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PATRIARCHAL REPRESENTATIONS: Gender and Discourse in Pirandello's Theatre

Italian Cinema

Gender and Genre

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"Heroic Bodies"

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This book is dedicated to my mother, Ruth Fornelli-Günsberg, and to the memory of my father, Luitpold Günsberg.

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married life. In *Il giovedì* Gassman's live-in girlfriend has a good salary, while he is unemployed and unwilling to pull his weight financially. Another minor female character, Gassman's estranged wife in *Il sorpasso*, has a lucrative job in advertising, in other words, at the heart of the consumer industry itself. She can even afford to pay him to have their marriage annulled. What these female characters have in common is independence and poise, in sharp contrast to melodramatic femininity. They also provide, albeit from the margins, a serious foil to the comic desperation of male characters at the centre of the film.

These are striking new depictions of contemporary femininity in a genre dominated by masculinity. Other depictions, however, continue the dominant cinematic tradition of femininity portrayed in its sexuality, in other words, how women look rather than what they achieve. Loren's central role in *Ieri, oggi, domani*, for instance, is limited to motherhood in 'Adelina', adultery in 'Anna' and prostitution in 'Mara', her striptease in the final episode ensuring the box office success of the film. New material, on the other hand, is provided for the representation of masculinity by the pressures of the contemporary consumerist ethos on the traditional gender of productive power. The portrayal of the boom in *commedia all'italiana* centres on the satire of a masculinity which commodifies social relations. Meanwhile another, contemporaneous genre was striking a popular chord. This was the peplum, which fed fantasies of escapism in those whom the boom had completely bypassed.

3

Heroic Bodies: The Cult of Masculinity in the Peplum

Introduction

The peplum is a fantasy genre celebrating musclebound masculinity in heroic action in the distant prehistorical, pre-industrialized past, and often in unidentifiable countries. Some 300 of these Italian spectacle films were produced between 1957 and 1965, the years when the genre was at its peak. This period coincided with the boom, from which the genre is regarded as providing escapism for those excluded from the new, increasingly industrialized base of economic prosperity.¹ Classified as a sub-category of the adventure genre, the peplum sometimes combines with other genres, such as horror (for example, Gentilomo's *Maciste contro il vampiro*).² Overlap with comedy, as in Cerchio's *Totò contro Maciste*, further accentuates the element of parody already inherent in the genre, an element impacting on gender portrayal, as we shall see. Also known as 'sword and sandal' or 'muscleman' films (and in Italy often as *film storico-mitologico*), many of them were co-productions, used an international cast and met with great commercial success both in Italy and abroad. Unlike melodrama and *commedia all'italiana*, the peplum is not steeped in *italianità*, a factor that helped to make it more suitable for the export market. The films are particularly renowned for their depiction of mythical (Achilles, Ajax, Hercules, Theseus, Ulysses), invented (Maciste), literary (Saetta, Ursus), historical (Spartacus, Thaur) or biblical (Goliath, Samson) apotheoses of the heroic male body.

The genre was first labelled peplum in French criticism of the early 1960s, using this Latinized version of the Greek term 'peplos' to refer to the short skirt worn by heroes. The peplos was originally a voluminous piece of cloth worn floor-length by Greek women until the fifth century

BC, when it was replaced by the chiton, a woollen tunic worn long by the Ionians and short by the Dorians (Cammarota 1987, pp. 6–7). In the peplum films, female characters wear both long and short versions of this tunic, as do male characters. The focus in current critical work on the genre tends to concentrate on the exposed heroic male body in a short peplum or loincloth, and of course the high-profile muscle is hard to ignore. However, exposure of the female body is also a feature of the films, with censorship remaining an issue. The Maciste films, for instance, were forbidden to minors under sixteen years of age by the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico (Cammarota 1987, p. 75).

The cinematic genesis of the genre has its roots in the pre-First World War historical epic film spectacles on ancient Rome, which placed Italian cinema on the world map in terms of export (Brunetta 1993, III, pp. 538–604). On the heels of early films based on literature, notably Maggi's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1908) (taken from Lytton's eponymous novel of 1875), a first cycle of silent Italian muscleman films ran from 1913 to 1926.³ Also feeding into this genre were popular adventure and romance stories in *feuilleton* and comic strip formats (with *fumetti*, or comics, born at the same time as the first peplum series) (Cammarota 1987, p. 22). An influence of longer standing was the popular tradition of chain-breaking, fire-breathing strongman shows in public squares and circuses (Ghigi 1977, p. 733). The first cinematic muscleman was the literature-based Ursus, played by Bruto Castellani in Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* (1913) (taken from the eponymous novel of 1895 by Sienkiewicz).

However, it was the invented Italian figure of Maciste, a freed slave from the Marche played by the dockworker Bartolomeo Pagano in Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), who really captured audience attention. The film was based on the novel *Cartagine in fiamme* (1908) by Salgari, a popular Italian writer of adventure stories, including westerns, which were in vogue at the time. The name of Maciste replaced that of Sidone in the novel, and was invented by Gabriele D'Annunzio, the decadent poet and novelist whose association with the film (renaming characters and writing intertitles based on the novel) gave it high cultural credibility. Pagano went on to play Maciste in a series of 18 silent films based on this figure from 1914 to 1926. Other heroes in this first cycle included Achilles, Hercules, Saetta and Samson. Isolated films with peplum elements continued to be made thereafter (Gallone's *Scipio l'Africano*, 1937, Blasetti's *La corona di ferro*, 1941, and *Fabiola*, 1949).

In the 1950s Hollywood renewed its interest in epic spectacle, and the success in Italy of the American remake of *Quo Vadis?* by Le Roy in

1951, as well as the popularity of the Italo-American *Ulisse* by Camerini in 1954, helped to stimulate production of the second Italian peplum cycle. Both Italian and Hollywood cycles of the 1950s and 1960s were produced in the peak period of technicolour, and their particular attention to production values reflected technological advances in the cinema industry. In the case of Italy, these were utilized in response to a crisis of falling audience figures attributed to competition from Hollywood imports and the spread of television (1956, the period when television was beginning to establish itself across Italy, saw a fall of 29 million in cinema audience figures, and a drop of 670 million *lire* in box office receipts) (Ghigi 1977, p. 735). As it developed, the Italian peplum cycle was characterized by the hybrid, cross-national nature of much of its production, partnerships motivated by reasons that were mainly economic (co-production with the US and France helping with the costs of making and distributing films, as well as expanding the export and exhibition sector).

The Italian cycle was inaugurated in the late 1950s by a pair of low-budget Hercules films directed by Pietro Francisci and starring Steve Reeves, an American bodybuilder of peasant origins who became Mr Pacific in 1946, Mr America in 1947 and Mr Universe in 1948 and 1950. Francisci had already made several low-cost films on mythical (*La regina di Saba*, 1952), ancient historical (*Attila*, 1955) and literary romantic (*Orlando e i paladini di Francia*, 1956) themes. The commercial success of the latter, which made almost seven times more in receipts than the 80 million *lire* it had cost to produce, spurred him on to the first Hercules production. The first film, *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1957), cost less than 300 million *lire* to produce, and grossed 887 million *lire* in little more than a season, outperforming all other contemporary films, including those by auteurs (Ghigi 1977, p. 736).⁴

Export success followed, with Joseph E. Levine of Embassy Pictures buying the rights for the film (dubbed into English as *Hercules* in 1959) to be shown in the US for a mere 120,000 dollars. The film made more than 18 million dollars in one year alone. Six hundred copies were made for simultaneous distribution in America, while barely thirty copies circulated in Italy. Francisci's second peplum, *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (1958), made 3 million *lire* more in its first season than the first film, and, dubbed into English as *Hercules Unchained* in 1960, became the biggest grossing film in England that year, showing in 4,000 cinemas. The scale of Levine's advertising campaign for this film was unprecedented, with more money spent on advertising on television, in newspapers, posters and related merchandise, than was spent on

production costs. Peplum production, constituting only 4 per cent of Italy's film production in 1958, rose to 13 per cent in 1961, and after a dip to 8 per cent in 1962, went up again to 15 per cent in 1963 and 1964. A drop to 8 per cent in 1965 signalled the demise of the genre, which gave way to the spaghetti western in the adventure strand (Ghigi 1977, p. 736). The peplum contributed significantly to film exports. Whereas in the 1940s and 1950s 75 per cent of films exported had been made up of art films, in the 1960s the peplum made up as much as 46 per cent of exported films (Wagstaff 1993).

Other peplum directors in this second cycle included Mario Bava (also director of photography for Francisci's Hercules films), Vittorio Cottafavi, Riccardo Freda and Sergio Leone, with Bava and Freda also associated with the horror genre, and Leone with the spaghetti western. The two main recurring male heroes in this cycle are Hercules and Maciste, each giving rise to a series of 22 and 26 films respectively (Cammarota 1987). Maciste was relaunched, on the heels of Francisci's first successful Hercules film, in Campogalliani's *Maciste nella valle dei re* (1959), starring Mark Forrest. For export, however, the Maciste films were retitled using a variety of more universally familiar heroic names. Hercules, on the other hand, is a well-known figure from Greek and Roman mythology. The third century BC *Argonautica*, by Apollonius of Rhodes, was used as a source by Francisci, this mythological context arguably providing the most interesting peplum hero of all, in that Hercules has a detailed history (even though the films often deviate from the original text to meet cinematic needs). The name of Maciste is linked to Hercules by its inventor, D'Annunzio, who cites it as an ancient appellation for the demi-god.⁵ The word itself originates in the Greek *makistos*, the superlative of *makros*, meaning 'long', or the Latin *macis*, meaning 'rock' (in several of the films Maciste claims that he was born from the rock). Other, shorter series feature Goliath, Saetta, Samson, Spartacus, Thaur, Ulysses and Ursus, with films made during the decline of the genre sometimes including combinations of two or more of these heroes.

These heroes were initially played by a series of American body-builders and musclemen rather than professional actors, with Steve Reeves setting the trend. In so doing, Reeves brought the sport of body-building to a wider audience, as well as initiating the American 1950s-style greased hair quiff, imitated by other musclemen-actors (Farassino and Sanguineti 1983, pp. 87–8). At the same time, Reeves facilitated the entry of the classical body into popular culture (Wyke 1997a). His popularity established an iconic style for subsequent musclemen heroes, who were mostly interchangeable in their characteristics and

narrative roles. In terms of domestic box office revenue, the use of American musclemen like Steve Reeves, Ed Fury, Mark Forrest, Brad Harris, Gordon Mitchell, Reg Park, Gordon Scott and Rock Stevens was designed to attract audiences addicted to Hollywood productions. However, the use of non-Italian stars was not in itself an unusual feature in postwar Italian cinema, being in part a response to the paucity of native male stars. As a result of this trend, Italian body-builders later acted under assumed American names (Sergio Ciani became Alan Steel, and Adriano Bellini called himself Kirk Morris).⁶ Postwar memory of the US liberation of Italy would also have added to the existing popularity of American male stars. Their use in the role of heroic protectors of the oppressed in the peplum films may have struck a positive chord in relation to these historical events of over a decade earlier (while, on the other hand, postwar dumping on the Italian market of American films under the US occupation caused serious damage to the Italian cinema industry).

