

Classics For All:  
Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture

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## CHAPTER TEN

ANCIENT MYTHOLOGY AND MODERN MYTHS:  
*HERCULES CONQUERS ATLANTIS* (1961)

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There is a widespread misconception that ancient Rome is more often represented in the cinema than ancient Greece. Jon Solomon's comprehensive study of *The Ancient World in the Cinema* seems to bear this out, listing 138 titles set in Rome to only 47 set in Greece (Solomon 2001: 327-329). However, a closer look reveals that Solomon has (probably wisely) chosen to subsume a number of titles under the single heading of "other Hercules films". This throwaway reference actually embraces as many as 120 titles which named Hercules as their hero in at least one release version. In Solomon's defence, listing the films individually would have been a complex task because of their habit of multiple titling: the same habit makes it difficult to assess exactly how many were made. The films formed the greater part of a group of unapologetically lowbrow productions popularly known as "sword and sandal" or (after the very short tunics worn by their muscular heroes and pneumatic heroines) "peplum" films. Between 1957 and 1965, around 170 pepla were produced, mostly in Italian studios. Almost all took their inspiration from ancient civilizations, particularly the narratives and characters of Greek and Roman mythology and history. Lacking the cultural ambitions of Hollywood epic films of the same period (like *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*), the films were nevertheless very widely viewed by mass audiences, especially in Italy and the USA. Many have since been "recycled" for television in the series *The Sons of Hercules* and *Mystery Science Theatre 3000 (MST3K)*, playing out their versions of ancient myth and history to new mass audiences. In terms of mass culture, then, peplum films have had the potential to influence popular ideas about ancient myth, and particularly the figure of Hercules, for a very substantial number of

viewers over a considerable period of time.<sup>1</sup> Their appeal for such large audiences has depended on filmmakers' abilities to use ancient myth's essential plasticity to power narratives which express modern aspirations and anxieties.

This chapter will discuss some of the ways in which peplum films blended ancient mythological narratives and characters with modern "myths", using the Barthesian understanding of "myth" as a "system of communication" that underpins contemporary cultural receptions (1972: 109).<sup>2</sup> Barthes extended the notion of myth beyond its popularly assumed settings in "another time, another place", describing it as an operation that informs all of our everyday meaning-making activities: "not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message".<sup>3</sup> Such utterances are inevitably ideological, with their fullest meaning springing not from nature but from culture, and more particularly from the very specific historical, political and social contexts from and into which the utterance is made. My discussion will consider the consequences of using ancient myth as the vehicle for utterances on modern myths: in particular, gender roles and man's relationships with science and nature.

My discussion will focus on a film produced in the mid-period of the genre, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961) (originally titled *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*). The film was directed by Vittorio Cottafavi, an experienced director with a more sober production of Sophocles' *Antigone* for Italian TV to his credit, in addition to a number of ancient world adventure films including *The Warrior and the Slave Girl* (1958), *Messalina* (1960) and *Amazons of Rome* (1961). Described by the film historian Pierre Leprohon as a "cultured" man (Leprohon 1972: 178), Cottafavi borrows from ancient and modern culture to construct an unexpectedly sophisticated peplum. Starring the British bodybuilder Reg Park as the eponymous hero, the film takes a mature (at least in age) Hercules, his son Hylus and his friend King Androcles to the island of Atlantis, where they battle a vampishly evil Queen Antinea. Narrative elements from both ancient and modern literature are used to discuss contemporary concerns about politics, gender roles and (perhaps most

<sup>1</sup> For consistency I will use the Roman "Hercules" throughout this discussion, although many of the mythological narratives and variants discussed will be Greek and would more usually refer to Herakles.

<sup>2</sup> Barthes' *Mythologies* was originally published in 1957. Quotations here are from Annette Lavers' 1972 translation from the original French.

<sup>3</sup> However, it was hard to escape antiquity completely: one of Barthes' brief chapters examined the signs in operation in representations of "The Romans in Films" (1972: 26-28).

surprisingly) nuclear weapons. However, in startling contrast to such high-frown aspirations, the film opens with a tavern brawl and pairs Hercules with a midget sidekick for comic effect. This discussion will start with a brief plot summary before considering the peculiar contexts which have both shaped the pepla as a unique chapter in film history, and contributed to their relative neglect by film scholars.

### *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (dir. Cottafavi 1961)

Hercules and his companions are travelling to Thebes when they are enveloped by a mysterious red mist and a disembodied voice warns that Greece is in great peril. Petitioned for an interpretation, the prophet Teiresias can only say that the danger comes “out of the west”. Androcles summons the kings of Greece for a council but none can be persuaded to join him in seeking the source of the danger. Hercules also refuses to go, having promised his wife Deianeira that he will give up adventuring. Androcles and Hylus drug and kidnap Hercules, and he awakes on board ship. However, the ship is wrecked in a storm and its occupants separated. Hercules drifts to a rocky island where he rescues the young girl Ismene, left as a sacrifice to the shape-changer Proteus. Returning her to her home, he discovers that she is the daughter of Antinea, Queen of Atlantis. The Queen worships the god Uranus, and tries to persuade Hercules to stay in Atlantis and share her power. After he refuses, she tries to drug him; he escapes and follows Antinea’s soldiers to find Androcles dumped in a barricaded quarry full of sore-covered prisoners. Here he is reunited with Hylus, who has also drifted to the island, and has himself rescued Ismene from re-capture by her mother’s soldiers. Hercules frees the prisoners, and when one tells him about the source of Antinea’s power, heads for the mountain where the Rock of Uranus is located. A priest tells him that Antinea is planning to create an indestructible army using the power of the Rock, and that the power of the sun will destroy the Rock, but also Atlantis itself. Having secured the safety of Hylus, Androcles and Ismene, and fought off Antinea’s Uranian army, Hercules destroys the Rock and escapes just in time, as Atlantis is destroyed.

