen offers us the flying horse Pegasus, a magnificent white winged stallion whom Perseus captures, tames, and rides through the clouds to the uplifting strains of Laurence Rosenthal's ethereal music. Along the way Perseus encounters the Stygian Witches and a superfluous limping, monstrous mute named Calibos (Neil McCarthy) before coming face-not-quite-to-face with



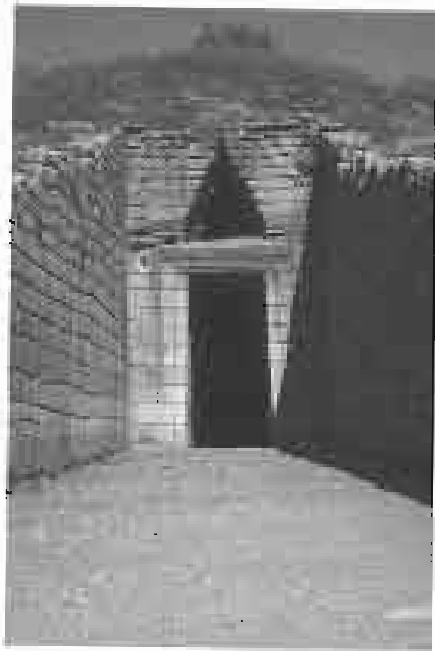
Medusa. Harryhausen's Medusa is an interesting creation. In ancient Greek art she is usually depicted as humanlike, save for a hideous face distinguished by a broad mouth and nose, swollen lips, fangs, and topped, of course, with a head full of snakes where hair belongs. In one famous archaic representation now in the Louvre she has the body of a horse. In *Clash of the Titans* she still has the requisite coiffure of snakes, but Harryhausen makes her an archer with a serpentine tail instead of legs.

In an interview in 1981 Harryhausen told me that he changed Medusa's appearance because the traditional Gorgon just did not look frightening enough; she needed to look more menacing and to be more terrifying. A similar cinematic imperative inspired Harryhausen to introduce Pegasus early in the film, even though our ancient Greek sources tell us that the winged horse sprang from the severed head of Medusa. He asked me whether I enjoyed seeing Pegasus on the large silver screen seemingly flying across the heavens. When I answered yes, he said, "That's why we used him all through the film!" What is particularly interesting about the liberties Harryhausen took with his sources is that all the great mythographers of antiquity—Hesiod, Homer, Pindar, Euripides, Vergil, and Ovid, among others—changed myths according to the requirements of their message, theology, or artistic style. Ancient Greek myths were not written in stone but were flexible, dynamic tales changed and adjusted by every storyteller, songster, and poet. That Harryhausen and Beverley Cross gave Pegasus birth before the death of Medusa—or, for that matter, that they had Perseus, rather than the hero Bellerophon, ride Pegasus at all—was an artistic decision guided by poetic license and aesthetic and narrative judgment.

After the success of *Clash of the Titans,* Harryhausen toyed with the idea of making a film about Hercules' labors. As it turned out, though, he opted instead to escape the pressures of filmmaking. After the Museum of Modern Art in New York honored his special-effects work with a retrospective, Harryhausen retired to become a full-time sculptor.

There were two earlier versions of the Perseus myth. *Perseus the Invincible* (1962; also released as *Medusa vs. the Son of Hercules* and under a number of other titles) faithfully if crudely presents the story of Perseus, Medusa, and Andromeda. *Winds of Change* (1978) is a childishly charming Japanese animated feature film enhanced by an international crew, including narrator Peter Ustinov. The film takes its newly invented hero Wondermaker through a series of adventures, including episodes illustrating the Ovidian tales of Acteon, Orpheus, and Phaethon. In the segment involving Perseus and Medusa, Pegasus is portrayed as part horse, part bird, and part dragon.

*Perseus the Invincible* was just one of scores of films that followed in the wake of *Hercules* (1959). In fact, no single film based on a Greek myth has been more influential than this Joseph E. Levine box-office smash of 1959. Raking in as much as $18 million (depending on whose figures you believe), thanks to a Herculean advertising effort, Levine metamorphosed his $120,000 investment in this 1957 Italian-made film *(Le Fatiche di Ercole)* into an overnight fortune. No one has ever denied that the film has serious



75/76 Harryhausen's mythical worlds depend not only on special effects but on makeup and set design as well. In the foreground of this interior photo from *Clash of the Titans* (1981) are the long-haired "Stygian witches" *(Graiai)*, women born old. The huge entrance stones formed into posts, lintel, and relieving triangle are Mycenaean, as are the circular colonnade with repetitive decoration above the thin, inverted columns. Similar design can be seen in the entrance to the Bronze Age tomb of Atreus at Mycenae.



drawbacks—the long stay with the crescent-helmeted Amazons, the abysmal dubbing, the thin characterizations, the hokey atmosphere—but this film was the prototype for an entire genre. *Hercules* was the first neo-Italian cloak-and-sandal film that had no pretense except to turn historical action and romance into profitable entertainment—a dubious distinction, perhaps, but a distinction nonetheless. Eschewing the periodic profundity of *Ulysses,* the seriousness of *Fabiola* (1948), and the quasi-historicity of *Attila* (1955), the film focuses on gushy love and pure, exciting adventure, and the male stars have new requirements: eighteen-inch biceps and fifty-plus-inch chests.