The composition of the peplum audience in terms of class, topography and gender is of relevance here. The peplum films produced by Romana Film, for instance, were specifically aimed at *terza visione* cinemas in Naples and the South, where these films were particularly popular, prior to the replacement of this circuit by television networks (Wagstaff 1995, pp. 112–13). The typical Italian audience of this peplum cycle was mainly lower class (proletarian and peasant), poorly educated (semi-literate or illiterate), and predominantly inner-city, Southern or provincial, viewing these films in *seconda* or *terza visione* cinemas with ticket prices under 300 *lire* (Ghigi 1977, pp. 737, 743, Wyke 1997, p. 64). This audience included children, with the peplum itself also interpreted by one of its directors, Domenico Paoletta, as childlike, in that it depended on visual rather than literate culture, and was led by emotion rather than intellect (Paoletta 1965). This is in sharp contrast to both the educated bourgeois audience of the earlier silent peplum cycle, who needed to be literate to read the intertitles, and the *prima visione* audience for 1960s auteur films in the Northern industrial centres (Ghigi 1977, p. 737).

One successful precursor to the peplum cycle, Camerini's *Ulisse* (1954), fared especially well in Sicily, grossing 10 million *lire* in both Catania and Messina (Ghigi 1977, p. 733). The fact that the strongman was part of rural tradition would also have helped predispose rural audiences to his cinematic variant, notably in an era of South to North migration of unskilled muscle power in the industrial context of the economic boom where this type of labour came a poor second (Dyer

1997a, pp. 168–9). In this sense, the heroic muscleman of the peplum offered reassurance to unskilled male audiences by validating muscle power over and above intellectual and other skills, a reassurance mirrored on the political plane by the hero's status as man of the people, rather than ruler, a role he openly rejects. At the same time, the use of muscle in protecting the oppressed, often of another race and colour, conjures up links not only with the American liberation of Italy from the Nazis, but also with Italy's own Fascist (and pre-Fascist) emphasis on colonial aspiration and Romanness, links which have been explored in relation to the whiteness of the peplum hero (Dyer 1997a).

From the multiple identity viewpoint of spectatorship, identification can therefore be hypothesized as taking place with both the liberating hero (offering validation of outdated traditional male muscle power in an era of economic boom and industrial advancement) and the liberated (a reminder of being rescued in the specific historical context of the Liberation, but also feeding fantasies of powerlessness in line with masochism and infantilism). From a gender perspective, the role of musclebound liberator has of course traditionally been associated with masculinity, and the latter fantasies with femininity.⁷ However, in the context of multiple identity spectatorship, the spectator would shift at will in identification and fantasy work between masculine- or feminine-associated roles. In terms of gender-specific audience targeting by the peplum film market, not only men but also women were deliberately catered for by musclebound male bodies.

Steve Reeves was chosen to portray Hercules for his appeal to women, an androgynous combination of 'muscle and beauty' (Farassino and Sanguineti 1983, p. 90, Wyke 1997, p. 66). As Ghigi puts it, he had the face of an angel on the body of Hercules (Ghigi 1977, p. 736), thereby departing from his mythological characteristic of mere brutish muscle power (which is how he appears in Chaffey's *Jason and the Argonauts*, 1963) for broader audience appeal. Pagano and the strongmen of the first peplum cycle, unlike those of the second, were 'rarely pretty' (Lagny 1992, p. 171). Men were also catered for by the many exposed female bodies in the peplum, whether disempowered exposed female bodies in need of rescuing, or excitingly and dangerously empowered exposed female bodies expressing desire and autonomy. The spectrum of actual (rather than planned) appeal is of course broader. Sexualities other than licit heterosexuality are also provided for, with female eroticism feeding into lesbian and female bisexual fantasies, while the male bodies on show (as indeed the male bodybuilding cult itself) also cater for male homosexuality and bisexuality.

The degree of planning for spectator appeal and identification is evidenced by a set of rules for the production of the peplum drawn up by Tessari (a director of several peplum films who later went on to direct spaghetti westerns), rules which also illustrate the formulaic nature of the genre. Rule three, for instance, specifies the significance of the colour of costumes in relation to audience response to individual characters: white or yellow indicate 'good' characters, black or red indicate those who are 'bad'. Tessari explains: 'The audience must recognize immediately which characters to side with' (Ghigi 1977, p. 738). Of special relevance to gender portrayal are rules two and eight. Rule two relates to the number and gender of characters involved in the romantic side of the plot, and specifies at least three characters, the two competing ones being male rather than female (thereby reinforcing patriarchy's insistence on male, rather than female, sexual desire and proactivity, as well as the Lévi-Straussian view of male competition for a never-sufficient supply of female bodies and chattels): 'The love story should never be limited to only two characters. It is better to present one woman loved by two men than two women in love with the same man' (Ghigi 1977, p. 738). In practice many pepla disobey this rule, mirroring the characteristically patriarchal splitting of femininity into asexual madonna/wife and sexual Eve/mistress. This split is regularly embodied by two competing female characters in the films (for example, Iole and Omphale in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, and Deianira and Hippolita in *Gli amori di Ercole*).

An archetypally misogynous rule eight splits femininity into old and young, following patriarchy's emphasis on the centrality of age in evaluating different life stages of femininity (an exclusively sexual evaluation applied to femininity but not masculinity) (Ardener 1978): 'There should be at least two female characters: one old and cadaverous and one young, ingenuous and silly. At the end the evil one redeems herself by dying to save the young one' (Ghigi 1977, p. 738). These rules underline the patriarchal thrust of the peplum in terms of representation of gender relations (while the final product in terms of the consumption of the film is, of course, more multivalent). Direction and production of the peplum were in all-male hands in an era which, with its sexist traditions, helped spur on the contemporary resurgence of the women's movement in Italy. The distant, pre-industrial, rural settings of the peplum evoke an elemental period representing an early melting pot of gender relations and sexuality, as well as providing reassuring escapism from rapid industrial, consumerist development for those unable to participate. As far as gender portrayal in particular is

concerned, however, the patriarchal drive inherent in many aspects of the peplum's portrayal of femininity is indicative of reassurance in the form of reaction. While Cammarota and Spinazzola may argue that historical reality is transformed reassuringly into metahistorical unreality in the peplum, the fact remains that social reality in terms of gender relations in these films remains securely anchored in the patriarchal status quo. The films ultimately propagate an essentialist version of gender and sexuality in line with patriarchy's fundamentally unchanging inflection of these social categories. However, the film as vehicle for signification is multivalent, and patriarchal ideological tentatiousness conflicts with signification itself as process, and therefore as subject to negotiation.

The filmic arena for signification includes both visual and sound elements, with the former particularly to the fore in genres like the peplum (allowing also for the use of American stars who spoke no Italian), as opposed to the more dialogue-based melodrama and verbal forms of comedy. The tendency of the peplum to prioritize the visual element over dialogue is captured in Tessari's rule nine: 'Much smoke and fire should be used: a brazier, a burning tent, or a flaming spear are worth more than any dialogue' (Ghigi 1977, p. 739). The element of colourful spectacle and action as cinematic entertainment is very much to the forefront in the peplum, with the body-as-spectacle a major focal point. Importantly for our purposes, the visually simplistic, comic strip extremes of signification favoured by the peplum provide easily digestible fare.⁸ The peplum deals in visual superlatives and starkly differentiating characteristics inscribed on the body as a new technicolour landscape. The body in all its detail of contour and colour is available for close-up scrutiny and the negotiation of gender, sexuality and race, a process which is explored in the following section.

Negotiating gender, sexuality and race

The specific qualities of cinematic discourse, in conjunction with historical, cultural and socioeconomic context, have a crucial bearing on the representation of gender, sexuality and race, and the way these are negotiated at the point of consumption. Properties specific to the construction of the cinematic image and its soundtrack are crucial in shaping the relationship between screen and audience, with point of view dictated by the camera eye through an array of different types of shot and editing styles. In particular, consumption of the enlarged cinematic screen-as-surface also offers participation in a dynamic of

desire set in motion by the various mechanisms of identification, voyeurism, fetishism and scopophilia, all contributing to the sheer complexities of the gaze in a cinematic context. With its parodic extremes of signification, the peplum rehearses this dynamic in a particularly overt way.

Identification with screen images of the body has been traced back in film theory to one particularly crucial stage in infantile psychosexual development (Metz 1982, Cowie 1997). This is Lacan's mirror stage (occurring between the ages of six and eighteen months), entailing identification with the image of the self in the mirror, and the initial fulfilment of the phantasy of bodily unity (Lacan 1985). This phase is the matrix and first tracing of the future ego (Laplanche and Pontalis 1980, p. 251). The mirror stage was theorized by Lacan as inaugurating, in the first instance, a pleasurable, narcissistic affirmation of identity, at the point when the self is perceived in the mirror for the first time as differentiated from the outside world and from its surroundings. No longer an indistinct mass of libidinal energies merged with the mother, the self is quite literally seen to take shape, a shape with which identification can take place as a result of the apparent correspondence of the mirror image with the imagined and desired unified image, or *imago*. Following on from this first phase of primary narcissism, a second, less pleasurable phase, situates this new, separate self among others, in a moment of socialization and recognition of sexual difference marked by entry into the symbolic, with language and naming taking over, but not obliterating, memory of the initial phase. Another, later stage in infantile identity-formation is Freud's Oedipus complex (at its peak from the ages of three to five years), important in terms of further, particularly anxiety-inducing, perceptions of sexual difference (see chapter 1).

Viewing images of the body on screen (and indeed in all subsequent mirrors) allows for reiteration of the first, narcissistic identificatory process, and the pleasurable sensation it generated, in a reaffirmation of identity and subjectivity in differentiation from the other and the outside world. The hyperbolically well-defined masculine body shape in the peplum particularly facilitates the re-enactment of the narcissistic recognition of the *imago*, or ideal ego of the unified, separate body (with horror and spaghetti western genres also playing out this desire for wholeness and separation, as we shall see in later chapters). However, there is a twofold downside. First, this pleasurable identificatory process is located only in an image, in the insubstantiality of surface. Second, there is a gap between this image and the

viewing self, a gap created by the doubling, splitting and distancing perceived between the self in relation to its image. The location of identification in a mere image or surface underlines the illusory nature of the entire process, while perception of the gap between the image and the self means that pleasurable feelings of autonomy and mastery in identification are offset by a sense of lack and loss. As a result, the image itself is already perceived as absence (Metz 1982). Importantly, it is in this gap that desire is located, with its defining features of distance, unattainability and lack. Attempts to satisfy desire, to bridge the gap, fuel the compulsion to look (a key component of spectatorship), while pleasure-in-looking (scopophilia) derives in part from narcissistic identification with the image, in other words, from the positive and empowering element of the identificatory process, however short-lived and ultimately illusory.

Also feeding into the pleasures of the look are two anxieties rooted in the fear of powerlessness: anxiety about the fragmented body in relation to the mirror stage (Lacan's *corps morcelé*), and anxiety about sexual difference compounded by the Oedipus complex. Both these anxieties result in the fetishism of body parts or objects representing them. Discussions of fetishism usually refer only to the anxiety of sexual difference associated with the oedipal phase. However, the role of the fragmented, incoherent body shape of the infantile stage, which precedes the Oedipus complex, cannot be ignored. Lacan's *corps morcelé* refers to the infantile human body, which, compared to other animals, is born prematurely, and for a long period remains dependent on and psychically merged with the m/other. For both sexes, the anticipated sense of a separate, unified and coherent self begins to replace that of fragmentation and shapelessness during the mirror stage. Importantly, the anxiety relating to both fragmentation and separation continues in life as part of the ongoing process of identification.