### The Development of the Peplum

In the mid-1950s the once globally prominent Italian film industry was in a precarious period of post-war recovery. Threatened by a mass influx of films from America, the government introduced protectionist trade policies that promoted domestic production and distribution (Eleftheriotis

2001: 103-104). As a result, filmmakers began to concentrate their efforts on responding to the demands of local audiences. These were largely composed of the rural and (often newly) urban working classes, lacking in education and poorly housed. While neo-realist Italian films like *The Bicycle Thief* impressed critics, these mass audiences preferred to escape their surroundings by watching *filoni*, formulaic productions with a running theme or character, and these flourished, with new series emerging as soon as the audience began to tire of the old one. Christopher Frayling lists the most popular series, including the “film-fumetto”,<sup>4</sup> the “By Night”, “Sexy” and “World” series, James Bond derivatives, and pepla (Frayling 1998: 70). The pepla were themselves succeeded by the internationally popular “spaghetti westerns”.

The use of ancient world settings, narratives and characters suggests the convergence of two strands of cinematic tradition: the recent popularity of ancient world Hollywood epics like *Quo Vadis* (dir. LeRoy 1951) and *The Robe* (dir. Koster 1953), and memories of the Italian film industry’s own most successful period in the early years of the 20th century, when classical myth and history were recurrent topics. Nevertheless, the films’ subsequent international success was wholly unexpected. The first peplum film, released in 1957, was *Le fatiche di Ercole* (“The Labours of Hercules”), directed by Pietro Francisci and starring the US bodybuilder Steve Reeves. In the tradition of the *filoni*, once the formula had proved its popularity, more films were swiftly produced. The next, also starring Reeves, was *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (“Hercules and the Queen of Lydia”, 1959), later released in the US as *Hercules Unchained*<sup>5</sup>.

The pepla might have remained just another Italian *filone*. However, their potential as crowd-pleasers was spotted by an American promoter named Joseph E. Levine. He purchased the rights to *Le fatiche* for an alleged \$120,000, renamed it for US release as *Hercules*, and spent a further \$1 million on promotion (Lucanio 1984: 12-13; Wyke 1997b:

<sup>4</sup> The term has come to refer to films derived from comic books, though the *fumetti* of the 1950s were more usually sentimental narratives derived from photo-novels.

<sup>5</sup> Classicists might be tempted to conjecture an association between the title of this sequel and that of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Unbound*, which is itself a sequel to *Prometheus Bound* and includes Hercules as Prometheus’ rescuer. While there is no explicit evidence of a deliberate connection, ancient authors were used to authorise narratives in the early pepla: the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius is credited as a source in *Hercules* (1957), while *Hercules Unchained* credits another Aeschylean tragedy, *Seven Against Thebes*. However, an association more likely to be made by US audiences is the notion of the strongman’s chain-breaking act.

67-68). The film was massively successful with American (and subsequently other international) audiences, remaining in *Variety's* list of top twenty box-office hits for over twenty years. It made Levine at least \$5 million. As a consequence of this international success, the peplum persisted as a popular theme for Italian (and later French and Spanish) filmmakers for much longer than previous *filoni*, not fading until 1965, a year after the release of the last of the great Hollywood Roman epics, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Peplum films are no place to seek subtlety. Familiar names from ancient culture (like Theseus, Philippiades, Iole, Eurystheus) are used to identify cartoonishly caricatured figures: hyper-muscular heroes, virginal heroines and "orientalised" villains. Cottafavi described the genre as "big noisy and colourful machines constructed in the vein of strip cartoons for children" (Lagny 1992: 178). Perhaps the best-known feature of the films is their habit of casting bodybuilders (usually American) as ancient heroes. While the original casting decision may have been purely serendipitous,<sup>6</sup> the enormous popularity of the bodybuilder hero demonstrated the resonance of this theme for the films' audiences, in both Italy and the US. Dyer has argued that, for Italian audiences, Reeves' hyper-muscular figure restated the importance of the "big, strong boy" in farming communities, thus validating the traditional values recently displaced by the move to industrial urban communities (Dyer 1997: 168-169). In America, a more immediate association might be made with the aspirational agenda of Charles Atlas' bodybuilding course, widely advertised in popular magazines of the time (Dutton 1995: 129). In both instances, the bodybuilder represented control over, and perfection of, the body through one's own physical efforts: an alternative to the more usual agenda of improvement through education, and perhaps more achievable for its working-class audience. Muscular perfection was regarded as manifesting moral perfection.

If subtlety is not the peplum's strong point, nor should the viewer anticipate historical authenticity. Typical narratives are a promiscuous mix of classical myth and modern popular culture, with an ample helping of fantasy. There are films placing Hercules alongside biblical figures or fictional characters from 19th-century literature and 20th-century cinema (*Hercules*, *Samson*, *Maciste and Ursus*); even pitting him against 16th-Century witch-burners (*The Witch's Curse*) or extra-terrestrials (*Hercules*

<sup>6</sup> Reeves has claimed that Francisci's thirteen-year-old daughter saw him in an early minor film role in *Athena* and told her father that she had found his Hercules (Frumkes 1994).