Playing the title role was the most perfectly formed specimen of male musculature captured on film to date. Steve Reeves had broken into film in *Athena* three years before *Hercules* was filmed in Italy in 1957, but the new film vaulted him into fame and fortune. His smooth, sculptured, Hellenically proportioned physique stretched, pulled, grasped, and displayed itself on every page of the perfunctory screenplay, while American audiences argued nonstop about whether such a build was beauty or beast. In the meantime, there was a film going on, and the film had some worthwhile moments.

The story of *Hercules* is reasonably faithful to several ancient Greek myths about the demigod, son of Zeus and the human Alcmene. After tearing out a huge tree by its roots to stop the runaway horses of princess Iole (Apollonius, *Argonautica* 1.1180 ff.), Hercules comes to Jolco (Iolkos) to be Master of Arms. In the exercise yard he astounds everyone—including Aesculapius, Laertes, Orpheus, Argus, Castor, and Pollux—by throwing a discus beyond the horizon (to the effective warblings of a Moog). The scene reaches its climax when all the other Greeks back away from the mighty Theban. They are afraid because he has thrown the discus too far: he cannot be human; too strong for the rest of mankind, he stands alone. Although the philosophy behind the scene is treated in a shallow manner, it at least hints at the loneliness and isolation Hercules confronts in Euripides' *Heracles.*

Hercules then meets young and wily Ulysses. He ironically tells Ulysses (in a deep, dubbed voice), "Some day a bow and arrow may decide your fate." We must smile. But soon tragedy enters Jolco. Hercules kills a ravenous lion who has been terrorizing the countryside, but not before it kills the young prince Iphitus (Mimmo Palmara). Hercules, who had been Iphitus's guardian, is blamed for his death. To atone for his crime Hercules must serve as a vassal to the evil Eurystheus, who sets forth a series of seemingly impossible labors. All these events are more or less according to actual Greek mythology, though the chronology is somewhat confused. They give us the impression of a Hercules who is almost immortal, yet also a Hercules who suffers loneliness among mortals because of his share in divinity. As in the myth, Hercules' irrational passion causes the death of Iphitus, and leads to Hercules' travails. "Even the greatest strength carries with it a measure of mortal weakness," proclaim the opening titles of the film. In the early episodes, the film is a delightful combination of adventure, muscles, comedy, and mythology. Thereafter it falls apart.

Hercules begins his canonical labors by battling the Cretan Bull (a European Bison in the film). He goes with Jason on the quest for the Golden Fleece, and after encountering a gynarchy of warrior Amazons (Lemnian women) and some furry creatures (Apollonius 1.940 ff.), he returns to Jolco to find that Jason's uncle Pelias and Eurystheus have double-crossed him. Imprisoned via trapdoor in an underground cell, Hercules rips his chains from the wall, crashes through the door, and fights off one hundred armed soldiers by swinging the heavy iron chains around his head. He chases all the soldiers onto the porch of the palace, where he wraps each chain around a pillar. Flexing a magnificent, Mr. Universe–winning *V*, he yanks the supporting columns and crushes his enemies under the roof of the porch. *Vae victis!* Hercules and his girlfriend, Iole (Sylva Koscina), ride off into the sunset arm in arm.

The romance in *Hercules* is light, the action absurdly heroic, the evil characters without any redeeming characteristics, and the rest comically likable. Director Pietro Francisci, whose previous directorial work had been in such heavy-handed, historical films as *Queen of Sheba* (1952) and *Attila* (1954), develops his peculiar style of light-hearted adventure in this amusing production, the result of which is an uneven film of dubious merit. Nonetheless, there are several enjoyable and mythologically worthy sequences, and the film paved the way for the scores and scores of muscleman epics that followed in the next four years.

Following his successful *Hercules*, Joseph E. Levine defended his hard-sell tactics, announcing, "We are reminding everyone that this is a circus business."[2] To publicize the opening of the sequel *Hercules Unchained* (*Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, 1959), Levine threw a huge garden party in Hollywood, complete with a large statue of Hercules made out of ice, with variously colored light bulbs for muscles. To seven hundred press and movie people he gave four-pound chocolate statuettes of his mythological strongman.