The oedipal phase, on the other hand, inaugurates anxiety about sexual difference located in fear of castration by the father on the part of the male child/spectator (that is, fear of loss of the phallus, or, specifically, what the phallus symbolizes in terms of power). The male child remains caught between opposing feelings of acceptance and disavowal on recognizing what appears to be his mother's existing (and by implication, his own impending) castration. For the female child/spectator there is the realization, and after that reminder, of lacking the phallus. The search for reassurance leads to fetishism, or sexual over-valuation, of female body parts or their representatives (Freud, in his essay 'Fetishism', suggests the foot or shoe, velvet and

fur) (Freud 1984, p. 354). It is on the female body as a whole or on its parts that the male-dominated culture industry of cinema generally focuses, with its male camera eye, to provide fetishistic appeasement for the prioritized male spectator. The entire female body or parts of it are objectified and given phallic status in a cinematic disavowal of difference which in fact comes full circle to undermine patriarchy's hierarchization of the genders. In other words, by empowering cinematic images of women, especially in whole-body shots, with phallic status, the male spectator could argue as follows: women *do* possess/are the phallus, they have not lost it, they are no different from me, and therefore I, as a man, am also in no danger of losing mine/my (sexual) power.

Fetishism of the female, rather than the male, body, then, dominates in cinema, resulting from anxieties concerning fragmentation and sexual difference rooted in basic fears of powerlessness. These fears are commonly relocated onto the female body, specifically the body of the m/other, separation from which is a vital part of individuation and recognition of a unified, independent self (a characteristic of horror, which rehearses male fears of helplessness and female incorporation). Extreme strategies of separation and individuation used by masculinity to define and differentiate itself against femininity can lead to misogyny, a trait running through many cinematic genres, often in ways specific to each genre (Benjamin 1990). As we shall see, fetishistic strategies aimed at allaying the various anxieties rooted in fear of powerlessness, are in part transferred onto the male body to provide the defining features of the cult of masculinity as embodied by the peplum hero (after which they are taken up and adapted by the spaghetti western).

Taking the heroic male body as the point of reference, how does the peplum negotiate gender, sexuality and race? Starting with sexuality, this notion is taken to encompass both sexual desire and its object choice (opposite sex for heterosexuality, same sex for homosexuality and lesbianism, both sexes for bisexuality). Heterosexual activity in the peplum films can be further divided into the licit (procreational, domestic) and illicit (recreational, extra-domestic). In the two Francisci films that launched the second peplum cycle, licit, domesticated heterosexuality provides a framework for sexual desire (the relationship between Hercules and Iole set up at the beginning of *Le fatiche di Ercole* with their first encounter, and an early scene underlining their newly married status in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, both films also ending with their embrace). However, this framework is tokenistic and sketchy.

Between this beginning and ending, in other words, within a licit, heterosexual frame, the films explore other forms of desire for the audience to negotiate and position themselves in relation to, with episodes of illicit heterosexuality punctuating a homoerotic baseline. Even at the level of the framework, heterosexuality is constantly put on hold, denied and ultimately postponed until the final cursory moments of closure. Sexuality will be explored further in the next section, where it will be argued that underlying homoeroticism in the films is the powerful and fundamental dynamic of homosociality, or relations between men, on which patriarchy is founded.

The term 'gender' has for some decades now been used in feminist theory to denote social gender in terms of femininity and masculinity as clusters of culturally determined attributes, and distinct from biological sex in terms of female and male. However, the sex-gender binary, with its biological versus sociocultural association proving indispensable in exposing patriarchy's biological essentialism, may have outlived its theoretical usefulness and be in the process of being closed down. Gender is now perceived to include sex, with both terms connoting the social sphere. As Butler argues, the biologically-sexed body has limited use as a fixed, unchanging premise on which to base an economy of social gender, because it is in itself not 'natural', but, like gender, is also open to sociocultural readings (Butler 1993). The biologically male-sexed, musclebound body on central display in the peplum is at the apotheosis of its muscular development and is very much a constructed, built body. To develop the body to this degree requires work, time, discipline and a certain degree of wealth (Dyer 1997a). In the process, the biological body is reshaped according to cultural definitions of ideal masculinity. To reiterate Butler's view, it is not that the material (biological) body does not matter, but that the body inevitably signifies (Butler 1993). The (built) material body signifies according to historical, cultural and socioeconomic context. The musclebound heroic body, however pumped up, cannot exceed or escape from the process of signification of which it is a part.

The excessive, overdetermined and parodic nature of the signifying properties of the heroic, built body, pulls away from the furthest opposite extremes of femininity, and of weaker, culturally determined inferior other male bodies. It is as racially inferior, often darker-skinned than the lightly tanned hero, more brutish, less hairy, strategically less intelligent and often on the side of 'evil' that other male bodies are lined up against the relative whiteness, competence and 'goodness' of the peplum hero, in the process of cinematic negotiation of racial hier-

archy in visual and narrative fields. As Dyer points out in 'The White Man's Muscles', the peplum made use of two black bodybuilders, Paul Wynter and Serge Nubret, but never as heroes, concluding that 'the built body and the imperial enterprise are analogous' (Dyer 1997a, pp. 148, 165).

In terms of the gender hierarchy, both across the genders and within masculinity, the hyperbolic degree of differentiation from femininity and effeminate male bodies by the pumped-up male body results in what amounts to fetishism of the already potent phallus, with individual pectorals or biceps fragmented off and highlighted by the shot. When the body in its entirety is the focus of the camera eye, there is a reversal of fetishism's common metonymy (a part for the whole). There is an obvious link between the pumped-up body and the erect penis, with the latter of course the biological base of the culturally symbolic phallus as marker of sexual difference within patriarchy. This fetishistic display of the male body may be read as indicating anxieties about both sexual difference and fragmentation of the body, under cover of excess and parody which function, like Freudian negation, to couch affirmation of an anxiety in denial. Crucially for the analysis of the negotiation of gender, sexuality and race in the peplum, the heroic body, in the process of signification taking place on screen, is necessarily linked to its opposites, to what it is not.

The model of gender is therefore that of a social category which signifies as process rather than a given, and specifically in ways that are interactive and relational. In the process of its performativity, gender interacts with other categories of social identification: sexuality, race, nationality, class, age, familial role. Gender, like the other categories, is relational in that, as clusters of culturally determined attributes, masculinity and femininity are definable in relation to each other in a reciprocal way, but in a relationship determined by difference. This difference is both insisted upon and hierarchized by patriarchy's heterosexual imperative. These modes of interrelation shift and change as the narrative progresses. Indeed, narrative itself could be read as a process, or series, of crystallizing points at which differences intersect and cohere. Cultural production, particularly of the fantastical variety, often toys with differentiation and liminality, such as the borderline between the living and the dead (in horror), between human and machine (in sci-fi), and between human and divine (in mythology), as in the case of the demi-god Hercules (son of Zeus and the mortal Alcmena) who discards his divinity in *Le fatiche di Ercole*. Fantastical narrative explores and shifts boundaries, invoking the carnivalesque,

the heroic body is a constructed, built body. It is as racially inferior, often darker-skinned than the lightly tanned hero, more brutish, less hairy, strategically less intelligent and often on the side of 'evil' that other male bodies are lined up against the relative whiteness, competence and 'goodness' of the peplum hero, in the process of cinematic negotiation of racial hier-

the world upside down, as it rehearses, reshapes and, above all, negotiates difference as a process, and not as a given. It is in this sense that gender is also performative, performed on the body-as-surface, and performed through repetition as process (Butler 1990).

The ways in which the peplum as filmic text negotiates differentiation as a process in terms of gender, sexuality and race generate viewing pleasure specifically in relation to desire and to identificatory fantasies. In terms of gender construction, the heroic, built, musclebound male body in the peplum is the site of representation of a particular idealized masculine physicality. In one sense this contradicts the usual patriarchal binary apportioning of gender characteristics whereby femininity, and not masculinity, is defined and circumscribed by the body, and masculinity is associated with the mind in a set of interlinking binary oppositions dating back to the Greeks (masculinity–femininity, mind–body, intellect–emotion, culture–nature, activity–passivity) (Maclean 1985). This contradiction, while revealing the incoherence of patriarchal ideology, can also be accounted for in terms of a class inflection of patriarchy. The appeal of muscular masculinity to a mostly lower-class audience (from strongman displays in circuses and town squares to cinematic peplum heroes) effects a valorization of the male body at the level of popular culture, while mind and intellect are the terrain of higher-class masculinity. Also feeding into this emphasis on the centrality of the body to masculinity are the twin anxieties of sexual difference and infantile body fragmentation, discussed earlier. At the same time, the erotic appeal of the semi-naked, pumped-up male body as object of desire knows no boundaries of class, gender, sexuality, race or age.

Representation of physically heroic masculinity in the peplum is achieved by means of tactics of differentiation from femininity as well as from other masculinities regarding what the hero does and how he looks, rather than what he says (thereby allowing for little character development). This is brought about cinematically by varying combinations of narrative, visuals and soundtrack. The narrative, in the form of action scenes contributing to a plot, contrasts heroic feats with the lesser deeds of other male characters, or the ineffectual actions or inaction of other characters, male and female; in other words, heroic action that is effective enough to contribute to narrative progression and closure. Visually, the heroic male body is differentiated from other bodies using specific types of *mise en scène*, with scenes focusing on the muscular heroic body in action alongside or against other bodies which are iconographically marked as less effective or inferior. These

markers may indicate gender inferiority (signalling femininity, or, in the male body, effeminateness due to youth, or to certain racial characteristics, such as long curly hair) or racial inferiority, as described above. Other types of *mise en scène* represent static scenes, straight from body-building, showing the pumped-up male body posing and on display outside the narrative, and in clear differentiation from other bodies (for example, the upshot of a fully pumped-up, posing Hercules in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, smiling as if to show an audience the effortless-ness involved, and flanked by the shorter Castor and Pollox on a hillock).

Alternatively, solitary poses of the hero, often on his first appearance in the film, are again shot from below to accentuate his height and importance, as in bodybuilding photography. As Dyer observes, these poses frequently take place near water to link the hero with the elements and a magical, superhuman birth (Dyer 1997a, p. 167). In *Ercole al centro della terra* Hercules (Reg Park) is first viewed from below in a shot panning up a waterfall whose source is situated at penis level, connoting ejaculation on a massive scale and hence super-phallic masculinity. In *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*, the upshot introducing Maciste (Kirk Morris) shows him high on a hillock overlooking a river, into which he hurls a spear to kill a monster. The setting of the heroic *mise en scène*, usually in natural, outdoor, public space, is a crucial element in the iconography of this form of idealized masculinity, for reasons which will shortly become apparent. As far as the soundtrack is concerned, in addition to sounds belonging to the diegesis, extradiegetic sounds (music, speech and other noises from outside the narrative) reinforce narrative and visual indicators of male perfection constructed and measured in relation to inferior versions. Examples are the recurring, grandiose brass fanfare motif whenever Hercules appears in *Ercole contro Roma* and, in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, the male voice-over extolling the abilities of Hercules as he poses alongside Castor and Pollox, and the supernatural, sci-fi-style sound effects accompanying his superhuman discus throw and defeat of the bull.

In terms of differentiation and separation from femininity, the peplum hero appears to follow the hero of classical myth, who, as Hartsock argues, actively rejects the feminine, domestic, familial, heterosexual sphere, associated by patriarchy with passivity and inaction, and where life is created and preserved. Instead, he chooses to pursue death, rather than life, with a zeal which marks him out from others (Hartsock 1985). The peplum hero (as has also been observed of the contemporary Hollywood action hero) is generally placeless (Tasker

1993).⁹ Maciste, born of a rock rather than of a woman, has no fixed home and no tie to femininity. Hercules, on the other hand, comes from Thebes, and in myth had several wives, factors providing him with a putative place of return. More commonly, the hero is seen out of doors and on a journey (the element of travel associated with Hercules perhaps contributing to his popularity as the god of merchants). The setting of the heroic *mise en scène* (in public space, outdoors and on the move) serves to differentiate masculinity from domestic femininity positioned indoors, waiting and inactive in the private sphere.