*Vs The Moon-Men*).<sup>7</sup> This "exuberant spirit of collage" (in Dyer's phrase) may have been partly responsible for the disdainful way in which the films have been treated by film historians (Dyer 1997: 166). Leprohon, for instance, feels the need to apologise for his reluctant (and brief) discussion, saying that "the history of the cinema cannot be written in terms of "intellectual" films alone" (Leprohon 1972: 175). Peter Bondanella describes the pepla as "of artistically inferior quality and limited cultural significance" (Bondanella 1994: 158). Even Michèle Lagny, whose analysis is generally positive, calls the films "a minor genre which caters for rather uneducated audiences and does not appeal to 'sophisticated' filmgoers (with the exception of a few wayward enthusiasts)" (Lagny 1992: 163).

Patrick Lucanio has another explanation for this critical antipathy, pointing out that (in America at least), "critics vehemently prefer subtitled foreign films, and consequently our perception of what constitutes value in foreign films is often tied to whether the film is dubbed or subtitled" (Lucanio 1984: 17). Dubbing is a persistent feature of the films, a consequence of the circumstances of their production. Actors were drawn from many countries, and not all spoke Italian. This was especially the case with American bodybuilders like Steve Reeves, Gordon Mitchell and Mark Forrest who, as the films' hyper-muscular heroes, literally shaped their most prominent identifying features. In addition to the lack of a common language, the films were produced under severe economic pressures. There was often only enough money available to finance a day or two of shooting. The early prints from these brief periods of filming would then be used to persuade financiers to invest enough to film for a day or two more (Frayling 1998: 68). The constant need to excite investors resulted in the filming of successive episodes of spectacle. In addition, on such an urgent and unpredictable shooting schedule, there was little time to "finesse" scripts. Dialogue was finalised only in the dubbing suite, and then had to fit (however roughly) the movements of the actors' lips. Subsequent releases of the films would be re-dubbed without too much concern for the original soundtrack. As a consequence, our tendency as cultural consumers to prioritise language over images when making value judgements about texts is of little use when viewing the pepla.

These films' focus on visual and other non-verbal communications (and especially on spectacle) may have deterred critics, but boosted their

<sup>7</sup> The hero of *The Witch's Curse* is technically "Maciste", a Greco-Roman character popular in Italy but usually translated as "Hercules" for English-speaking audiences. He is played by Kirk Morris, who had been Hercules in *The Conqueror of Atlantis* (dir. Brescia 1965).

appeal to the often under-educated rural and urban working-class audiences of their most frequent exhibition venues: Italian *terza visione* (third run) cinemas and American drive-ins. Although ticket prices were lower here than in the more prestigious first-run theatres, the number of locations and seats was far greater. This gave the films a potentially wider dissemination, albeit with a less critically-influential audience. Nights out at these venues could be highly informal occasions. The film *Cinema Paradiso* (dir. Tornatore 1988) recreates the experience of the post-war Italian *terza visione*, with babies crying, couples courting and late arrivals noisily greeting their friends in the middle of a screening (Grignaffini 1988: 125). Film viewing at the drive-ins could be an equally chaotic affair. These open-air cinemas were advertised as providing the complete family night out with no need for babysitters. Recognising that not every member of the family would want to watch all the films on one programme, proprietors offered a range of alternative attractions, like laundrettes for busy housewives, and fishing from the car for restless husbands (Segrave 1992: 81-82). Viewing practices for audiences at these venues are best compared with the casual, often interrupted and less critical ways that we watch television: for instance, commenting on what we see on-screen, going in and out of the room, and taking the passive decision to “watch television” rather than actively choosing a particular programme (Wagstaff 1992: 253). This contrasts with the pseudo-dramatic theatre experience of more prestigious cinemas, where the viewer selects a particular film to view, uninterrupted in the silent dark. The “theatre of interruption” presented in the *terza visione* and drive-in cinemas favoured episodic narratives that viewers could dip in and out of without too much loss of understanding. To counter the distractions in the cinema itself, spectacular setpieces (for instance, bodybuilder displays, erotic dances, fight scenes) and unusual sound effects were used to keep recalling viewers to the onscreen action. Such constant recourse to novelty retained the films’ target audiences—but did nothing to encourage more serious critical attention.

Whatever the reasons for the pepla’s general lack of concern for cultural consistency, it makes them rich texts for cultural analysis. Purposely produced for mass audiences, they can tell us much, both about the ways that classical civilisation resonates with modern audiences, and about the influences that have shaped popular perceptions of the ancient world. As Frayling notes, “in the hands of an intelligent artist these genres could become a positive inspiration...films which transcend the Cinecittà formulae (at the same time as deriving from them) were well worth the attention of the critics” (Frayling 1998: 93). The film Frayling chooses to

single out for this critical approbation is *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. My discussion will now focus on the rich mixture of ancient and modern mythologies which have shaped this cinematic representation of the ancient world.

### Re-Presenting Ancient Myth

Mythology is by its nature flexible, but Hercules has been a particularly plastic mythological hero, changing quite radically to suit the needs of a succession of audiences and authors from archaic Greece through Rome, Christian philosophers and the writers of the Enlightenment (Galinsky 1972; Blanshard 2005). In film and popular culture, certain attributes of the mythological Hercules have proved especially adaptable to modern concerns and anxieties. His model of independent heroism suited 20th-Century obsessions with the individual. His complicated parentage (fathered by Zeus on the mortal Alcmene, and hated by the goddess Hera as a consequence) have made him a useful vehicle for looking at family relationships. Examples can be found in *Hercules in New York* (dir. Seidelman 1970), television’s *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*<sup>8</sup> and Disney’s animated *Hercules* (dir. Musker & Clements 1997), among others. Finally, his immense strength (often put to work in these films against mechanical contraptions) has made him a symbol of nature triumphant over science: a significant issue in a world where traditional rural values had only recently been overturned by industry and technology. At the same time, popular representations have had to take care to avoid some of the mythological Hercules’ less socially acceptable attributes, for example his catastrophic lapses in self-control, and superhuman excesses in eating, drinking, fighting, seducing and general hell-raising. Ancient narratives have him murdering his music teacher (Apollodorus, 2.4.9; Theocritus, *Idylls* 24); impregnating fifty sisters in one night (Apollodorus, 2.4.10; Diodorus Siculus, 4.29); and killing his own wife and children in a fit of madness (Euripides, *Heracles*). There is also the question of his sexuality; he abandons the Argonauts on their quest for the Golden Fleece in his grief after losing his young (male) lover Hylas.<sup>9</sup> Influential pre-release scare campaigns by conservative groups