As with its predecessor, the plot of *Hercules Unchained* is based in part on Greek mythology. The sequel begins where *Hercules* left off. In the Greek city of Thebes, Oedipus's semi-illegitimate sons, Eteocles and Polynices, are contesting the kingship. From the pages of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* comes the mysterious death of the blind widower and orphan, Oedipus. From the pages of Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes* comes the famous battle at the city's seven gates. Also mythologically sound is the movie's depiction of Omphale (Sylvia Lopez), the lascivious queen who keeps Hercules imprisoned against his will. We also see the mythological Antaeus (the ex-wrestling and boxing champ Primo Carnera), who is the child of Earth; he cannot be beaten in battle so long as he has contact with his alma mater, so Hercules kills him by lifting him off the ground with a bear hug. Francisci directed the film in the same light romantic style of the original, combining adventure and humor, mythology and complete fabrication. Very, very far from being a mythological masterpiece, *Hercules Unchained* employs its cheap sets and costumes, imaginative love triangles, and muscular feats to create another triumph of mundane entertainment.

77/78 In *Hercules* (1957) the Cretan bull (here a European bison) pins Hercules (Steve Reeves) against a hillside. The ancients had a different conception of how an ideal Hercules should look, as an early-fifth-century B.C. depiction of the demigod's seventh labor illustrates. This Hercules' girth and lack of proportion would prevent him from winning the Mr. Universe title claimed by modern Herculeses Steve Reeves and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The mighty success of *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* gave birth to many feeble films in the next few years. Sequels to the sequel—*Ulysses vs. the Son of Hercules*, for example, and *Hercules, Samson, and Ulysses* (directed by Francisci), and even the quadruply implausible *Hercules, Maciste, Samson, and Ursus*, bringing out of retirement the stalwarts from *Cabiria*, the Old Testament, and *Quo Vadis?* to join the strongman of the hour—were produced ad infinitum and, inter alia, ad nauseam. In the next ten years, approximately twenty-five Hercules movies were released in bulging muscularscope. The quality of most of these *Hercules* sequels and imitations is generally poor, from both the cinematic and the mythological standpoint, but they have earned at least passing mention: *Ercole contro Moloch* (*Conquest of Mycenae*, 1963), in which Hercules, called "Glaucus" (Gordon Scott),

79 Hercules (Steve Reeves) exhibits a prize-winning V-shaped flex before Samsonesquely destroying the palace of Jolco in *Hercules.* The gilded columns and mural-sized vase paintings are absurdly inauthentic, but Reeves's well-proportioned musculature, a mythologically plausible plot, and Herculean advertising earned this film $18 million and created a new genre of film—the muscleman epic of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

battles against the tyrannical priests of Moloch in the city of Mycenae; *The Challenge of the Giant* (1965), in which Hercules battles with Antaeus; *Hercules in the Haunted World* (1961), in which Hercules' mythological paramour, Deianeira, is imprisoned by Lichas (Christopher Lee), the agent of Pluto, so Hercules (Reg Park) and Theseus together venture into the Underworld on her behalf to retrieve a magical flower; *Hercules and the Captive Women* (*Hercules and the Conquest of Atlantis,* 1961), in which Hercules (Reg Park) visits the mythical Atlantidean kingdom and there sees the ever-changing Proteus, the one-man mythological zoo; *The Loves of Hercules* (1960), in which Hercules (Mickey Hargitay) falls in love with Deianeira (Jayne Mansfield), the daughter of King Eurytus of Oechalia (though mythologically this should be Iole), then fights Achelous and Queen Hippolyte's Amazons; and *La Vendetta di Ercole* (*Goliath and the Dragon,* 1960), in which Hercules (Mark Forest) battles against his mythological adversary Eurytus once again. This time Broderick Crawford plays Eurytus, King of Oechalia, and his three-headed dog (that is,



Cerberus) gives Hercules a scare, though its barks are worse than its bites. Other Hercules films that make little pretense about re-creating Greek mythology include *Hercules of the Desert* (1960), a veritable Western; *Hercules Against the Mongols* (1960), in which Herc matches up with the three sons of Genghis Khan; *Hercules Against the Barbarians* (1964), in which Herc meets the great Genghis Khan himself; *Hercules Against the Sons of the Sun* (1963), in which Hercules battles against the Incas (!); *Hercules and the Giant Warriors* (1964), in which Hercules (Dan Vadis) must face ten bronze soldiers; *Hercules Against Rome* (1960), in which Hercules (Alan Steel) brings justice to the Caesars; *Hercules and the Black Pirate* (1962), set in sixteenth-century Spain; *Hercules, Prisoner of Evil* (1964), in which the strongman faces werewolves; *Hercules and the Masked Rider* (1963), set in the seventeenth century; *Hercules Against the Moon Men* (1964), which by now should not sound too surprising; *Hercules and the Tyrants of Babylon* (1964), which at least has something to do with antiquity; and *Hercules in New York* (1970), which starred another champion bodybuilder, one who barely spoke any English (Arnold Schwarzenegger, billed as Arnold Strong). Just a year later Adventure Cartoons produced *The Mighty Hercules* for Saturday-morning television.

