

TROY D'oh! *The Iliad Redux*: Some Notes on Adaptation in *Troy*

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Disappointment is almost guaranteed whenever people attempt to adapt any literary work for the cinema, especially because nerds like myself will forever be questioning the faithfulness of the film to the short story, novel or poem on which it is based. So while I am well aware that listening to another stickle over inconsistencies in adaptation can be equally irritating, it goes without saying that such critical 'house-cleaning' is nevertheless a necessary step on the path to understanding how an adapted work of the stature of Homer's epic appears in its new form. Hence, I present the following notes.

Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* attempts to synthesize the entire relationship between Paris and Helen and the subsequent fall of beautiful Ilium into 3 hours of screen time. Homer himself never attempted such a feat in *The Iliad*: the bulk of the Trojan cycle is filled out by the poet in *The Odyssey*, not to mention the work of other poets and playwrights, including Virgil, who describes the final days of Troy through the voice of Aeneas in *The Aeneid*. Having said that, a clearer picture of the whole will no doubt give a more complete notion of the world presented in *Troy*, if only because it'll show what the film includes, omits, and how interesting these choices are.

THE GODS

One does not turn to a page in *The Iliad* without finding some reference to the gods. Deleting their presence from the story has the effect of cutting out all the ads from an issue of *Vanity Fair*: it leaves you with a rather skimpy amount of paper. Setting aside the amount of

time spent in Greek and Roman literature departments discussing whether or not people believed in physical manifestations of divinity, their physical and tangible presence is important to the world of *The Iliad*. Set in the hallowed age of heroes when gods and humans were thought to have interacted on a regular basis, the poem offers divinity as a force that has direct influence on the events of the siege. The film however, as a modern existential version of the story, presents humans as entirely in control of all of the actions and events. Paris (Orlando Bloom) and Helen (Diane Kruger) are depicted as actually being in love rather than paired off by virtue of Paris' selection of Aphrodite as the winner of a beauty contest with Athena and Hera. While absolute human agency is an interesting spin on the events, it causes, first, a lot of narrative problems and, second, difficulties in the presentation of Greek culture.

One major problem that their omission creates is linked to the issue of prophecy and fate. Prophecy is a major aspect of the Homeric epic and of the culture of the period. People of power never acted without querying the gods first and then struggling over the instructions given, interpretation being a central part of divine prophecy; gods were rarely concise. Part of the tragedy of Troy is that the most of the people involved know that bad things are going to happen. The city's fate lies solely with Hector, who senses that his death will signal that the end of Troy is nigh. The prophetic figure on the Trojan side is Cassandra, whose fate—to speak the truth and yet to never be believed—is at the core of the tale's tragic forcefulness. TROY skirts this issue entirely by simply omitting the character of

Cassandra altogether, emphasizing the (post-) modern, Nietzschean rift between god(s) and humans that the film takes for granted.

SEXUALITY

The aggressive heterosexuality of *Troy* is as prominent as the absence of the gods. Many, many months ago I audibly groaned when I heard that Patroclus (Garrett Hedland) was going to be presented as Achilles' (Brad Pitt) cousin rather than as his lover. Thankfully I wasn't called upon to offer up this response a second time during the screening I attended, as a man behind me yelled out during Patroclus' funeral, "He's his lover you fucking Hollywood cowards, read the books!" Negotiating male sexuality in the Greek world may be difficult for us today, but this does not mean we can simply gloss over the fact that men in most ancient city-states were free to have sex with women and young men, a young man being seen as the something of an equivalent to a woman. While the Greeks never offered anything in the way of a sociological explanation of this practice, a possible source is the absence of a structured educational system. Whereas rich families could afford a tutor, it was common to send a young man ("eromenos") to be educated by an older man ("erastes") with experience in the arts of rhetoric, politics and military tactics. The labels "eromenos" and "erastes" suggest that a sexual relationship occurred on a fairly regular basis (see Plato on pederasty). While male sexuality in this context was strictly codified, it was read in terms of active and passive positions whereby the male is defined as being the active participant (the top in modern lingo) to the female or feminized passive (the bottom).

I label *Troy* an aggressively heterosexual film because it goes out of its way to avoid any possible male-on-male sexual practice, even though an explanation would have been easy to insert into the narrative. But *Troy*'s peculiar 'sexlessness' goes beyond this; the current hetero-social fear of the male body in cinema extends even to the film's depiction of the Greek camp and to the manner in which the leading figures are represented. The absence of nude male bodies caught me somewhat by surprise particularly because nude men would hardly have been scarce in this context. Part of Greek social practice was to exercise and wrestle in the nude. Nudity also extends to the realm of hygiene, as displayed in the Roman marble copy of the *Apoxymenos* by Lysippos. *Apoxymenos* literally translates as "oil scraper;" the statue itself displays men cleaning themselves by rubbing oil on their bodies and then running around

until they are sweaty so that the oil and dirt could be scraped off.

As for the leading males, Brad Pitt and Eric Bana (Hector), the mere presence of their muscular bodies does in some way connote a sense of sexuality and offer eye candy for the viewer. However, the film does nothing in its formal structure to 'sexualize' their bodies. Throughout TROY I kept thinking about how Brad Pitt's body had a stronger sexual presence in FIGHT CLUB than it does as the semidivine Achilles.

TIME

A crucial aspect of the epic nature of *The Iliad* is that it takes place over an absurdly long period of time. The 10 years that the war lasts creates a sense of drainage, exhaustion, and desperation between the two camps. *Troy*, in its Movieland revisionism, cuts this period down to a couple of weeks, which somehow seems to drain out the tension that was so important to the original. While the action of *The Iliad* itself occurs in a relatively short period of time, it constantly alludes to the past and the future, indicating that there is more to the story than what is presented in the poem. But *Troy* does the complete opposite by trying to be too tidy about characters and plot. And, while there is a nod to Virgil and *The Aeneid* in the form of a cameo appearance by Aeneas (Frankie Fitzgerald), Petersen's version disregards so many narrative strands that he's forced to kill off characters in a stunningly throwaway fashion. The deaths of Ajax (Tyler Mane) and Agamemnon (Brian Cox) are particularly odd, for both figures play prominent roles in tragedies set after end of the Trojan War, penned by Sophocles and Aeschylus respectively. *Troy* therefore superimposes a structure of closure whereby the villainous Agamemnon dies on camera for the sake of pleasing the audience and maintaining the first rule of the Blockbuster action movie: the bad guy must die before our eyes.