<sup>8</sup> First screened by USA Network from 16 January 1995–22 November 1999.

<sup>9</sup> The name “Hylus” for Hercules’ son in the film is not an allusion to Hylas: the name is used for Hercules’ eldest son by Deianeira in various ancient sources (for instance, Euripides’ *Heracleidae*), although the more usual spelling is Hyllus. Although the altered spelling looks suspiciously similar to Hylas (and some of

over recent film versions of Alexander the Great (in *Alexander*, dir. Stone 2005) and Achilles (in *Troy*, dir. Petersen 2004) have shown that even now, filmmakers who dare to present their heroes as anything other than strictly heterosexual risk alienating some of their most profitable audiences.<sup>10</sup>

The blueprint for the peplum Hercules was established in the 1957 *Hercules* (a.k.a. *Le fatiche di Ercole*) starring Steve Reeves. His Hercules is sober, almost humourless; the hero as teacher, protector and role model: the paradigmatic Father. Reeves' virtuous Hercules is inspired by the parable of the "Choice of Hercules", attributed to the 5th-century BCE Greek sophist Prodicus and recounted in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (2.1.21). The young hero has to choose between Vice (or Pleasure) and Virtue (or Duty), disguised as two beautiful women. Vice offers him immediate reward in the form of unlimited food, drink and sex: Virtue offers him a life of hard labour but the final reward of immortality. He chooses Virtue. Later receptions were keen to utilise this virtuous Hercules; he had obvious attractions for Christian moralists wishing to promote moral behaviour in this life to reap rewards in the next, and was adopted as a model by what Alastair Blanshard refers to as "many of history's greatest egoists", including "Charlemagne, Cardinal Richelieu, Napoleon and Mussolini" (2005: xvii). However, the earlier, "uncontrolled" Hercules has never been completely eclipsed by Prodicus' portrayal of the hero as model of rectitude.<sup>11</sup> These contrasting visions of the hero offered later mythographers (including those working in film) the opportunity to make their own "choice of Hercules".

While most Herculeses have come down on the side of Virtue, Cottafavi chose to make the hero of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* a more ambiguous figure: principled in his opposition to the worship of "evil" gods, and prone to profound observations about man's relationship with nature; but also lazy and greedy, often unconcerned for heroic conventions, unreliable as a husband, and ineffective as a father. This

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Cottafavi's references to homosexuality are very subtle), for the original Italian release the spelling was Hyllos.

<sup>10</sup> Nisbet (2006) notes some of the responses to pre-release rumours about the inclusion of gay relationships for the heroes of *Alexander* (110-111, 122) and *Troy* (78).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, *Disney's Hercules* (1997) (described by Lowe (1998) as Disney's "most openly Biblical movie"), takes a Prodican approach, albeit tailored to a juvenile audience: Hercules employs the discipline of physical training to gain command over his uncontrollable adolescent body, and virtuously agrees to give up his powers in exchange for Meg's life.

characterisation is established in the opening scenes, in which Androcles and Hylus become involved in a tavern brawl over a girl. While they battle the customers of the tavern, Hercules sits unconcerned in the midst of the chaos, eating his gargantuan dinner. He only intervenes once he has finished eating, ending the fight with a single gesture. In contrast, Reeves' Hercules is the first to leap into action when a hero is required; his opening scene has him leaving his own dinner to burn while he rescues a Greek damsel in distress. This reversal of Reeves' Prodican Hercules continues when Park's hero prioritises private happiness over the public good, by unpatriotically refusing a mission to save Greece in favour of a settled family life with Deianeira. These uxorious promises are swiftly forgotten once he finds himself on Atlantis. He offers little resistance to the charms of Queen Antinea, then mirrors his earlier broken promise to his wife with another (also doomed to be broken) to the Atlantean queen. This Hercules is as promiscuous and changeable as the Hercules of classical myth. However, one mythological attribute that this Hercules avoids is madness, here visited on Androcles instead. Even so, there is a casual reference to this (at least in the dubbed English soundtrack) when Androcles and Hylus, having drugged him to get him on board ship, speculate on whether he will be "mad" when he wakes up. Against their expectations, he merely stretches and goes back to sleep, only stirring himself on the ensuing journey to fish. This is a pragmatic hero, who eschews unnecessary responsibility and is little interested in the problems of his friend, his son or his country, except when they threaten to interrupt his sleep or his dinner. The result is true to the inconsistencies of the ancient mythological figure, and at the same time to the subversive and parodic approach that pervades the film.