Reeves and Schwarzenegger had made Hercules films the (dis)proving ground for would-be actor/bodybuilders, so Lou Ferrigno, whose film debut had been in Schwarzenegger's documentary *Pumping Iron* (1977), starred in two subsequent Hercules films, *Hercules* (1983) and *Hercules II* (1985), in the renascence of ancient films more than two decades after the original was made. When the Hercules juggernaut was in high gear in the 1960s, *Hercules and the Princess of Troy* (1965) was filmed as a pilot for a television series, but the Gordon Scott vehicle was never put into production. Apparently the time was not right. Almost thirty years later, with dozens of additional television networks and channels available through cable and satellite delivery systems, a series of 1994 pilot films starring Kevin Sorbo (*Hercules and the Lost Kingdom, Hercules and the Amazon Women, Hercules and the Circle of Fire, Hercules in the Underworld,* and *Hercules and the Maze of the Minotaur*) was much more successful. The essential formula in these films is to characterize Hercules as tall, handsome, and physically imposing—but not a bodybuilder. He is vulnerable emotionally because of the loss of his wife Deianeira, and he is always wary of Hera, his eternal celestial enemy. The special effects are usually computer generated: two fine examples in *Hercules and the Amazon Women* show a child morphing into Hera and the Hydra sprouting new heads. The fight sequences are choreographed according to practices well-honed during the kung fu era two decades earlier. The successful pilots led ultimately to four syndicated television series, one each for Hercules, "young" Hercules, a Diana-like warrior named Xena, and Sinbad. Sinbad's connection with Greek myth in the series doubtless owes more to Ray Harryhausen's work in the 1970s than to the influence of Greek myth on the medieval *Tales of the Arabian Nights.*

In the wake of this new Hercules mania among a mostly adolescent audience, Disney aimed at even younger moviegoers with its animated feature *Hercules* (1997).

Packaged with fast-food-restaurant purchase offers and a huge merchandizing campaign (which was simultaneously satirized and promoted in the film itself), the enterprise turned a $245 million profit as just one in a revitalized series of annual Disney animated features. Its success is no surprise, for in many ways the film is much more clever than its young audience (and many parents) could appreciate. The opening, in which the Motown Chorus of Muses comes to life from a vase painting to sing a prologue summarizing the Greek creation myth recounted in Hesiod's *Theogony,* is already beyond the youngsters. Later we see the three heads of Cerberus fight over a steak and the conflated Fates/Graiai (the *Clash of the Titans* influence again) predict, "Indoor plumbing: it's gonna be big!" The self-destructive power of blue-flame-headed Hades (James Woods), with his silly companions Pain and Panic, is similarly beyond the ken of the youngest viewers, and all these details depend on a thorough and irreverent rethinking of Greek myth.

On the other hand, in a nod to the young audience and the Disney image, the film softens the ancient confusion between Hercules' biological father Zeus and his mortal father Amphitryon. In this version, Pain and Panic steal Hercules from his Olympian crib, drug him with some "Grecian Formula" to make him mortal, and drop him to the earth, where Amphitryon and Alcmene adopt him. Hercules develops into a strong and unintentionally destructive teenager, who knocks down the columns of an entire stoa in one fell swoop. This creates the isolation that is so important in contemporary Herculean characterizations. Hercules tells his troubles to a statue of Zeus, which, as in Pausanias's ancient description of the image of the god at Olympia, comes to life and reveals Hercules' divine birth. Zeus promises that Hercules can become a god if he can prove himself a "true hero." Aided by the Yoda-like satyr Philoctetes (Danny DeVito: "Call me Phil"), Pegasus (thanks again to *Clash of the Titans*), and the Academy Award–nominated song "Go the Distance," Hercules develops into a true hero, winning battles against the multi-multi-multiheaded Hydra (modeled after the computer animated version in *Hercules and the Amazon Women*) and the rumbling mountainlike Titans, who represent natural disasters. His final triumph, before his colorfully animated apotheosis, requires him to swim through the River of Death, a rather magnificent variation on the original Greek labors, in which Hercules conquers death, but another concept that is probably beyond the grasp of the film's primary audience.