The hero is seen in open spaces (in the countryside or at sea), traveling in distant, foreign lands, setting up temporary, outdoor camps, or visiting peasant villages. Occasionally he is seen in council chambers, where important decisions of state are taken, or in prison cells from which he escapes. Even if he is married, as in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, he is rarely seen for long in a domestic environment. Domestic femininity, on the other hand, is associated with settlement, and as a rule remains firmly situated in private space, in rooms and adjoining terraces and gardens. When such female characters stray into public space, they often die (as in *Ulisse contro Ercole*) or have to be rescued by the hero (*Le fatiche di Ercole*, *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*). When they venture out of doors for prolonged periods, they take their homes and household retinue with them (Elena in *Ulisse contro Ercole* has a pavilion-style tent, and Delilah in *Ercole sfida Sansone* travels with a caravan). The hero, on the other hand, appears to live in fields and caves, with no luggage or home comforts, and is ever on the move in an endless and, for the cinema industry, profitable series of legendary journeys.

The essence of heroism is to travel on quests seeking out risk, rather than staying at home safely preserving life. This is why Hercules, portrayed at the beginning of *Le fatiche di Ercole* as a divinity, and therefore immortal, makes a point of relinquishing his immortality. The preamble to the film states: 'Huge and immortal was the strength of Hercules, as the world and the gods to which he belonged. But one day men crossed his path. They were ready to sacrifice their brief treasure, life, for knowledge, for justice, and for love.' The definition of heroism as a rejection of the feminine domestic sphere where life is created and preserved, rather than risked and sacrificed, can also be read as part of the process of masculine separation from the feminine and the maternal. This has been theorized as a necessary step towards the individuation of masculinity in childhood, and continues, with

varying degrees of intensity and violence, throughout adulthood (a violence that is key to the hero of both the peplum and the spaghetti western) (Benjamin 1990).

The female figure of Iole, whom Hercules meets and rescues at the beginning of *Le fatiche di Ercole*, and with whom he departs at the end, represents the domestic, licitly heterosexual sphere on which he repeatedly turns his back as the narrative progresses through a series of action scenes or labours ('fatiche') associated with myth. On the first occasion, he storms out of the city to kill a lion, while Iole tries to stop him. His heroic departure results, significantly, in a family death. Her brother, Ephetes, pursues Hercules in order to outdo him and is killed by the lion. Yet, despite having killed the lion, Hercules is blamed for his death. This is explicable only in terms of the anti-familial, death-seeking significance attached to the heroic action of Hercules by both Iole and her father. Hercules is banished by this family unit, at which point he decides to relinquish his immortality, ostensibly in order to link up with the domestic sphere.

Importantly, the first part of his request to the sibyl is none the less still couched in the discourse of heroism in terms of death-seeking action and the pursuit of honour as personal destiny: 'But I want to love like other men, and to fight like them. I want to have a family, and see my children grow up.' Once mortal, after a pseudo-baptismal drenching in a rain shower, he is able to achieve heroic status as a man (rather than as a demi-god) by risking death. His words again foreground the primacy of inserting himself into a community of men, and it is in this all-male context that his earlier reference to the feminine, domestic sphere of the family now transmutes into female sexuality as an arena for male competition, with no mention of family or children: 'It will be a challenge to fight like men. Now I have battles to win, the woman I love to conquer for my own and my destiny to fulfil.'

Once briefly reunited with Iole, he turns his back on her a second time. Having returned with Jason to help him claim his throne, Hercules sets off again to accompany him on his quest for the Golden Fleece. Iole remonstrates: 'Now you have another job to do, more glory to win, more victories for yourself, and more grief for me.' To Hercules' reply, 'It is destiny', Iole signals her exclusion from this masculine sphere of activity: 'No Hercules, your destiny is not mine.' The differentiation between the heroic masculine and the domestic feminine is also clearly drawn by a specific sequence of shots. The first shows Hercules aboard ship, men rowing and singing, with a soundtrack

expressing steadfast endeavour, and Ulysses commenting: 'Women are a nuisance.' This is followed by a scene showing Iole on her own on her veranda looking out to sea – the familiar, static *mise en scène* of abandoned domestic femininity of the peplum. The camera then cuts to an action scene with lots of movement, as Hercules and his comrades brave a storm at sea. This is the last we see of Iole until near the end of the film, as the narrative follows the much more exciting world of the action men.

Narrative differentiation of heroic outdoor masculinity from powerless domestic femininity in need of rescue is underscored by differentiation in stark visual terms from the outset of the film. Iole is first seen in white, the colour of innocence and chastity, and one of Tessari's colours for 'good' characters. Her chariot, drawn by white horses, is dangerously out of control at the edge of a cliff-top as she runs into trouble in outside space, where, by implication, she should not be. Her fruitless cries of 'Stop, stop' and the wild sounds of the horses, accompanied by dramatic extradiegetic music, precede her appearance on screen as she disrupts the tranquil scene of a shepherd and his flock. Her rescue by Hercules is portrayed with a rapid sequence of upshots of heads which fill the screen, and whose stance is at once visually indicative of a set of gender-specific binaries (active-passive, powerful-powerless). Shots of the upright heads of Hercules and the horses are tellingly interspersed with the dangling head of Iole, who has fainted and who is carried by the hero down to the seashore.

Rescue of the hero by a female character is of course not on the agenda, as evidenced by the ineffectual attempt by Iole and her maid to free Hercules from imprisonment later in the film. They succeed in opening the prison door, but it blows shut, imprisoning them along with Hercules, who then proceeds to break free of his chains and escape by his own efforts. The hero's mastery of nature and outside space, in contrast to the female character's near-fatal ineptness in this sphere, is also underlined by the effects of his power, which precede his appearance on screen. The audience first sees and hears a massive tree trunk being uprooted, followed by a shot of the upright head and pumped-up torso of Hercules himself. Various exploits in this and other Hercules films, often originating in myth, further underline his mastery of outside space (trees, boulders, rivers) and its natural and unnatural inhabitants (lions, tigers, bulls and monsters).

Heroic differentiation through rejection of the domestic, feminine sphere is also a feature of other films. In *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, the follow-up to *Le fatiche di Ercole*, Hercules again leaves Iole, now his wife,

behind. She is once more abandoned ('I wish we didn't have to separate'), and while the reason for his departure is again of greater importance than the private sphere ('I have no choice, Thebes is in danger'), his return at the end of the film only signals future departures, as he indicates to Iole: 'How much you have suffered, Iole. The gods have placed many obstacles against us, and there will be others.' While domestic femininity depends on the return and presence of its patriarch, heroic masculinity defines itself in diametric opposition to and absence from the private sphere. The beginning of the film outlines the dangerously debilitating effects of domesticity on masculinity. As Hercules returns home with his new bride, he cannot stop himself falling asleep in the back of the cart, while Iole sings a love song. Even the threatening appearance of the giant Anteus fails to rouse him into action until some considerable time later. Masculinity is literally put to sleep by marriage. Spending time with a woman is similarly equated with inaction by Theseus in *Ercole al centro della terra*. When Hercules finds him in the company of his girlfriend, Theseus is only too eager to leave, saying: 'I'm fed up with doing nothing.' In this film, saving Deianira means leaving her behind (this time to seek out the golden apple from the Garden of Hesperides to cure her madness). Deianira is also abandoned in *Gli amori di Ercole* and in *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*, while Iole is yet again left behind in *Ercole sfida Sansone*.

At the end of the film the hero either returns, briefly, to the domestic realm before, it is implied, leaving for the next quest (*Le fatiche di Ercole*, *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*, *Gli amori di Ercole*, *Ercole al centro della terra*, *Ercole sfida Sansone*), or sets off alone for the next quest after refusing the invitation to remain and set up home (*Maciste all'inferno*, *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi*, *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*), or, less commonly, tries to leave alone, thereby signalling his rejection of femininity, but is followed and joined by a woman he has saved from death (*Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*) or from slavery (*Le legioni di Cleopatra*). Rejection of the domestic, feminine sphere as central to heroic masculine differentiation is, then, often clearly flagged at both beginning and ending of the film. This may well have had special resonance during the late 1950s and early 1960s, a time of migration of male labour from the South to the North when wives and children were often left behind, leading to the breakup of marriages and families (Caldwell 1995).

Heroic masculinity in the peplum also constantly defines itself through differentiation from other types of masculinity. While the hero may be a man of the people defending the oppressed from

tyranny and violence, he none the less stands out, literally and physically, from the mass of common men. The hard, pumped-up musculature of the ever-victorious hero tested to his limits in a variety of activities (sport, fighting other men, animals or monsters, and classic weightlifting feats such as lifting rocks, moving pillars and holding up ceilings) is a key focus of close-up camera attention. While the Hercules series, with its roots in mythological narrative, often tends to slot these physical feats into a narrative context of events, other films whose heroic protagonist has no such reservoir of narrative detail to draw on, like the Maciste series, have a sparse narrative framework which clearly operates primarily as a setting for strongman performances. Freda's *Maciste all'inferno*, for instance, soon leaves its Scottish 1622 setting of witchcraft and witchburning to plunge Maciste (played by Kirk Morris anachronistically still wearing the characteristic short peplum skirt) into Hell, where he begins a series of prolonged feats of physical strength with little narrative justification.

The hard musculature is key in differentiating the hero from other men, who either have less or no muscle, or whose bodies are not exposed to the camera eye. Shots of the semi-naked hero, clothed in earth colours in keeping with his rural, peasant, rather than urban, belonging, and the common people he often defends (as in *Ercole al centro della terra*, and *Gli amori di Ercole*), and winning fights with soldiers fully clad and helmeted in metal and leather armour (as in *La battaglia di Maratona*), function on several gender levels, which are at times contradictory. The triumph of bare, hard muscle over the armour-clad bodies of soldiers suggests that the hero's muscle is as impenetrable as metal, if not more so, and represents the apotheosis of invincible masculinity. In relation to separation from femininity as key to the individuation of masculinity, the impenetrability of muscle/metal precludes any possibility of merging, the state originally characterizing the period of infancy up to the mirror stage, which signals the first step in leaving the stage of being psychically merged with the body of the mother.¹⁰

At the same time, the juxtaposition of bare-torsoed, bare-legged male bodies with fully armoured, cloaked soldiers has the opposite effect of feminizing the former in a relation of apparent vulnerability to the latter, until bare muscle is seen to prevail. The suggestion of androgyny in the hero, already noted in the choice of Steve Reeves, remains in this type of scene. At other times it is dismissed visually in order to counter its challenge to gender boundaries. This is done by making male characters from other races the locus of effeminacy, which is then

demonized or stigmatized. This is achieved, for instance, in terms of hairstyle, with the short, masculine cut, with or without a quiff, as the standard marker of heroic masculinity. By contrast, the evil Lico in *Gli amori di Ercole* has ringleted hair, while the Mayas whom Maciste helps in *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*, and who are therefore portrayed as ineffectual, have long hair, as do other Eastern races like the Persians (Dyer 1997a).

The body cult distinguishing the peplum hero is presented in the all-male arenas of sport, military combat and feats of strength against forces of nature and the supernatural that baffle other men. Military combat is portrayed as the natural extension of sport in *La battaglia di Maratona*. In this film Philippides of Athens, played by Steve Reeves, is the champion of the games held every four years, winning at javelin, rock-throwing, swimming, wrestling and running (when he is not portrayed ploughing the land, muscles bulging with honest effort). His sporting prowess not only win him a military position (chief of the Sacred Guard of Athens), but also saves the capital from defeat, as his run from Marathon to Athens enables him to transmit a vital message in the war with Persia. His body is shown sweating and pumped up as he runs and swims cross-country, master of all the natural forces he encounters. In relation to his rival for Andromeda, Theocritus, he shows more bare muscle, while phallic, semi-nude statues in the background complete the *mise en scène* of the body cult he embodies.¹¹ While Philippides is human, the mythical Achilles, protected by the gods and played by muscleman Gordon Mitchell in *L'ira di Achille*, similarly wins sporting contests and is feared for his invincibility in battle.