In addition to Hercules and his wife and son, the film includes other figures drawn from Greek mythology, who come together to play a significant part in the film's central anti-nuclear theme: Teiresias, Proteus and Uranus. Teiresias, the blind prophet, is consulted by Hercules and Androcles after a mysterious encounter with a figure enshrouded in red mist predicting a terror coming to destroy Greece. The prophecies of Teiresias feature in a number of ancient mythological narratives: for instance, his revelations of patricide and incest are dismissed by Oedipus; he tells Hercules' foster-father Amphitryon of his wife's unintentional infidelity; even after death, he is found advising Odysseus from the underworld. In the film all he can say is that the terror will come "out of the West", determining the direction for the friends' quest but nothing more. However, as will be shown later, there is more to this prophecy than initially seems.

The second mythological figure, Proteus, is encountered by Hercules after the ship carrying them from Thebes is wrecked. Drifting to the shores of an island he finds a young girl in the process of being absorbed by the rocky cliffs. Finding that she is a sacrifice to Proteus the shape-changer, Hercules battles the god through various transformations—lizard, lion, bird—before finally killing him and releasing his sacrificial victim. This scene conflates two events in ancient mythology: Menelaus' combat with Proteus in *Odyssey* 4.509-521, and Hercules' combat with the shape-shifting Nereus during his eleventh labour of picking the golden apples of the Hesperides. On both occasions, the purpose of the combat is to gain information, rather than to kill, as in the film. However, we shall see that this narrative decision too has a specific purpose.

The last key mythological figure is the god Uranus, the focus of worship for the people of Atlantis. In myth Uranus is the very first god, both begotten by and coupling with Mother Earth, but his actions cause her to turn against him, and she persuades their children, the Titans, to attack him. His son Cronus castrates him with a sickle, and the drops of blood that fall on the earth produce the Furies, those avengers of maternal injuries (Hesiod, *Theogony* 170-186). In the film, Hercules is told by Antinea that the same drops of Uranus's blood have produced a magical rock which can transform men into supermen—or kill them. Thus ancient mythology provides precedents for three key elements of the film's narrative: prophecies of disaster; transformations; and revenge for the rape of Mother Nature.

One more feature that the film borrows from ancient Greece is of course the island of Atlantis. But Atlantis does not feature in Greek mythology. Our only ancient sources are Plato's descriptions in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*. However, the film itself uses a different source: the 1919 French novel by Pierre Benoit, *L'Atlantide*.<sup>12</sup> Examining this modern source, and the modern "mythologies" to which it appealed, will be the next step in understanding this compound narrative.

### The Muscleman and the Vamp

*L'Atlantide* tells the story of two French officers of the Foreign Legion, sent to the Sahara desert to investigate the mysterious disappearances of other officers. The two are captured and drugged, and find themselves in the hidden kingdom of Atlantis, presided over by the vampish Queen Antinea, who has taken the lost officers as lovers before killing them. She

has used a legendary metal, orichalcum, to preserve their bodies which are stored in a red marble mausoleum. When the mausoleum is full, the queen will achieve unimaginable power. One of the officers eventually escapes, but not before Antinea has used her seductive influence to persuade him to murder his friend. Rather than directly adapting the novel, the film borrows certain features and combines them with the conventionally vague antiquity of the peplum. Queen Antinea's vampiric consumption of men is central to the diegesis. Other features also show the film's debt to the novel: the red marble lining the corridors in Antinea's palace; the use of a legendary metal to transform men; and Androcles trying to kill his best friend Hercules out of jealousy.

*L'Atlantide* enjoyed massive popular and critical success in its time, winning the Grand Prix of the French Academy, and selling over 2 million copies in 15 languages. This achievement was not without controversy; there were allegations (later dismissed) that Benoit had plagiarised his man-eating female queen from H. Rider Haggard's *She*. Despite (or perhaps because of) this not altogether positive publicity, Benoit's Queen Antinea became an icon of early 20th-Century popular culture as an extreme example of the vamp: the ultimate expression of perverted female desire. As a sexually voracious, exotically foreign woman who could drain power out of a man, the vamp became popular in the early years of the 20th century as a channel for anxieties about women adopting more independent roles. The American film actress Theda Bara (in real life Theodosia Goodman, the daughter of a Cincinnati tailor) was particularly promoted in this role, with studio publicists claiming for her an Egyptian heritage, and noting that her name was an anagram of "Arab Death". Two years before the publication of Benoit's narrative, Bara had played the title role in the hugely successful *Cleopatra*, encouraging an identification of the vamp with exotic foreign queens from ancient worlds (Wyke 2007: 87-89).

*L'Atlantide* was adapted several times for popular cinema, including a 1920 French version; the 1949 Hollywood film *The Siren of Atlantis* starring Maria Montez as Antinea; and the Italian genre comedy *Toto Sceicco* ("Sheik Toto") (1950), one of a series of films featuring the Italian comic Toto (comparable with the *Three Stooges* or *Carry On* series). There was also an Italian/French co-production, *L'Atlantide* (directed by Giuseppe Masini and Edgar Ulmer), released just prior to the peplum version in 1961. This version gave the story a topical twist, by having an entrance to Atlantis revealed in the Sahara desert as the result of a nuclear explosion. *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (again an Italian/French co-production) might be read as a response to this title: borrowing the nuclear

<sup>12</sup> P. Benoit, *L'Atlantide* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1919).

element but neutralising the seriousness of the female threat through parody. (The 1963 epic film *Cleopatra* was similarly parodied by *Carry On Cleo* (1964), which even used some of the same sets.) As a sexually active female who used seduction to disempower and emasculate men, Antinea was simultaneously appealing and appalling to male viewers. Who better to disarm this feminine weapon of mass male destruction than the peplum's hyper-masculine bodybuilder Hercules?

