FILM REVIEW

Troy, 2004, directed by Wolfgang Petersen. Screenplay David Benioff.

Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* has not received kind treatment from classicists, and some of this criticism is interesting in what it reveals about us. Some critiques have been perfectly reasonable. Nick Lowe in the *TLS*[1] is not entirely ungenerous, but complains that the characters are ciphers. This is only partly true. Most are not ciphers, but flat: Patroclus is just unappealing, Menelaus is a stupid brute, Agamemnon a greedy brute, Priam kind but with far too much trust in the decency of the world. The viewer does not feel that there is a great deal more to know about them. It is Achilles about whom we need more and do not receive it. Brad Pitt does his best with very little help from the script.

Other criticism does not always reflect well on the critics. Some classicists' complaints constitute typical territorial carping, often of a rather silly kind. The mélange of cultures in its sets, for example, has drawn considerable mockery — but since the *Iliad* presents a material culture formed of the remnants of different centuries simultaneously, why is such a mixture inappropriate? The identification of Patroclus as Achilles' 'cousin' has disappointed some who must have fondly imagined that action-movie fans are ready for a gay hero. Not yet — despite Oliver Stone's 'Alexander' (not a success in the US). In *The New York Review of Books*, Daniel Mendelsohn accuses the film of the flaws of Cyclic Epic — but it certainly does not lack unity, and indeed its plot, though far from perfect, proceeds according to plausibility or necessity.[2] Again in the *TLS*,[3] Victor Davis Hanson comments:

> Gladiator more or less registered well on Classicists' authenticity meter. Troy, on the other hand, was an abject travesty of Homer.

This is an extraordinary judgment, since *Gladiator*'s historical consultant, Kathleen Coleman, tried to dissociate herself completely from the film.[4] *Gladiator* contradicts established facts about well-attested people, going far beyond the acceptable licenses of historical fiction to compress time and create composite characters. Its historical wrongness is not just about particular facts. There is something really disturbing in implying that after Commodus' death the Republic was restored. And as Coleman complains, basing costumes on Alma-Tadema's paintings gives a profoundly false impression of the social norms of the Roman elite. But *Troy* is fiction, and its fictional world is mythological. *Troy* can only be a travesty of Homer if it is trying to be a film of the *Iliad* — and it's not. It could only be false to history if it made any claims to represent the late Bronze Age — and it doesn't. The Trojan War is legitimately open to the imagination.

The movie certainly makes drastic changes in the established canon of mythological 'fact'. It is considerably freer with the tradition than any tragedian ever was, and it is impossible to discuss it without being a spoiler — anyone who has not seen the film, but expects to see it, should stop reading here, because nobody should be deprived of the experience of being surprised by a version of the Trojan War. The core plot is certainly the *Iliad*'s — Achilles quarrels with Agamemnon over Briseis, he withdraws from battle, Patroclus fights (though, in the film, without Achilles' consent) and is killed, Achilles kills Hector, Priam recovers Hector's corpse. The changes, though, are big enough that the film is more an *hommage* to Homer than an attempt to film his story. Its inadequacy relative to Homer really matters only in the scene between Achilles

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1 'Beware Greeks bearing scripts', *TLS* 5279, June 4, 2004, 18-19.

2 'Lost in "Troy"', *NYRB* 51, 11, June 24, 2004, 46-49.

3 'Take me to my leader', *TLS* 5297, October 8, 2004, 4-5.

4 See M. Winkler, ed., *Gladiator Film and History*, Oxford, 2004, 45-52; see also 31-44.

and Priam, which is close enough to the original to be moving, but too abridged to be as moving as the reader of Homer knows it should be.

Troy is not a great movie, and in many ways not a successful movie. The dialogue is often stiff and unconvincing, Lowe's criticism of the characterization is largely justified, the pace often lags, Diane Kruger is not beautiful enough for Helen (but nobody could be). Its excellences mostly lie in particular moments, like the dazzling shot when the camera pulls away from Achilles' ship to show the vast fleet — presumably computer generated, but still beautiful — the recollections of his own youthful wars by Peter O' Toole's Priam, when we glimpse Lawrence of Arabia inside the old man, the firing of Patroclus' pyre, or the strange intensity of the scene in which Achilles, alone, approaches the walls of Troy and calls for Hector. Not Homeric, this is still very good. In general, though, the movie seems unhappily poised between being a summer action movie for young males and an antiwar meditation. It is not, however, entirely stupid, and it would be more profitable for us to think about why Petersen, Benioff, and the rest of its creators made what they made than to be snide about it.