The ancient Greeks had other mythological heroes besides Achilles, Ulysses, Hercules, Jason, and Perseus. Athens was the greatest city-state in Greece, and her favorite son was Theseus, who sailed to the island of Crete to kill the monstrous, semibovine progeny of King Minos. *The Minotaur* (1960, also entitled *Theseus Against the Minotaur* and *The Wild Beast of Crete*) stars two-time Olympic decathlon champion Bob Mathias. As you might expect, the film includes a sequence in which Theseus sportingly competes with a friend in the javelin, discus, and pole vault. All the characters from the Athenian/Cretan myth are in the film—Minos and his wife Pasiphaë, their daughters Ariadne and Phaedra, Theseus's father, Aegeus, and the Minotaur—as is the famous labyrinth in which the Minotaur is housed. But none of the characters has any complexity, and the myth has had



major surgery: Aegeus does not commit suicide, Phaedra does not marry Theseus, and Theseus does not abandon Ariadne. Yet the use of the appropriate Minoan snake-goddess dresses, the reproduction of actual Minoan frescoes, and the atmospheric, turquoise Aegean hue that pervades most of the film improve at least the visual quality of the film and lend it at least a tincture of authenticity.

The labyrinth scene is the most praiseworthy of *The Minotaur.* The famed maze opens onto the king's court, where a mouth-shaped portal (à la *Cabiria*) takes seven maidens and seven lads to a horrible sacrificial death each year. Theseus enters the dark and cavernous labyrinth with torch and sword in hand, and in the echoing hollows he hears the threatening growling of the half-man, half-beast. Ariadne follows Theseus, cleverly tying a thread from her shawl to the portal so that she will be able to find her way back. Such well-known details from the ancient myth make an otherwise bland film palatable.

But fidelity to the myth alone cannot make a bad film good. Another Italian export, *My Son, the Hero (Arrivano i Titani,* 1963, also released as *The Titans),* contains a curious mixture of extensive mythological motifs and inane acrobatic antics. In the Underworld we see Sisyphus rolling his eternally burdensome rock, Tantalus reaching for inaccessible food, and Tityus offering his liver to hungry vultures. The Titans are chained to the rocky walls of Hades; Krios, their leader, sees the three Fates measuring, spinning, and cutting Destiny's thread. Medusa's famous beheading is here, too, as is a cyclops and Hades' cap of invisibility. Perhaps the most interesting of these mythological details is the scene from the Knossian bull-jumping fresco from Crete—not a painting, but the ritual itself. None of the mythological scenes is intelligently developed, though, and the characters are even sketchier. Equal proportions of muscle, acrobatics, humor, and mythological accuracy do not make *My Son, the Hero* any more than a harmless and mindless panorama of Greek mythology.

In contrast, a handful of films treat the images of Greek myth more symbolically. *Fellini Satyricon,* for instance, uses the image of escaping the labyrinth to illustrate a rite of passage from ridiculed youth to experienced adulthood. George Lucas's first film, *THX-1138,* a futuristic film about a totalitarian world, contains a climactic sequence in which the state prison turns out to be a labyrinth so pure and white that it needs no walls.

Both these films, like almost all the other symbolic treatments of Greek myths, belong to the post-*Cleopatra* (1963) era. But two seminal films by French directors, Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1949) and Marcel Camus's Brazilian *Black Orpheus* (1959), were the first to explore some of the profound meanings inherent in Greek myths. Not coincidentally, both treat the myth of the title character's heroic journey to Hades and conquest of death, but these passages of Orpheus look very different from the similar scenarios in Disney's *Hercules* and *My Son, the Hero.* Most obviously, rather than strictly re-creating a costume version of the well-known myth of love, death, tragedy, and triumph, Cocteau and Camus adapt the story of Orpheus and Eurydice into modern milieus to create films with a broader intellectual and temporal impact.

Cocteau cynically announced that *Orphée* set out to be "nothing but the paraphrase of a classical Greek myth," and he repeatedly tried to discourage deep interpretations of the film.[3] In the film itself, Orpheus, a young French poet, is told, "You try too hard to understand what it all means, my dear sir. This is a great defect." But Cocteau is playing with us. He uses visual symbols, obscure phrases, and subtle touches of artistry to elevate the film from the "paraphrase of a classical Greek myth" to cinematic poetry. When we hear a sentence like "L'oiseau chante avec ses doigts" (The bird sings with its talons) broadcast over the radio of an imposingly dark Rolls-Royce, how can we do anything but try to figure out what it means? Yet Cocteau later disclosed that the sentence was nothing more than a favorite line sent to him by his fellow poet Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917.

Visual symbols at first confuse those who would analyze all of the film's eccentricities. "Hades" is entered by passing through mirrors. But Cocteau illuminates the puzzling choice of a gateway to the Underworld: "Mirrors are the doors through which Death comes and goes. . . . Watch yourself in a mirror as you age and you will see death at work." Using the ruined military school of St. Cyr for Hades, Cocteau creates a stark and cold atmosphere for his Land of the Dead. He mattes slow-motion and normal-speed shots in the same scenes to enhance photographically this strange atmosphere. Similarly, by using a large tub of viscous mercury, Cocteau makes a mirror "dissolve" as the gloved hand of Orpheus disappears into the nether region.