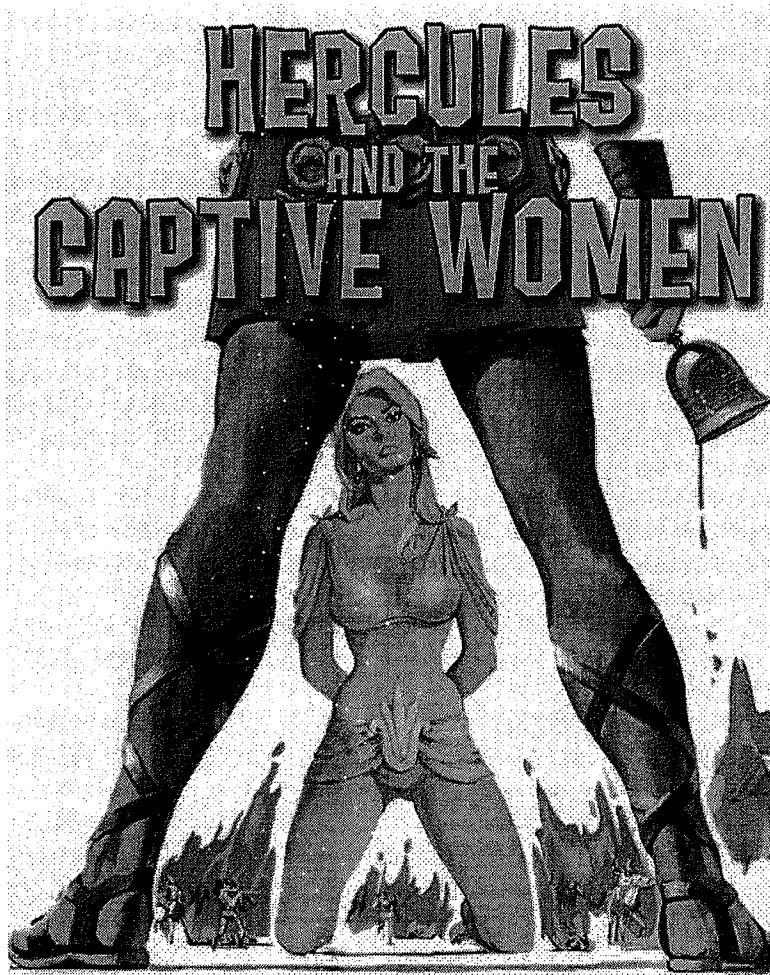


Fig. 10-1: Cover art for the 2007 re-issue of *Hercules and the Captive Women* on DVD. Reproduced by kind permission of Retromedia.

As an extreme expression of the power of female sexuality, Antinea suited the peplum's preference for camp hyper-sexuality. The model of the seductive queen was established in the first film of the genre, when Reeves' Hercules encounters Antea, queen of the Amazons. The equivalent figure in the film's acknowledged ancient source (Apollonius's *Argonautica*) is named Hypsipyle. This change to a name so similar to Antinea suggests that Benoit's idea of the vampish anti-heroine is deeply embedded in the conventions of the peplum genre. Exaggerated presentations of sexuality are a strong linking thread throughout the films. In her famous essay "On Camp", the cultural critic Susan Sontag points out the genre's fondness for the "corny flamboyant female-ness of Jayne Mansfield [who starred in three different roles in *Gli amore di Ercole*]...the exaggerated he-man-ness of Steve Reeves" (Sontag 1982: 109). Hyper-sexual characterisations define moral good and evil in the films: hyper-muscular bodybuilder heroes battle emasculated villains, usually denoted by their asexuality or rejection by the women they desire. Virginal blonde heroines compete for their man against cynical and sexually experienced brunettes—though both are equally pneumatic.

The obvious attraction of such erotically charged figures to popular cinema audiences is clearly illustrated in the ways the films were advertised. In the US, *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* became *Hercules and the Captive Women*, rather than the more literal translation used for its UK release. Taglines for the US release exploited Ismene's brief capture by Proteus—"The Weirdest! The Wildest! Half Woman Half Stone!"—and asked "What sadistic secret did these women possess?" More recently, the cover for the DVD release in 2007 transformed features from the original publicity posters, showing a bound, bikini-clad woman framed between the splayed legs of a male figure trailing an empty wine goblet. (Fig. 10-1.) This scene, with its intimations of sexual violence, does not exist in the film, though it refers to two features of the plot (the bondage of Ismene and the drugging of Hercules' wine). However, the images of eroticism, debauchery and implied violence used to illustrate them have their origin in the popular understanding of the pepla genre rather than in this rather unusual film. Indeed they show quite opposite characterisations of the figures apparently represented: the innocent adolescent (and decidedly unpneumatic) Ismene and the indolent but domesticated Hercules. Even the title is more apt for selling the pepla as a B-movie genre than the film itself: there are many captive men (Androcles, the slaves in the uranium mines), but Ismene is the only captive woman—although she is captured and released surprisingly often.



Such exaggerated heterosexuality was a necessary tactic for more than just attracting viewers. It also played an essential role in allaying any concerns the mass audience might have about the potential homoeroticism of the films' core feature: their display of built male bodies. A similar focus on visual representations of oiled, tanned, unclothed muscular males had previously been the special preserve of physique photography magazines: a tacit alibi for homoeroticism (Wyke 1997b: 59-63). Most of the bodybuilders who starred in the films had also posed for such magazines, Reeves and Park included. Peplum films offered the chance for those who had previously enjoyed these magnificent bodies in static, often statue-like, poses to watch them in motion. The attraction of the films for this "openly secret" spectator group must be disguised from the lucrative heterosexual (and often homophobic) mass audience. However, if the aim of US advertising was to sidestep homoerotic associations with the bodybuilder, Cottafavi's choice of Uranus as the Atlanteans' god threatened to confound that. The term Uranian came into limited use in the mid-19th century to describe male homosexuals.<sup>13</sup> References to the worship of Uranus would certainly alert any viewers aware of this coded usage.