Sport and heroic feats characterize the hero in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, as we have seen. To set up the differentiation of heroic masculinity from other types of masculinity, Hercules is preceded on screen at the beginning of the film by a slender, young shepherd sitting on a rock playing pan-pipes. Despite the fact that he is the first to notice Iole's plight, it is notably not he, but Hercules, who attempts her rescue. The frequent juxtaposition of Hercules with younger male characters who are of slighter build, paler-skinned and therefore more feminine is a continual reminder of his exceptional manly prowess (Reeves was 32 when he made this film). In *Le fatiche di Ercole* he is accompanied by the younger, blonder, non-muscular Jason (the actual hero in Apollonius' *Argonautica*), in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* by a positively diminutive, eighteen-year-old Ulysses and in *Ercole al centro della terra* by the 'immature' Theseus. Theseus is described as not yet ready for marriage, unlike Hercules, and spends much of his time in what is portrayed as the the feminizing presence of girlfriends (with

rejection of the domestic sphere after marriage proving the true defining factor of masculinity).

As if the relative shortness and inefficacy of Androcles, the younger quest companion of Hercules in *Erocole alla conquista di Atlantide*, were not sufficient visual indicator of his greater masculinity, a male midget accompanies the pair in this film (also fulfilling this role in relation to Mark Antony and Curidio in *Le legioni di Cleopatra*). The function of the midget as epitome of male powerlessness made comic (and thereby less alarming) is served homophobically by the highly camp, cowardly stooge to Herculean muscle power and valour in *Erocole alla conquista di Atlantide*. The older, weaker and consistently comic figure of Ascalapius also provides a regular antithesis to Hercules in *Le fatiche di Erocole*, as do other older male characters whom the hero rescues (for example, the old man escaping from the mole men and rescued by Maciste at the beginning of *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*).

While the hero towers over others, and often over entire races (like the Mongols in *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*), he also faces challenges from larger and more brute-like foes who sometimes serve to illustrate his cultural superiority in terms of linguistic powers, as well as his exceptional physical powers. These range from the bulky Anteus in *Erocole e la regina di Lidia*, a giant born of the earth (as Maciste is born of the rock) who is able to taunt Hercules verbally as well as physically, and the massive Goliath in *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*, almost pre-linguistic with his sole utterance throughout the film of the word 'Aloha' (the name of the Queen of the Mayas whom he desires), to the brutish, non-speaking Cyclops who feeds on humans in *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi*, and the grunting, gorilla-like monster in *Gli amori di Erocole*. This monster also serves to externalize brute desires with his impending rape of Deianira, thereby shifting the sexual heat from Hercules and his affair with Hippolyta, to the animal kingdom, and re-establishing the hero's chastity. Races of animal-like foes vanquished by heroic human masculinity abound in the films (for example, the birdmen and the troglodytes in *Ulisse contro Erocole*, and the apemen in *Le fatiche di Erocole*), with feathers and large quantities of body hair contrasting vividly with the hairless golden skin of the white hero. The use of race is key in the construction of a superior heroic masculinity which differentiates itself not only from femininity and from other 'inferior' kinds of masculinity, but also from non-white, non-western masculinity also coded as inferior.¹² In *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi*, the black Paul Wynter, serving an alien race, loses a fight with Gordon Mitchell's Maciste, while in *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo* he

continues doggedly with his slave mentality in relation to Mark Forrest's Maciste, a mentality made more pointed by the latter's liberal speech on freedom for all men early on in their relationship. While the camera focuses on Wynter's black, shining, pumped-up muscle in the latter film, it is the white Maciste who saves the day.

Other masculinities represented in the films may be wiser, politically more powerful, younger or older, but physical strength and bravery in the service of the extremes of good against evil are placed centre stage. The superlative pumped-up, tanned and oiled white body of the man of the people is ever on display, towering over other male bodies which are often less exposed, bared but less muscular, larger but not as toned and disciplined, or darker and brutish or slavish, with pejorative racial implications. Importantly, Hercules is always part of a community of men. He literally stands out as unique among these male groups, the heroic individual against the unindividualized mass, with members of the male community providing constant points of reference and differentiation.

Homosociality vs gynosociality

Crucially, the hero privileges homosociality, or all-male relations, over relations with women.¹³ Patriarchal society is founded on relations between men, whose exchange of women between different family or tribal groups in the form of exogamy (the incest prohibition) is basic to social organization (an exchange noted by the structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss). Women function within this system as objects or commodities of exchange, together with goods or chattels, and provide an arena for relations between men (whether those of bonding or of competition). Striking examples of theft, rather than exchange, of women as valuable possessions occur in *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas* and *Maciste contro i mostri*. In both these tribal films women are stolen during a raid by one tribe on another, much like cattle-rustling, to be sacrificed, taken as slaves or used for procreation. In the first film, Aloha, Queen of her tribe, becomes a valuable commodity in the negotiation of an alliance with Goliath which would give one tribe considerable advantage over the other. In the second, three Mongol brothers compete for one woman, Bianca di Tudela, and the town over which her family rules.

Heterosexuality is central to the workings of patriarchy, but, as Irigaray observes, functions as no more than an alibi for the smooth running of relations between men. The passage from nature to culture

effected, according to anthropologists, by the exchange of women, serves to establish the hegemony of 'hom(m)o-sexuality' (Irigaray 1985, p. 172). This key term indicates that the dominant, or indeed only, relations within patriarchy are those between men, whether sexualized (without the second 'm') or not, resulting in repression of female sexuality. Female desire is negated, along with genuine rather than tokenistic relations between men and women. Gynosociality, or relations between women, whether sexualized or not, is threatening to the hegemony of homosociality. Patriarchal privileging of homosociality is very much in evidence in the peplum. This genre frequently sidelines heterosexuality, whether licit or illicit, as the primary expression of heterosociality, or relations between men and women. As we have seen, it is against femininity in the context of licit, domesticated heterosexuality that the peplum hero often defines and differentiates himself in terms of masculine individuation from the familial/maternal other.

This form of licit, family-oriented heterosexuality may well frame the narrative (explicitly in some of the Hercules films, implicitly via negation in the Maciste series), but it is cursorily dealt with in the peplum, and not portrayed as particularly erotic (the relationship between Hercules and Iole in *Le fatiche di Ercole* and *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, for instance, is from the outset more companionate than sexual). Illicit heterosexuality in the form of non-procreative, extra-domestic sexual encounters in other countries, on the other hand, is given much more screen time, often providing a major obstacle to the hero's duties, as well as furnishing highly marketable exotic and erotic spectacle. These encounters often form the heart of the film, which explores how the hero (and by extension, through wish-fulfilment, the male spectator) deals with illicit heterosexuality. He may correctly shun it, as in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, or be temporarily tricked into indulging in it, as in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, *Gli amori di Ercole*, and *Le legioni di Cleopatra*. Ultimately, however, it is usually rejected, either in a return to licit domestic heterosexuality, upon which he will before long again turn his back (Hercules), or a direct resumption of the journey to the next quest (Maciste).

Illicit heterosexuality is often linked in the films to gynosociality, namely to communities of women (Irigaray's 'l'entre-femmes', or women-amongst-themselves, as opposed to 'l'entre-hommes', or men-amongst-themselves).¹⁴ In the peplum these matriarchal rather than patriarchal societies take the form of all-female communities ruled by a queen (the mythical Amazons in *Le fatiche di Ercole* and *Gli amori di*

Ercole), or female rule of mixed-sex groups (Omphale, Queen of Lidia in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, and Cleopatra in *Le legioni di Cleopatra*, both historical figures, and the invented figures of Aloha in *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*, Queen Antinea in *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*, Queen Alismoya in *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*, and the Queen of the Bird-People in *Ulisse contro Ercole*). When at their most extreme, these queens are depicted as bad, sexually desiring women, who also covet power. Their dangerous twin desires are eroticized in the films as the antithesis to non-erotic, domesticated female heterosexuality which is procreative rather than recreative, and not linked to power in the public, sociopolitical sphere.

These dominatrix-figures allow for spectatorial desire that goes beyond straightforward sexual titillation to accommodate fantasies of phallic motherhood, masochism and infantilism. However, having set up this dynamic, the films are ultimately careful to diffuse the threats of autonomous female sexuality and female political power. A variety of strategies is employed to this end. One is to reduce the female rulers to mere 'women in love'. This tactic positions them firmly in romantic discourse, which renders female desire passive, and at the same time sidelines their political role. In other words, they may not have both. Cleopatra in *Le legioni di Cleopatra* declares her pleasure in posing as an ordinary woman and freely following her heart in the company of the hero, in a welcome interlude from her role as Empress of Egypt. Capis in *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi* similarly declares: 'I'm no longer a queen, I'm a woman.' The power of Aloha is undercut at the beginning of *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas* by her futile attempts to fight for her people when they are attacked by a rival tribe, and she is forced to flee the battleground by her male advisers. From this point on she becomes the victim constantly waiting to be rescued by Hercules, and enters romantic discourse by virtue of being defined solely by her desire for the hero to the exclusion of her role as leader of her people. In an unusual closure she leaves with Hercules at the end of the film (the hero commonly leaves alone), while at the same time her abandonment of her subjects in favour of fulfilling her sexual desire feeds into the romantic, patriarchally-correct choice of a relationship with a man over sociopolitical power.

Another, more final solution diffusing the threat of female rule is to kill the queen, while ensuring of course that she does not die at the hands of the hero, who has usually enjoyed illicit sexual pleasure with her. The hero is never shown killing a woman, a task which is left to 'lesser' men, as in *Ercole contro i figli del sole*, and in *Gli amori di*

Ercole, where Hercules' wife, Megara, is murdered by evil counsellors (in mythology Hercules himself kills her while under a spell). The representative of the gynosomal threat may be dispatched by a former lover whom she has turned, in Dantesque fashion, into a tree (Hippolyta in *Gli amori di Ercole*, again killed 'unheroically' by Hercules in mythology). Alternatively, she may die accidentally by falling from a waterfall (Alismoya in *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*), commit suicide (Omphale in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, Cleopatra in *Le legioni di Cleopatra*), or even meet a heroic end while shielding the hero (Capis in *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi*). As noted by Wyke in relation to Cleopatra, the legendary history of this female ruler has long provided cinema with a closed narrative in which distant, exotic female desire linked dangerously to political power can be explored, and then dismissed, with the 'factual' event of her suicide (Wyke 1997, pp. 73–109).

Alternatively, gynosomal communities can simply be left behind. Situated in distant lands across the sea, these all-female or female-dominated communities may be reduced to providing exotic, sexual, dominatrix-style thrills, while their distance poses no real threat to western 'civilization' (as in *Le fatiche di Ercole*). If female rule cannot be avoided in the films, then a male consort can be ensconced alongside the ruler as part of the (romantic) closure, thereby ensuring patriarchal control and containing the gynosomal threat (as in *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*). In *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan* this strategy combines with white, western colonialism as the Oriental princess is finally married to an inexplicably European-looking Chinese consort, whose non-noble origins (he is a fisherman) and heroic deeds as a rebel against the Mongols do not manage to distract from the intertwining of dominant ideologies of gender (patriarchy), race (western) and colour (white) at work in the diffusing of the gynosomal threat.