Death is the pervading theme of *Orphée*, but it goes hand in glove with love. Eurydice wants death by suicide because Orpheus (Jean Marais) does not return her love; Orpheus does love her, yet he also loves and is loved by personified Death (Maria Casares); Orpheus goes back and forth between death and life, between a living love and a dead one. Both he and Eurydice wish for death, but they both come back from death after achieving it. Mixed with the themes of love and death are explorations of free will (especially in Heurtebise's arguments with Death) and poetical inspiration (the radio obscures Orpheus's). The sum of all these themes suggests that a poet must love and die a number of times before he can reach perfection, and that in reaching death by putting one's gloved hands through a mirror, the poet does indeed "sing with his talons." But it would be foolhardy to reduce *Orphée* to this single meaning.

Cocteau refuses to restrict himself to a toga-clad, lyre-playing poet whose one purpose in life is to bring his Eurydice back from death. Instead, he transforms a gracefully aging Greek myth about a poet and death into a modern statement on poetry and death. In doing so, he makes a mythic contribution to the cinema. Much in the tradition of Vergil and Monteverdi, he has revived an age-old story in a brilliant piece of contemporary art. He continued to explore the themes of poetry, immortality, fame, and death in the delayed sequel, *The Testament of Orpheus* (1959).

Though less profound than Cocteau's masterwork, *Black Orpheus* (*Orfeu Negro*, 1960) was no less poetic and won an impressive share of awards in 1959–1960, including the Palme d'Or at Cannes and the Academy Award for best foreign-language film. Produced and shot in Brazil, it remains one of the few Brazilian films to become popular in the United States. During Carnival, white-dressed Eurydice (Marpessa Dawn, Camus's wife) comes to Rio de Janeiro to visit her cousin. The handsome streetcar conductor Orpheus (Breno Mello) sees the innocent newcomer, and gradually they fall into a gentle love, flavored by the lovely music that Orpheus sings and plays on his guitar. Also present are the mythological dog Cerberus who guards a metaphoric Hades and the elderly streetcar conductor named Hermes (in the myth, Psychopompos, "leader of souls"). In the tragic denouement, Eurydice is accidentally electrocuted; Orpheus takes her from the morgue as if to revive her, but he is struck in the head by a stone thrown by a jealous ex-girlfriend. He falls to his death with Eurydice in his arms. In Greek myth, when Orpheus is stoned to death by frenzied Bacchantes, his music carries on. In *Black Orpheus*, when Orpheus dies, three children pick up his guitar and sing, play, and dance to his song.



As in *Orphée*, the sequence in Hades is one of the most poetic. Instead of embarking on the traditional *katabasis* down into the Land of the Dead, this Orpheus travels up in an elevator to the twelfth floor of a modest skyscraper. It is the middle of the night, so the only person he finds there is the custodian, who, like Charon punting his ferry along the River Styx, has his hands grasped around a handle—of a broom. With that broom he pushes papers, countless pieces of small paper, each of which, he tells Orpheus, represents a person in the Lost and Found department. Camus is telling us that in the modern world we "lost souls" are bits of bureaucratic data, and then the final irony is that we learn that this Charon cannot even read! At the end of the scene we see scores of lost souls—pieces of paper—floating down the middle of a lengthy spiral staircase. The image suggests Dante's Hell, circle after circle inhabited by souls whom Dante and his guide Vergil compare to falling dead leaves. In case there is any doubt about Camus's symbolic purpose, at the bottom of the staircase Orpheus encounters a (one-headed) dog named Cerberus.

The plot of *Black Orpheus* is straightforward, but it is enlivened by its setting during Carnival. With scores of shots of smiling dancers and bouncing musicians, the colorful spectacle of the city between mountains and sea is a delight for the viewer. The splendid array of bright shades and all the colors of the spectrum scattered through the rhythmically active masquerading celebrants create an overwhelming environment of cheerfulness; in such cheerfulness the tragic death of Eurydice and Orpheus's desperate attempt to find her become all the more pitiable. An entire city's wild celebration dissolves suspensefully into Orpheus's solitary despair. The contrast between the peak of social revelry and the depths of personal tragedy make *Black Orpheus* an extraordinarily moving film. Elemental joy yields to elemental pathos, and Orpheus and Eurydice are crushed by inevitable forces of evil. Like *Orphée*, Camus's film borrows its plot from the Greek myth, then completely revitalizes it with a new setting and different approach.