Even so, the threat to male sexuality most often reiterated by the film is not homosexuality but transformation. Antinea uses the rock of Uranus to transform men into superhuman warriors. However, they also become clones, facsimile albino warriors with no identity of their own, their masculine will subjugated to a woman. This gender transformation is echoed in the film's references to emasculation. In his first contact with Atlantis, Hercules' defeat of Proteus is achieved when he breaks off the lizard's phallus-like horn.<sup>14</sup> Proteus's power is derived (like a mirror of Antinea's) by draining the life force from young females: Antinea's own daughter Ismene has been sent as a sacrifice to this monster. Hercules

<sup>13</sup> The term was first used by the German writer Karl Ulrichs in a series of booklets written in 1864-1865, defending male same-sex love (White 1999: 4). It is likely to have been derived from Plato's *Symposium*, which describes Aphrodite's birth from the sea, after Uranus's testicles were cast there following his castration. Plato makes a distinction between Aphrodite Ourania (heavenly/spiritual love) and Aphrodite Pandemia (earthly/physical love), later drawn on by homosexual apologists like John Addington Symonds.

<sup>14</sup> Another example of Cottafavi's recycling of ancient myth, this repeats the incident in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (9.1-100) when Hercules wrestles and defeats the river god Achelous for the hand of Deianeira. Achelous transforms himself into various forms, including a serpent and a bull, whereupon Hercules breaks off one of his horns.

frees the young woman by disarming Proteus of his male power. (Is this yet another adaptation of Hercules to the times—a hero of women's liberation?) Most tellingly, the transformative rock which Antinea uses is itself the result of Uranus's castration. In mythology, as mentioned above, this violent act of emasculation that creates the Furies is the revenge of Mother Earth. In the film, the heavy metal uranium aptly stands in for these avenging figures, and its eventual destruction of the island through nuclear explosion wreaks revenge on the Atlanteans for their misuse of Mother Nature—and indicates to the more sophisticated viewer our own possible fate in the atomic age.

### Power and Nature

Trying to persuade him to remain on Atlantis, Antinea tells Hercules of her "plan to subjugate nature to our own scope". Hercules' reply voices the ambiguity of man's love-hate relationship with nature, saying "I am happy with nature as it is—savage and gentle at the same time, cruel and yet generous". Antinea's ambition to master nature is to prove hybridic when Atlantis is destroyed: the serious message of this mostly comic film is that our own attempts to gain power through interference with nature may prove equally disastrous.

For some years before the release of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the ancient world had proved a productive location for cinematic narratives about the use and abuse of power. After the end of the Second World War, epic films set in Rome rehearsed the Allied victory over fascism in an ancient arena, presenting a tyrannically militaristic Roman Empire opposed (and ultimately defeated) by the freedom fighters of early Christianity. Examples of this "tyranny versus freedom" theme included *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) and *Ben-Hur* (1959). In the same period, ancient Greece was more often used as a metaphor for nature in conflict with culture: the love of Helen and Paris thwarted by political expediencies in *Helen of Troy* (1956); the talents of Alexander corrupted by the acquisition of great power in *Alexander the Great* (1956); the strength of Hercules against the technological inventions of his enemies in the peplum films. *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* also has its example of the futility of political power in a scene where Androcles and Hercules try to persuade a council of Greek kings to send forces to defeat the mysterious "threat from the West". Each ruler shows his impotence in different ways: one is henpecked by his mother, others squabble over land or money. For the original Italian rural audience, this catalogue of uselessness figured the futile chaos that was

post-war Italian local politics. The message of this comic scene is that real power lies in action, not talk.

More seriously, the power and nature themes in this film converge to focus on man's use of atomic power. The late 19th and early 20th Centuries saw the growth of confidence in Western nations that the purpose of science was to provide solutions to all of humanity's problems. This optimistic view had begun to ebb with the two devastating World Wars of the first half of the 20th century, and the realisation that advances in science could be used for harmful as well as beneficial results. In particular, the use of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 was a horrific example of the vast destructive powers that could result from science's interference with nature. E.L. Doctorow (1986: 330) has famously described the relationship of the American people with nuclear power since that time, observing that

We have had the bomb on our minds since 1945. It was first our weaponry and then our diplomacy, and now it's our economy. How can we suppose that something so monstrously powerful would not, after forty years, compose our identity?<sup>15</sup>

At the time of the film's release, in addition to the immediate devastation, the extent of longer-term effects were beginning to become fully apparent. These included the appearance of a range of birth defects, demonstrating radiation's capacity to change the very way in which human beings developed. Antinea's transformed race of albino warriors, with their homogeneous mask-like faces, offer a cinematic realisation of science's power to remake men.