Mendelsohn's complaint that the film is Cyclic, like Hanson's that it is a travesty, is very odd in a way whose wrongness is helpful. The film is the very opposite of a Cyclic Epic, and its most violent changes in the tradition are the result of its basically Aristotelian strategy. The film is heavily enough influenced by the *Iliad* that it organizes its story around Achilles and the Iliadic narrative. At the same time, it is not an *Iliad*, but a Troy-romance. The *Iliad* manages to include the rest of the Troy-story by allusion and recollection, but it depends on an audience that knows the basic framework, and it has, besides, a very generous amount of narrative space in which to achieve its goals. The moviemakers evidently decided, probably rightly, that they needed a linear narrative. So they needed a single story that would go from the beginning to the end of the war, yet would center on Achilles and his quarrel with Agamemnon. This decision entailed much else, if the movie was to have unity. The ten-year war is compressed into days.

In the film, Achilles' difficult relationship with Agamemnon begins before the quarrel so that it can provide thematic continuity, and the hero needs to be kept alive until the fall of Troy because his experience is the focus. In order to keep narrative tension after the end of the quarrel, Achilles becomes genuinely in love with Briseis, who is returned to Troy so that he can try to rescue her. I did not like the resulting standard romantic plot, especially because it gives Achilles a typically modern 'sensitivity', but it is easy to see why it happened.

The authors made other decisions with narrative consequences. Most important, their view of the Trojan War is not Homeric, but 'realistic', reminiscent of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* or Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. There are no gods, not just because Greek gods in the movies are invariably silly, though this would be a good enough reason, but because the gods imply a higher order and meaning behind the action, and the film does not want one. The characters talk about the gods; the Trojans, unfortunately, expect the gods to help them. Critics who object to a plot in which Achilles can desecrate a shrine with impunity have failed to realize that that is, precisely, the point: whether or not the gods exist within the fictional world (and a brief scene with Thetis would seem to imply that they do), this film shows a world that is the same one we live in — the world of the Melian Dialogue, in which the gods do not intervene to rescue the weak or even to punish offenses against themselves.

The entire point of the film lies in two contrasts: one is between Achilles, who fights purely for glory in order to be remembered, and Agamemnon, who fights exclusively for his own power. The other is between the Greeks, exploited by their imperialist commander, and the Trojans, who are only nominally in the wrong for having acquiesced in the abduction of Helen, since Agamemnon, once he has his excuse for war, will destroy Troy whatever the Trojans do. Having Menelaus killed early in the war is essential for this version, since it makes Agamemnon's position absolutely clear. This portrayal of Agamemnon is probably also the reason for the film's creating a Hector without the narcissism and self-delusion of Homer's. Agamemnon is a bad guy,

so the Trojans have an unmistakable good guy. The movie's Hector plans for Andromache's escape from Troy instead of fantasizing about her future slavery. (Eric Bana does very well in giving reality to a character who could easily have been annoyingly and unbelievably good.)

The movie does not reconcile how Achilles can function in Agamemnon's world; it does not try to explain where glory lies in fighting for bad causes — especially for an Achilles who never seems to be genuinely at risk when he fights, until the very end. Insofar as the film attempts to make sense of itself, it relies on Odysseus, who fights himself because he is compelled by Agamemnon, but who understands and sympathizes with Achilles. (Sean Bean as Odysseus is superb at conveying a simultaneous detachment from and commitment to the action.) This confusion, though, can actually be seen as a virtue. After all, *Philoctetes* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* also leave their audiences with uncertainty and unease about how political reality and heroic values can co-exist. It is a problem we can talk to our students about, and they might learn something from thinking about it. However, the movie lacks the courage for real tragedy. So, since it kills the characters we most care about, Achilles and Hector, it also kills Agamemnon to provide a satisfying closure, while pointing towards an *Aeneid*-like future re-founding of a successor to Troy. This is too easy.

Movies like this can be very useful to classicists precisely where they are least 'correct', because they are good to think with. If Brad Pitt's Achilles is inarticulate, it reminds us that the *Iliad* creates sympathy for an otherwise often inhuman character through his eloquence: the imperishable glory of Achilles is based no more on his deeds than on the relentless power of his language. The swordplay in the movie is quite splendid, and the combats bring out how peculiarly unsuitable for film Homeric battle really is: once we take out all the speeches, the similes, the authorial comments, we are left with a few spear casts, maybe a thrown rock, sometimes a brief moment with a sword, and some powerfully grisly descriptions of wounds. Making Homeric combat thrilling is harder narrative work than I ever realized until I considered how un-Homeric the movie had to be in order to have a good fight.

When the movies use ancient history, we need to defend the truth, not pedantically, but because the past is entitled to respect. When they use our texts, we need to consider why we value these works, and we have every right to be angry if a movie claims fidelity to a source it abuses. Very little of what we believe makes the *Iliad* still important to read is in this film, and that may be a reason individual classicists will not like it, or the basis for reflections that can be valuable in teaching. Failure to be the *Iliad*, though, is not the reason the film does not entirely work. We also need to allow modernity the freedom we would not deny an ancient poet, and we need to remember that mythology is not our property.

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