Italy exported a few other mythological films in the early 1960s, most of them focused either on ancient history or on Hercules. In *Atlas Against the Cyclops* (*Maciste in the*

*Land of the Cyclops*, 1961), Capys, the daughter of Circe, presents Penelope and Ulysses' son and presents him to the vengeful Cyclops; in *Colossus and the Amazons* (1960), the Greeks return victoriously from Troy only to be imprisoned by the warrior women; and for Jordi Grau's Spanish film *Acteon* (1964), based on the story of Diana and Acteon, Ovid actually receives screenwriting credit. In the horror genre, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing starred in Hammer Productions' *The Gorgon* (1964), in which the Gorgon Megaera inflicts terror and calcification on a German village; and Roger Corman and Charles Griffith, just months after releasing the camp classic-to-be *Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), offered their own Italianate film called *Atlas* (1960), an even worse film than the Italian sequels to the sequels.

Hercules, the Golden Fleece, and Hades are subjects of Greek mythology still recognizable to most people today, but fewer people associate the lost continent of Atlantis with ancient Greek myth. But long before the many books that have been published in the past three decades about the "real" Atlantis, the search for the famed lost world had originated in the dialogues of Plato in the fourth century B.C. Plato tells us Atlantis was a huge island in the ocean beyond the "Pillars of Hercules" (Gibraltar). Its inhabitants amassed a huge military force and invaded Greece and the Mediterranean world. The Atlanteans were defeated in battle, and soon afterward Atlantis suffered violent earthquakes, which sank the entire island to the ocean's depths.

George Pal's production of *Atlantis, the Lost Continent* (1961) followed this basic Platonic outline. Using modernistic technology worthy of his earlier production of *Destination Moon*, director-producer Pal equipped the ancient mythological kingdom of Atlantis with a gigantic solar-powered ray gun and a fleet of submarines. The combination of ancient world and modern scientific technology evokes memories of a serial in the 1930s, and indeed the twelve-part *Sharad of Atlantis* (1936) probably influenced Pal, but his film is far more polished. While Demetrius, an ancient Greek fisherman, and Antillia, the princess of Atlantis, row their little boat out in the "Atlantic Ocean," a submarine slowly and subtly appears in the background. It seems almost as if Pal expected everyone in the theater to rub their eyes in disbelief at the anachronism until the sub actually surfaces next to Demetrius's boat. The sequence is a memorable introduction to Atlantean technology.

The earthquake that levels Atlantis, a product of A. Arnold Gillespie's special effects, brings the mythological fantasy to a magnificently destructive conclusion. Gillespie borrowed scenes from MGM's earlier fiery holocaust in *Quo Vadis?* in rendering the flames, upheaval, and panic that culminate in the explosion of the powerful solar ray-gun. The towering white (model) buildings of Atlantis are voraciously swallowed by the voracious sea. The Atlantis that survives thus becomes mythology and speculation.

Atlantis appeared in several other films, none particularly notable. *The Siren of Atlantis* (1949) placed lost Atlantis under "a sea of sand"—in the Sahara Desert. Ruled by an evil but voluptuous queen, Atlantis lures unsuspecting French Foreign Legionnaires to their disgraceful deaths. The film features some interesting Tuareg music and choreography, but its pace is sluggish, and few would mind if *Siren* were lost with the legendary continent it deenergizes with a testudinariously slow cinematic pace. Atlantis appeared twice in muscleman epics, first in the previously mentioned *Hercules and the Captive Women (Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide)*, whose palace is entered via Mycenae's Lion Gate, and then in *Kingdom in the Sand* (1963), where Atlantis is patrolled by an army of robot-powered zombies. The Hercules film does have one of the muscleman genre's most amusing moments: Androcles, ruler of Thebes and friend of Hercules (Reg Park), decides to invade Atlantis, but he fears that someone "will sit on my throne during my absence." Hercules assures him that he need not worry, picks up the stone throne, raises it above his head, and throws it to the floor, where it breaks into a hundred pieces. Androcles sullenly bemoans the whole affair: "What a waste of a good throne."



Roman mythology, like almost all Roman culture, is essentially the same as the Greeks'. Rome did produce some marvelous myths about her early history, though. The *Aeneid*, Vergil's epic poem about Rome's early mythological history, was the basis of *The Last Glory of Troy* (1962, also known as *The Legend of Aeneas*), a muscleman vehicle for Steve Reeves. The warrior Aeneas takes shiploads of his fellow Trojans from their city when, thanks to Ulysses and his wooden horse, it is destroyed. He leads the refugees to Italy, where they in turn become the invaders. After many battles with the local citizens, Aeneas finally wins and founds a new city. This city would in a few generations be relocated and renamed Rome. The film makes certain to include Nisus and Euryalus from Vergil's poem, as well as Pallas, Lavinia, and Turnus, though the gods are omitted.