Although the substance Antinea uses to maintain her power is never named as the heavy metal uranium, cinematic clues make it clear. The Atlanteans worship the god Uranus, who gave his name to the planet discovered in the 18th century, which in turn gave its name to the new

<sup>15</sup> Among its many appearances, this quote appears in the preface to *American Prometheus*, a biography of Robert Oppenheimer published in 2005 by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. The title suggests a reading of nuclear weaponry through ancient myth. Oppenheimer led the Manhattan Project, responsible for developing the first nuclear weapons during World War 2. However, he also (at least initially) opposed the subsequent development of the hydrogen bomb, and as a public policy adviser lobbied for the products of nuclear power to be controlled by scientists, not governments. This conflict is illustrated by his revelation (described in a television interview) that, at the moment of the first atomic test, he thought of a quote from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds".

element discovered eight years later.<sup>16</sup> The Rock of Uranus, used by Antinea to effect the transformation of her invincible army, lies deep in the heart of the mountain. Those men who are rejects of the transformative process are imprisoned in a pit. They show Hercules the sores that cover their bodies as a result of their contact with the material: cancers induced by contact with radioactive material. The immeasurable power that Antinea claims to have found in the Rock fixes its identification with the element that finally had the power to end the Second World War in the nuclear explosions which Androcles prophesies in the film: "Blood will rain down and the skies will burn".

Opposed to this technological power is the natural power of Hercules: in particular, his great physical strength. The attraction of this anti-culture attribute for the people's largest rural and urban working class audiences has already been described. A scene in another peplum film, *The Giant of Marathon* (1959, dir. Tourneur) makes the particular valorisation of agricultural labour explicit, showing Steve Reeves straining his giant muscles as he ploughs the fields. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* there are many narrative opportunities for feats of strength: Hercules drags a ship by its anchor chain, bends iron bars, pushes up a stone ceiling, collapses pillars and hurls giant rocks. The irony of using bodybuilders to illustrate Hercules' greatest attribute is that the sport is essentially designed to produce bodies for display rather than strength. In their moments of triumph at competitions, bodybuilders are often at their weakest: dehydrated and starved of energy-providing carbohydrates in order to present the best muscle definition. Park was unusual in this respect, usually ending his bodybuilding exhibitions with a display of actual strength. As with the coded references to Uranus, only those in the know would be able to appreciate this considered casting fully, offering more evidence that this film was designed by its makers to be enjoyed on many levels.

Antinea's Rock of Uranus brings together the film's key themes: the use and abuse of power and nature, and anxieties about gender roles and sexuality. Formed as the result of an act of emasculation, it offers great power, but only at the expense of unpredictable and potentially devastating effects. If uranium is the product of the blood of Uranus, then the film's critique associates it unequivocally with violence and vengeance, war and destruction, and the hybriatic dangers of tampering with nature. In particular, the film's warning that the danger comes "out of the west"

<sup>16</sup> The element was discovered and named by the German scientist M.H. Klaproth in 1789. The usage is first recorded in the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1797.

presents an explicit critique of US possession of nuclear weaponry, in the context of Cold War paranoia.

In many respects, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* does nothing to dispel the anti-peplum prejudices of film critics. It wastes little of its resources on subtlety or nuanced acting, preferring brief moments of audience-grabbing spectacle; the methods for producing its special effects are barely concealed from its audience (stock footage of explosions for the destruction of Atlantis, undisguised strings in Proteus's bird transformation sequence); its male and female stars seem to be in a competition for the largest chest measurement and smallest costume. However, a closer examination of its characterisations and narrative themes shows that this film was always intended to be enjoyed on many different levels by a range of viewers.

Although this film is unusual in the sophistication and seriousness of its representations, it should remind us that the cultural process of meaning-making never becomes less valid when applied to texts primarily consumed by mass audiences. Despite—perhaps because of—their overtly commercial aspirations, formulaic narratives and characterisations, and non-professional leading men, the peplum films can reveal much about the uses modern mass culture has for the ancient world, and existing ideas about antiquity assumed in their audiences.

Peplum films will repay time spent studying them simply because of their very wide disseminations, and consequent influence on later representations of the ancient world. The triangular body shape of Disney's *Hercules*, for instance, certainly owes more to Steve Reeves than to ancient sculpture. However, the genre's glorious collages of ancient and modern mythologies make their viewing not just productive, but also fun. Peplum films blithely exploit the plasticity of an ancient world whose narratives are never fixed, however many age-old texts we pore over. They have given many thousands of viewers pleasure watching representations of antiquity—and for that fact alone we should celebrate them.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### HELL HATH NO FURY LIKE A DISSATISFIED VIEWER: AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO THE PRESENTATION OF THE FURIES IN *XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS* AND *CHARMED*

AMANDA POTTER

Switch on your television set and you are unlikely to see actors dressed as ancient Greeks or Romans. Despite the success of *I, Claudius* in the 1970s, and more recently HBO/BBC's *Rome*, we have yet to see *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street* replaced with a soap opera set in 5th-century Athens. But if you listen carefully you might still hear the resonances of antiquity. Robin Hood compares the plight of his small band of outlaws facing a hundred mercenaries with that of the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae in the BBC's *Robin Hood*.<sup>1</sup> In an old people's home in *Smallville*, a blind woman called Cassandra can see the future.<sup>2</sup> These references might be viewed as "trivial" and "superficial", juxtaposed as they are with ideas and images from other periods and cultures.<sup>3</sup> Are television script writers including them because they expect their viewers to recognise them, or are they simply lazy, plundering the archives of myth and history to avoid the work of inventing new stories? This could be particularly true when we come across modern retellings of ancient myths: sometimes myths that are not very well known, like the use of the story of Philoctetes in the BBC's *Doctor Who* spin-off series

<sup>1</sup> *Robin Hood*, Season 2, Episode 12, "A Good Day to Die", first broadcast in the UK by the BBC in 2007. This episode was first broadcast after the release of the film *300* (dir. Snyder 2007), perhaps making viewers more likely to recognise the reference.

<sup>2</sup> *Smallville*, Season 1, Episode 6, "Hourglass", first broadcast in the US by the Warner Bros. Television Network in 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Goldhill (2004: 2-3) discusses how classical images have been trivialised.