Another crucial strategy employed by the peplum in dealing with the conflict between homosociality and gynosomality is that of the classic patriarchal splitting of femininity into two opposing (stereo)types, manifested on screen in two very different female characters who both lure the hero towards heterosexuality. Patriarchy works to divide and conquer femininity, with this schizophrenic splitting into two types based on the relation of each to sexuality: the good, asexual madonna as opposed to the evil, sexual whore. The peplum regularly associates asexual femininity with the domestic sphere of the patriarchal, father or husband-led family, and sexual femininity with extra-domestic, non-patriarchal communities which are gynosomal, or female-led. The

former, domestic type of femininity is disempowered and non-erotic, while powerful gynosomal femininity is deeply eroticized and demonized (to the point of equating female desire with witchcraft in Freda's *Maciste all'inferno*, for instance). These opposing stereotypes of femininity compete with each other for the hero, with the latter, illicit, recreational, extra-domestic version of femininity acting as a 'torpedo of domesticity' (Wyke 1997, p. 89).¹⁵

Importantly, in relation to the growing resurgence of Italian feminism and women's groups in the 1960s, the patriarchal thrust of the peplum isolates 'good', asexual femininity both socially and politically in the domestic space of the individual family. Gynosomal femininity, on the other hand, is portrayed as dangerously organized into communities, such as the Amazons. The isolation of the lone female character waiting in the domestic sphere for the return of the hero-husband, such as Iole waiting for Hercules in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, is mirrored by the recuperation of the female ruler (who is 'bad' simply because she has power), by means of her isolation and separation from her seat of power, a tactic that often turns her into an isolated victim in need of heroic rescue (Bianca in *Maciste contro i Mongoli*, Aloha in *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*). Italian feminism in the 1960s was characterized by an emphasis on relations between women, encapsulated by the term *affidamento*, meaning 'entrustment'. This particularly Italian aspect of feminism of the period recognized patriarchal strategies for alienating and isolating women from each other in competition for men, and celebrated the positive, varied relations of difference between women that could be drawn upon to create empowering female relations.¹⁶ In other words, the static separatism of the domestic 'woman's world' as a haven of peace was to be ousted by an emphasis on the dynamism of bonds and disparities between women (Bono and Kemp 1991, pp. 109–38). The aim was to replace the antagonistic inter-female relationship of competition, or passive, victimistic relationship of merging, encouraged by patriarchy, and 'turn it into a generalized form of sociality between women' (Whitford 1991, p. 194).

The patriarchal isolation of women from each other is described by Irigaray as follows: 'Our societies are built upon men-among-themselves ('l'entre-hommes'). According to this order, women remain dispersed and exiled atoms'. She explores this difference in the context of what she calls 'collective initiation rites for men':

These rites are perpetuated in socially and politically organized gatherings that are almost always mono-sexuate. Women's rites reverted

to being *individual* centuries ago, and have remained so. They are initiations into puberty, marriage or maternity which, moreover, often have no rites. The little girl becomes a woman, a wife and a mother *alone*, or at best with her mother or a substitute. It is probably the economic conditions bound up with industry that have allowed us to come together again, provisionally. (Whitford 1991, p. 191, emphasis added)

In the pre-industrial settings of the peplum films, the communities of women that would before long be envisaged and worked towards by *affidamento*, are demonized. The queen of such a community, or the female ruler of a dual-sex community, is highly sexualized, and placed in competition for the hero with his wife (Omphale versus Iole in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*), or wife-to-be (Antinea versus Deianira in *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*, Hippolyta versus Deianira in *Gli amori di Ercole*). Antinea in *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* is especially transgressive as a queen who is also older, a mother, yet still sexually desiring.

In the divisive strategy of splitting femininity into sexual and asexual opposites, the evil erotic temptress can be found in opposition to the good, victim-like female character, whom the hero rescues to ensure a romantic closure favouring the latter and the formation of a new heterosexual family unit, of which he himself is not to be a part. This takes place in Freda's *Maciste all'inferno*, a film in which older femininity and witchcraft are warningly associated with potent female desire in the form of Marta, the old witch, who not only seduces Maciste in Hell in the guise of her younger self, but dooms the young, recently married but not yet 'deflowered' Marta (her namesake on earth but clearly representing her young self while still innocent) to being burnt at the stake. Following Tessari's rule, the old witch is influenced by Maciste to sacrifice herself, and youthful domestic femininity survives. The good female character in need of rescuing may herself be a ruler (the Queen of the Light, opposed by Alismoya, Queen of Darkness, in *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*, or the queen-regent of the young king almost fed to the Cyclops by Queen Capis in *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi*), whom the hero saves and returns to her male consort.

In *Gli amori di Ercole* both sexual and asexual stereotypes of femininity are played by the same actress, Jayne Mansfield, a feature that highlights and exposes the artificial splitting of femininity as one of patriarchy's divisive strategies. This strategy alienates the two female characters from each other in competition, and forbids both stereotypes within the same woman. The peplum hero repeatedly has to choose between these

opposing types of femininity. As we have seen, in essence he rejects both, whether by not becoming involved with good domestic femininity (Maciste, born not of woman, but 'of the rock', and not linked to family of any kind), or temporarily returning to this licit form of heterosexuality only to leave it again (some of the Hercules films). Almost invariably, if only after a prolonged episode of heterosexual indulgence, he rejects illicit heterosexuality, which in some cases would even eventually kill him (*Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, *Gli amori di Ercole*).

The most powerful imaging of the heroic rejection of heterosexual domesticity in favour of homosociality takes the form of the ship. The ship in these films can be seen in direct opposition to the feminine hearth as a privileged locus for all-male labour, comradeship and merriment, a male community on the move, with important tasks to perform in public, outdoor space, as opposed to the static, private, indoor sphere of everyday domesticity. It is on leaving ship in order to hunt and gather supplies on a distant island that the male community becomes involved with illicit heterosexuality in *Le fatiche di Ercole*. Far from civilization and the patriarchal hegemony of homosociality, the men encounter an all-female community in the form of the Amazons, ruled by Queen Antea. In *Gli amori di Ercole* Hercules again meets the Amazons, whose Queen this time is Hippolyta (her correct name, according to myth). The equivalent episode in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* is the island ruled by Omphale, Queen of Lidia, to which Hercules is taken after being drugged while on a land mission with Ulysses. These three episodes feature as centrepieces interrupting the heroic quest. The Amazons function as warning and illustration of the dangerous nature of gynosexuality, and Omphale illustrates the dangers of female rule over a mixed-sex community.

The dangers of gynosexuality to patriarchy are translated on to the plane of female sexuality. Specifically, sexual desire on the part of the Amazons and Omphale ensnares the men in illicit heterosexual activity, illicit because here female desire is not attached to domestic femininity. It is not procreative but recreative. Licit heterosexuality is depicted as working to restrain and diminish heroic masculinity (Iole's attempts to prevent Hercules leaving in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, his dozing off in the back of their wagon and reluctance to fight the giant Anteus soon after they are married, and his joke that Iole has him in chains in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*). Illicit heterosexuality coded as the *femmes fatales* of the female-dominated islands, on the other hand, actually proves fatal. The Amazons in *Le fatiche di Ercole* satisfy their desires with travellers, drug them and kill them. In *Gli amori di Ercole* former

lovers of the Amazon Queen are turned into trees. Omphale in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* has her lovers stabbed to death by her male centurions and then preserves their bodies in various poses, exhibiting them in a subterranean cave. The castration symbolism of the huge circular doors to the cave, with their jagged, toothed edges closing shut to entrap the men, is painfully clear. Both episodes end with flight to the ship, a joyful reuniting and renewal of the male community after a lucky escape, and continuation of the heroic quest.

The response of Hercules to illicit heterosexuality, and the threat of gynossociality with which it is made to appear synonymous, deserves close attention in that, while on occasion succumbing to it, he ultimately acts to forbid desire and protect masculinity from femininity. For instance, he does not become sexually involved with the Amazons in *Le fatiche di Ercole*. Whereas his comrades pair off with the women, with Jason partnering their Queen, the entrance of Hercules to the royal dwelling, by contrast, is preceded by screaming women whom he chases, scowling. As hero of the peplum, Hercules, as we have seen, never harms a woman. In myth, on the contrary, he kills the Amazons when he steals Penthesilea's belt. Moreover, the hero-cult established in his name decreed that women and dogs, both signs of feminine domesticity, should not be allowed entry to his temples. This indicates a certain misogyny linked with his name, possibly due to his role in representing the apotheosis of a quest-bound masculinity (his story revolves around twelve labours) which could not risk being weakened by any association with femininity.

While the other men are drugged by the *femmes fatales* on the island, it is Hercules who carries them back to the safety of the ship, four at time, indicating the extent of the danger they are leaving behind. When more men from the ship try to get to the Amazons, Hercules beats them with his club, a father-figure asserting his phallic dominance and repressing the desires of his sons. Once safely on board, the men row reluctantly away from the island, while the Amazons sing, siren-like, in an attempt to lure them back. Hercules urges the men to row and sing, beating time with his club with such ferocity that it breaks (Figure 5). His violent forbidding of illicit heterosexual desire is further reinforced by ridicule of this desire, carried out in such a way that it simultaneously denies homosexual desire. As the drugged men come on board ship, they lie embraced on deck, murmuring as if to their Amazon women, while the others look on and laugh, both at their comrades in each others' arms and at the mistaken heterosexual fantasies allowing this homoerotic scene.

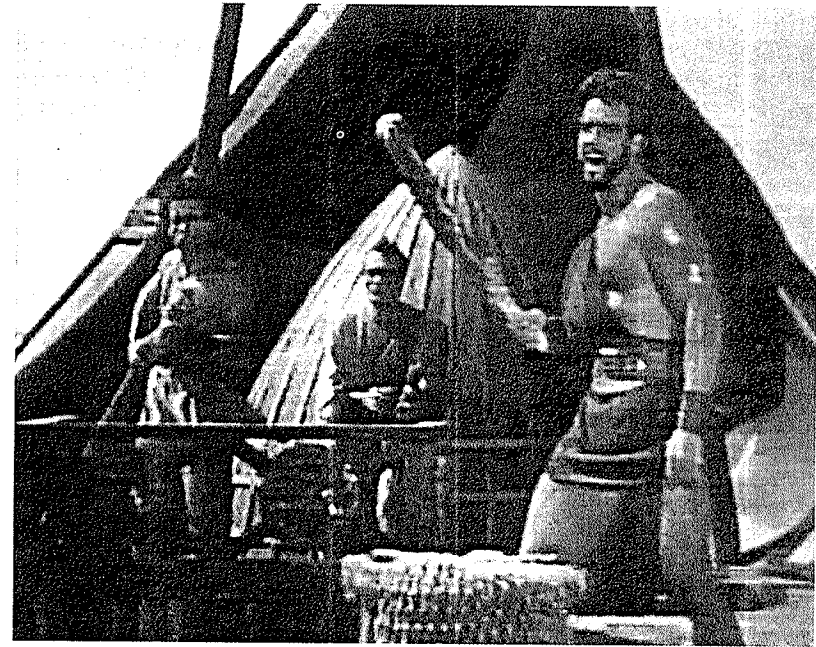


Figure 5 Preserving homosocial integrity: Hercules (Steve Reeves) drowning out the Amazons' siren cries with the blows of his club in Francisci's *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1958).