The story about the mythological founding of Rome by Romulus, the famous twin brother of Remus, is elaborately told in the *Duel of the Titans* (*Romolo e Remo*, 1961). Written by Sergio Leone, the film starred two of the more talented musclemen of the era, Steve Reeves as Romulus and Gordon Scott as Remus, and costars included such genuine Italian actors as Massimo Girotti (Tatius) and Virna Lisi (Julia). *Duel of the Titans* traces the lives of the twins from their abandonment in the woods of Italy and their rescue by a she-wolf that nurtures the orphaned children with her milk. The boys grow up not knowing that their real mother, Rhea, was impregnated by a god, Mars. But when they find out, Remus is overcome by lust for power while Romulus desires peace, brotherhood, and civilized life in their newly founded city. At the climax of the film, Romulus performs the ceremonial investiture of a king, plowing the first furrow of the city with two white oxen. But Remus rides in to fight it out with his brother once and for all. In an impressive yet quick struggle full of energy and strength, Romulus kills Remus.

*Duel of the Titans*, a fairly faithful borrowing from Plutarch's *Life of Romulus* and Livy's *History of Rome*, takes care not to leave out Amulius, king of Alba Longa, and Titus Tatius, king of the Sabines. It also shows Romulus receiving his famous vulture omen. True, a bridge defender is obviously based on Horatius Cocles, a much later historical figure, but the film's chronology is not much more fanciful than Livy's. The look of the film

80 Steve Reeves, right, and Gordon Scott as the mytho-historical Romulus and Remus in *Duel of the Titans* (1961). One of the better muscleman epics, this film re-creates the primitive atmosphere surrounding the founders of Rome.

is enhanced by expansive crane shots of the beautiful, wooded Sabine hillsides not far from where the events of the ancient stories were supposed to have taken place in 753 B.C. Rapidly ascending and descending scales in the musical score by Piero Piccioni reflect the massive human migration that takes place as the humble proto-Roman caravan clatters with wood, rope, animals, and peasants. The costumes are fittingly simple and ragged for the relatively small crowds of villagers that would someday be described as the "illustrious" ancestors of mighty Rome. This primitive atmosphere elevates the film above most other sword-and-sandal movies of its day, making it worthy of bronze mythological and cinematic laurels. One other version of this classic ancient story has been filmed: *Romulus and the Sabines* (*Rape of the Sabines,* 1961), starring Roger Moore. Nor should we forget the "Sobbin' Women" sequence from Fox's early CinemaScope musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), which is so dependent on the *Life of Romulus* that the lyric proclaims, "That's what Plutarch says."



A younger contemporary of Vergil's, Ovid wrote a number of Latin poems which helped make the entire corpus of Greco-Roman myths an artistic database for the next two millennia. Although the pre-animé Japanese compendium *Winds of Change* (1978) is the only film to concentrate solely on myths of Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999) re-creates several shocking moments from Ovid's gruesome tale of Philomela (*Met*. 6.424–676), who concocts a human stew to feed as punishment to the tyrant who raped her and ripped her tongue out; her prime ingredient was the tyrant's son.

Other films that are not centered in ancient myth contain several fine mythological sequences. Terry Gilliam created a vivid birth of Venus (Uma Thurman) sequence in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1989), and Mary Lambert used the symbolic iconography of Hades as the key introduction to *Siesta* (1987). Perhaps best of all is the "metahistorical" first half of Pasolini's *Medea* (1970), to be discussed in Chapter 7. But of all the categories of films produced about the ancient world, the mythological is probably the most difficult to film and therefore the most poorly represented to date. Far more than films about ancient history, mythological films need convincing special effects, or thought-provoking concepts, or an exotic ambience, or all three. The world of myth is by nature an unreal world, one in which action and events are either larger than life or more profound than the mundane events that normally take place in our world. Film by nature reveals an unreal world, but it too easily creates the illusion that its unreal word is real. Ray Harryhausen's SuperDynamation work—whether in his outer space films of the 1950s, his Sinbad films of the 1970s, or the specifically Greek *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Clash of the Titans*—has the look of myth because his images belong to another world that looks different from ours. Monsters, magic, and metamorphoses abound, and the two Greek films in particular take place both in Olympian heaven and on earth. But as magical as they are and as mythological as they seem, neither *Jason and the Argonauts* nor *Clash of the Titans* is intellectually profound. By contrast, Cocteau's *Orphée* and Camus's *Black Orpheus* are profound in their treatment of life, death, poetry, and song, but because they are placed in contemporary settings, they forfeit some mythic ambience. Mario Camerini's *Ulysses* has some fine effects and some of Homer's profundity, but its production values are clumsy. All of these films set good standards, yet a truly superb film of ancient Greek myth still waits to be made.

Jon Solomon

# The Ancient World in the Cinema

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

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To Lois, *quasi quasar universi mei*