In *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* Hercules is tricked into an illicit sexual association with Queen Omphale, losing his memory when he is given the waters of forgetfulness to drink. His involvement means that he is no longer the apotheosis of heroic muscular masculinity, as shown by his inability to bend an iron lampstand. Sleep is once again associated with the weakening, feminizing effects of sexual contact with women, with Hercules sleeping all day and, it is implied, having sex all night. At this point it is up to his male comrades to effect a rescue. Ulysses, who has pretended to be a mute servant of Hercules since capture by Omphale's men, ensures that he drinks normal water, keeps reminding him of his name and organizes their rescue. In a classic repetition of the Lacanian mirror episode, Hercules looks in a mirror to see his image and the feminizing garland of flowers he has been wearing, while hearing in his head the earlier words of his rescuers reminding him of his name and heroic masculine purpose. Once reinserted into the symbolic in this way, he rejects the pre-oedipal

world of the imaginary and the libidinal, with its threatening connotations of the reigning phallic maternal, and fights his way back to his all-male community, out of the gloomy womb-like cave with its *vagina dentata*-style entrance, and into the sunlight and the sea (Figure 6). The mood lightens as the men swim out to the ship, Hercules carrying old Ascalapius on his back as the latter, in myth the god of health and healing, complains of rheumatism.

The ascetic hero is again involved, against his will, in an illicit sexual episode in *Gli amori di Ercole*. Hippolyta (Jayne Mansfield), Queen of the Amazons, drinks a magic potion to make herself appear like Deianira (also Mansfield) and therefore appealing to Hercules. As Hippolyta, Mansfield's highly sexualized screen persona comes into full force, now wearing red and with fiery red hair (as Deianira she has dark hair). The Amazon's overt sexual advances in the guise of Deianira (a character change which Hercules neither notices nor questions) show illicit heterosexuality masquerading as licit domestic heterosexuality. Or rather, given the sexual Mansfield's portrayal of both characters,

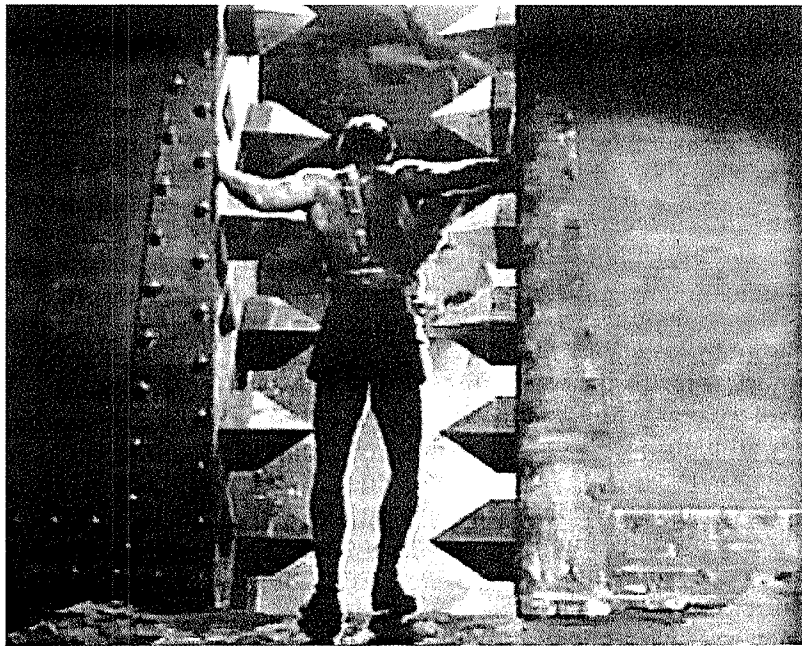


Figure 6 Defying the threat of the *vagina dentata*: Hercules (Steve Reeves) holding open the doors of Omphale's cave in Francisci's *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (1959).

sexual desire is intimated as also lurking even in licit, supposedly chaste and undesiring domestic femininity. Hippolyta's trickery is revealed to Hercules by a subversive, quite literally philanthropic Amazon, and he leaves the gynosomal community unscathed before meeting the usual fate of the queen's lovers and being turned into a tree. Duped by surface appearances and deception, defining features of femininity, any involvement in illicit heterosexuality on the part of Hercules is portrayed, quite simply, as not his fault. This apotheosis of masculinity is shown in the last resort to be beyond desire. In similar vein, while a hero like Maciste may facilitate the licit heterosexual bondings of others in the context of others, as in Freda's *Maciste all'inferno*, he himself remains outside the debilitating, emasculating, feminizing family as a social unit by not marrying (or, as in the case of a few of the Hercules films, continually escaping from the domestic sphere once married). This feature of the hero is already present in *Cabiria* (1914), the first Maciste film in the silent peplum cycle, in which his function is to rescue Cabiria and unite her with Fulvio Axilla, the master he serves despite being a free man. He himself, on the other hand, is not involved in any love interest. This feature continues in the silent Maciste series, even when Maciste, played for many years by Bartolomeo Pagano, is no longer associated with Fulvio. In Brignone's *Maciste all'inferno* (1926), the hero descends into Hell to fight the forces of evil so that the innocent Graziella and the philandering father of her illegitimate child can unite in matrimony. Maciste, who lives in chaste solitude, only becomes sexualized in Hell and, significantly, by feminine contamination, when he is kissed by the sexually voracious Proserpina, second wife of Pluto. As a result he is condemned to remain there. The underworld is associated with illicit heterosexuality and primitive desires, represented on a visual level by the replacement of Maciste's contemporary 1920s clothes by animal skins. The hero is finally released not by his own efforts, but by the prayers of the child in the de-eroticized context of the nuclear family. The final scene shows Maciste with the family he has helped put together. This is mirrored at the end of Freda's *Maciste all'inferno* (1962), from the second cycle, which sees Maciste (Kirk Morris) congratulate the newly wedded couple he has saved from death by burning at the stake, before leaving on his next quest.

While Maciste usually travels alone, the Hercules films often show the hero returning to the journey for the next quest as part of a group of men. The hero's predilection for homosociality and the persistent visual focus on the male body in the context of all-male communities

and situations of physical, man-to-man combat, have invited discussion of issues of homoeroticism and filmic mechanisms of denial of homosexuality. In an exploration of the male body as spectacle, Neale suggests that making the male body (rather than the regularly objectified female body) the object of the gaze (also assumed to be male) introduces a discourse of homosexuality that must be suppressed and denied (Neale 1993). In effect, homosexuality must be denied despite, or because of, its closeness to homosociality, or Irigaray's hom(m)o-sexuality.

As Irigaray argues, overt homosexuality is forbidden in a system based exclusively on relations between men, and may exist only at the level of pretence, or risk lowering 'the sublime value of the standard, the yardstick'. Her explanation also offers an insight into the role of the illicit heterosexual episodes in the films as distraction from male homosexual pleasure: 'Once the penis itself becomes merely a means to pleasure, pleasure among men, *the phallus loses its power*. Sexual pleasure, we are told, is best left to those creatures who are ill-suited for the seriousness of symbolic rules, namely, women' (Irigaray 1985, p. 193). Denial of homosexuality takes various forms in action genres like the peplum, including the displaced eroticism of male bodies in sado-masochistic combat, and the transfiguration of male narcissism by death as an identificatory viewing process. In particular, the gaze of the spectator at the male body on display is not direct, but mediated by the diegetic or on-screen male look, which is not marked by desire, but by fear, hatred or aggression, and by acts of violence and mutilation (Neale 1993).

The peplum, like the spaghetti western, is one of a number of action genres open to exploration from this critical perspective. Of special note in this genre is the fact that it is not just homosexuality, or even the homoerotic look, that is being denied. Heterosexuality, both licit and illicit, is also brought into play, only to be deferred or disavowed by the heroic body, as we have seen. This amounts to more than just the token use of heterosexuality as a framework to legitimate or distract from homoerotic fantasies. The films fluctuate between varying sexualities, all of which are denied in some way. The crucial point is that the fundamental driving force of homosociality remains a constant (a dynamic also at work in the spaghetti western). In other words, the main agenda of these films is to reaffirm patriarchy's baseline of homosocial relations, whether sexualized or not, in the face of fear of a gynosomal alternative (expressed in negative representations of female communities, female rule, and female desire).

It is notable that critical works on the peplum often continue this process of affirming homosociality. The exposed male body is appropriated for the homosexual male gaze, while the female body continues to be appropriated for the heterosexual male gaze, resulting in a closed homosocial circuit. There are, of course, important political reasons for continuing with the former. But current debates on the complexities of viewing processes and pleasures, tied to theories of multiple identity, the performativity of gender, sexuality and race, and the notion of spectatorial drag, indicate that more fluid, as well as more varied, viewing processes are generated by the negotiating processes of the peplum. This is particularly the case in view of the penchant of this genre for comic strip-style extremes of signification and playing with identity boundaries. In this context, spectators cannot be classified according to one fixed identity (a specific gender, sexuality, race, colour, age or class). Instead, the individual spectator would shift in fantasy work between a variety of desires and experience the coming into being of multiple, intersecting identities through their negotiation on screen.

To give one example, in *Le fatiche di Ercole* there is a scene with Iole watching male bodies in sporting action from her chariot. The prolonged look of Iole at Hercules and other sporting male bodies may well function to mediate an illicit homoerotic gaze on the part of the film's male audience. Apart from her, the only spectators on screen are all male, so that her presence offers a more licit, heterosexual eroticization of the male body as spectacle for both the diegetic and extradiegetic male gaze. However, sharing her heterosexual female gaze may also generate in the spectator other fantasies of identificatory desire for the male body (namely, female heterosexual as well as male homosexual desire), or the fantasy of being desired by her (lesbian, female bisexual or male heterosexual desire). At the same time, Iole herself may generate fantasies of identification in terms of *being her*, an identificatory process encouraged near the beginning of the film by a flashback of her childhood for which she provides the voice-over. These fantasies of desire involve being desired by others, a position common to all the sexualities. Her role as rescued damsel in distress established at the beginning of the film, and her reactive state of forever waiting for Hercules to return, might generate fantasies of helplessness (key in masochism and infantilism, for instance). Intersecting with fantasies of sexual desire and power relations are those of idealized, culture-specific positions. Iole as a young white princess offers a host of gratifying fantasies in the intersecting realms of gender, sexuality, age, colour, race and social status.

In terms of spectator pleasure, these spectacular peplum films offer fantasy images set in distant or mythical time and space that free up viewing positions between which the spectator can shift at will. These various identificatory positions and desires are generated by the peplum in its negotiation of social categories as performative, as a repetitive process of extremes of signification inscribed on the body as surface. It is in this negotiation that much of the pleasure of spectatorship in the genre can be located.

4

Looking at Medusa: Investigating Femininity in the Horror Film

Introduction

The Italian horror film, like the peplum, is a fantasy genre particularly concerned with the body and the exploration of gender. The main focus of the peplum was on the well-defined, pumped-up male body as differentiated from femininity and other masculinities. The horror film, on the other hand, centres on the female body and the threat femininity poses to masculinity in terms of problems of differentiation and the dissolution of subjectivity through the invasion of boundaries, incorporation and castration. The films often investigate this threat through the opposing gothic dynamics of fear and desire as experienced by masculinity in relation to femininity.¹ At the same time, some films posit problems of incorporation and loss of identity between female characters, using the dyadic, age-differentiated figures of the monstrous, archaic mother and the innocent, passive daughter (a variation of conflicts between older and younger femininity encountered in melodrama and the peplum).

With both horror and peplum genres current in Italy at the same time (classic horror from 1956 to 1966, the peplum from 1957 to 1965), the horror genre provides an interesting counterpoint to the peplum from a gender perspective. The horror film takes the patriarchal dynamic of fear and desire in relation to female sexuality, desire and autonomy one step further, moving it out of the daylight, the world of the conscious mind and outdoor peplum heroics of super-healthy male bodies, and into the dark, underside realm of night-time sexual activity in dusty castles, the world of the unconscious and the oneiric, of death and unheroic bodily decay. At the same time it is important to bear in mind, as always, that genres are not watertight,

Chapter 1

- 1 For a 1947 cover illustration of *Grand Hotel* featuring the couple in *Mancato appuntamento*, see Hine 1997, facing p. 338.
- 2 The use of highly condensed narrative structures in *fotoromanzi* and then in film melodrama also finds a precedent in the reduced narratives of the *Biblioteca dell'italiano popolare* (Galani edition), sold from the beginning of the century for 25 *centesimi* (Brunetta 1998, II, p. 130).
- 3 Sales of top *fotoromanzi* like *Grand Hotel* did not decline alongside their cinematic equivalent. This magazine was still selling nearly 900,000 copies a week twenty years later in 1976, with a later fall to 400,000 in 1992 due to television as an outlet for melodrama repackaged as soap opera (Hine 1997, p. 338). A higher figure of one and a half million copies of *Grand Hotel* sold weekly in 1976 is given in Aprà and Carabba 1976, p. 46.
- 4 Blondness has long been associated with Hollywood depictions of dangerously sexualized, unmaternal femininity, such as Barbara Stanwyck's Phyllis, the *femme fatale* in Wilder's archetypal *film noir*, *Double Indemnity* (1944). Italian cinema has followed suit, often equating blondness with threatening foreignness, as with Ingrid, the blond lesbian Nazi drug-dealer who seduces the dark-haired Concetta in Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945), and, more recently, Heidi, the blond Nordic model from the future who disrupts dark-haired Italian Maria's marriage in Nichetti's *Ladri di saponette* (1989).
- 5 The song *Lacreme napoletane* ('Neapolitan tears') provided much of the subject-matter on which the plot is based (Aprà and Carabba 1976, p. 22).
- 6 The medicalization of female desire as illness, such as hysteria, is discussed by Showalter 1987, pp. 121–44. It has a long history in Italian culture, finding expression especially in theatre, for example, with the plays of Goldoni and Pirandello (Günsberg 1992, 2000).
- 7 In practice the *sale parrocchiali* did not always follow censorship regulations, showing excluded films in the absence of sufficient numbers of films suitable for all or almost all ('per tutti' and 'per tutti con riserva') in order to fulfil the financial need to show around 150 films a year. In the process these cinemas created damaging competition for commercially-run cinemas in some areas (while overall constituting only one-third of Italy's cinemas, and providing a mere one-tenth of all cinema seats) (Valli 1999, pp. 35–9).
- 8 See 'La famiglia', *L'enciclopedia cattolica*, vol. 5, cited Ginsborg 1990, p. 23.
- 9 In 1921 in Italy, around ten times more women than men worked as typists, stenographers and copyists (5,841 women vs 571 men) (Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Censimento della popolazione*, 1921).
- 10 The oedipal dynamic in *Catene* is also noted by Aprà and Carabba 1976, p. 53.
- 11 Caldwell gives the following figures based on government surveys of 11,500,000 Italian families from 1950 to 1953: families in wretched conditions with lowest living standards (13,570,00 or 11.7 per cent); families in poor conditions with low living standards (1,345,000 or 11.6 per cent); families in average conditions (7,616,000 or 65.7 per cent); families in well-off conditions (1,274,000 or 11.0 per cent) (Caldwell 1991, pp. 48–9).

Chapter 2

- 1 For an account of economic miracle, see Ginsborg 1990, pp. 210–53.
- 2 The ill-timed irruption of advertising into films shown on television would become a scourge, and is satirized to great effect by Nichetti's *Ladri di saponette* (1989).
- 3 The intricacies of genre differentiation in relation to comedy are discussed in a Hollywood context in Neale 2000 pp. 65–71.
- 4 For Marx's critique of the working day under capitalism, see Marx 1974, I, pp. 222–86.
- 5 On the role of visual or sight gags in comedy, see Carroll 1991.
- 6 An examination of British audience response to Hollywood stars in terms of purchasing clothes and copying hairstyles can be found in Stacey 1994.
- 7 For a discussion of all three types of fetishism, see Gamman and Makinen 1994, Dant 1999.
- 8 An account of the social connotations of different makes of cars, and their significance in the comedies, is given in Giacovelli 1995, pp. 150–6.
- 9 See Introduction, note 6.
- 10 The mother in this 1963 film clearly does not belong to the increasing number of households owning a television (which rose from 12 per cent in 1958 to 49 per cent by 1965) and a fridge (from 13 to 55 per cent), let alone the more expensive washing-machine (from 3 to 23 per cent) (Ginsborg 1990, p. 239).
- 11 A discussion of building speculation during the boom can be found in Ginsborg 1990, pp. 246–7.
- 12 Palmiro Togliatti, postwar leader of the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano) and focus of hope for social change, has been criticized for not going far enough in addressing the situation of women, notably in his failure to unpick the role of the Church in women's oppression, and for submerging women's issues in the traditional left-wing preoccupation with class as the locus for struggle. This criticism represents a common feminist view of Marxism, while in an Italian party-political context it relates specifically to the strategic 'historic compromise' between the Communists, the Church and the DC. Sordi's character in *Una vita difficile* is imprisoned on suspicion of involvement in the attempt to assassinate Togliatti in July 1948.
- 13 On the role of women during the boom, see Chianese 1980, pp. 109–22.

Chapter 3

- 1 This figure is given by Wagstaff 1996, p. 224. Discussion of 89 of these films can be found in Cammarota 1987.
- 2 For an account of the adventure genre, see Cawelti 1976.
- 3 These films were at the time called variously *film d'azione*, *film di costume*, *film d'epoca*, *film storico*, *film storico-avventuroso*, *film storico-mitologico* (Cammarota 1987, p. 15). See Martinelli's filmography of 183 films belonging to this silent first muscleman cycle (Dall'Asta 1992).
- 4 With ticket prices for 1957 at 149 *lire*, a figure of 887 million *lire* indicates an audience of nearly 6 million (5,953,020) for *Le fatiche di Ercole* in one season (Quaglietti 1980, Table E).

- 5 D'Annunzio writes on 30 June 1913: 'The Roman hero of the action is called (Plinio) Fulvio Axilla. His super-strong companion is a freed slave from the Marche, named Maciste (an ancient surname of the demi-god, Hercules)' (Dall'Asta 1992, p. 217).
- 6 A list of pseudonyms appears in Ghigi 1977, p. 738, n. 6 and Cammarota 1987, p. 205.
- 7 For an examination of the relatively new role of the female action heroine in Hollywood cinema, see Tasker 1993. This has accelerated since her book was written, with powerful female figures like Lara Croft, adventuress and tomb raider, successfully taking part in the masculine world of action in her transition from computer game to the big screen.
- 8 The comic strip association with the peplum can be seen in advertising for the first cycle. See the poster illustration for *L'atleta fantasma* (1919) in Dall'Asta 1992, p. 82.
- 9 One exception occurs in *Ercole contro Roma*. In this film Hercules lives and works as a village blacksmith. However, he is not the original Hercules, but the one reborn every 100 years since Hercules first fathered a child in the village.
- 10 See Theweleit 1987–9, for psychoanalytical readings of hard military body-coverings in the context of Nazi Germany.
- 11 An analysis of *La battaglia di Maratona* in terms of popular taste is given in Lagny 1992.
- 12 For a discussion of the choice of white versus non-white as the least unsatisfactory set of terms, together with other related theoretical and methodological issues, see Dyer 1997, pp. 1–40.
- 13 The term 'homosociality' is used by Sedgwick 1985, following Irigaray.
- 14 The expressions 'l'entre-femmes' and 'l'entre-hommes' are used by Irigaray in an interview entitled 'Women-Amongst-Themselves: Creating a Woman-to-Woman Sociality' in Whitford 1991a, pp. 190–7 (pp. 192, 191). The second expression is equivalent to Irigaray's own term 'hom(m)o-sexuality', later transposed into English as 'homosociality', while the first can be said to approximate to the opposing term, 'gynosociality'.
- 15 Wyke notes that this phrase was used by Fox to publicize Theda Bara's portrayal of Cleopatra in 1914, the implication being that audiences would be attracted to the spectacle of marriage and family destabilized by female desire.
- 16 The notion of *affidamento* was suggested by the Milan Libreria delle Donne (Kemp and Bono 1993, p. 26 n. 17).

Chapter 4

- 1 For an analysis of fear and desire in the English gothic novel, see Day 1985.
- 2 Desire for change also involved an increase in the numbers of women filmmakers in the 1960s. Miscuglio notes: 'The concept of a women's cinema first emerged during a period of protest, when women made a link between struggle against cultural misogyny and the appropriation of the means for the transmission of culture and ideology' (Miscuglio 1988, p. 155). In general, their films would not have gone on general release, and are not

easily obtainable today. One outstanding exception is Lina Wertmüller, who honed her skills with Fellini on *Otto e mezzo* (1963), and went on to direct commercially successful films thereafter.

- 3 For an introduction to the horror genre, see Jancovich 1996, Wells 2000.
- 4 See Berenstein 1996 for a gender-specific account of Universal's 1931–6 cycle of horror films.
- 5 Hunt 1992, Jenks 1992, Troiano 1989, and Wells 2000 give 1956 as the year of production, whereas 1957 is given in Brunetta 1993 and Mora 1978.
- 6 *La maschera del demonio* came 109th, with 141 million lire, followed by *L'amante del vampiro* (124th with 106 million), *Seddok, l'erede di Satana* (128th with 93 million), and *L'ultima preda del vampiro* (131th with 75 million) (Mora 1978, p. 298).
- 7 The fullest account of films from the classic Italian horror cycle remains Mora 1978, II, pp. 287–322.
- 8 Bava's *La maschera del demonio* (1960) was banned in England for eight years (Hunt 1992), while a particular case in point in British horror is the outrage that greeted Powell's *Peeping Tom*, also 1960.
- 9 See Hunt's recapitulation, in the context of Italian horror, of Bordwell's definition of art film characteristics as 'patterned violations of the classical norm': unusual camera angles, stressed cutting, prohibited camera movement, failure to motivate cinematic space and time by cause-effect logic, enigmas of narration (who tells the story, how and why it is told) (Hunt 1992, p. 69, Bordwell and Thompson 1997).
- 10 Williams cites horror, melodrama and pornography as genres of excess evoking extreme bodily responses in the spectator (Williams 1999).
- 11 Dadoun regards the body 'dismembered or divided into pieces' in horror as an echo of shamanistic rites (Dadoun 1989, p. 49).
- 12 An analysis of the Medusa myth in the context of horror and psychoanalysis can be found in Creed 1993, pp. 105–21, 151–66.

Chapter 5

- 1 This figure is given in Wagstaff 1992, p. 260 n. 4. Brunetta estimates nearly 800 Italian westerns produced between 1964–74 (1993, IV, p. 403).
- 2 Carabba believes the number of Italian westerns preceding Leone's first western to be considerably less than 25. He also draws attention to the popularity of existing comedy westerns starring the duo Franchi and Ingrassia (Carabba 1989, p. 81).
- 3 *Il mio nome è Nessuno* is credited as supervised and presented by Leone, and directed by Valeri, but is often included in Leone's filmography.
- 4 For a list of films sporting the name Django, not always in the original Italian title but inserted for export to Germany, see Wagstaff 1998, p. 81.
- 5 A list of pseudonyms used by performers, directors, music composers, scriptwriters and cinematographers is given in Weisser 1992, pp. 363–461.
- 6 The comic strip heritage is especially clear in the title sequence of some of the films, beginning with *Per un pugno di dollari* and continuing with films like *Killer calibro .32*.
- 7 See also Volpi's plot phases in Nowell-Smith et al., 1996, pp. 67–8.