
Contempts

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Homer's odysseus is a man who wants to eat the world. He has an appetite for tasting, knowing, possessing everything he sees, he is a hero of acquisition, he is "one who knows profit," as Homer says. How does Homer heroize this pragmatic person? He complicates him economically: there is a vexing of the question how ideal or honorable profit differs from greedy gain. Similar issues play out in two modern reworkings of the *Odyssey*, Alberto Moravia's novel *Contempt* (*Il disprezzo*, published 1954)¹ and Jean-Luc Godard's film *Contempt* (*Le mépris*, based on Moravia's novel and filmed in 1963).

Homer was himself a poet who sang for his supper. He goes out of his way in the *Odyssey* to show how this worked, with snapshot accounts of the bards Demodokos, at the court of King Alkinoos, and Phemios, in Odysseus' own palace on Ithaka. Both are poets permanently attached to a household that pays them food, wine, shelter, and honor in return for the performance of songs that please. In the first book of the *Odyssey*, we see Telemachos instructing the house poet Phemios to sing only the most up-to-date songs and so keep his audience entertained.² Homer must have felt this pressure too: the *Iliad* was a hard act to follow, a war story like no other. So he made the *Odyssey* a postwar epic. It idealizes survival rather than death and features Odysseus, a hero for whom survival is pointless unless profitable. Here is a remark Odysseus makes to Penelope in book 19. He has arrived home but is still in disguise; claiming to be a traveling salesman from Krete, he tells Penelope he recently encountered Odysseus on his journey and

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in fact Odysseus would have been home long before now
but it seemed to his mind more profitable
to go to many lands acquiring stuff.
For Odysseus *knows profit* over and above mortal men
nor could anyone else alive rival him at this.³

His wife does not question the explanation. She knows her husband as well as he knows profit. Odysseus is a famously acquisitive man. But he is also an aristocrat in a society where status is the chief determinant of value and status resides in wealth. A distinction has to be made between aristocratic wealth, which is honorable, and trader's gain or commercial profit, which is not—so Odysseus remarks more than once in the *Odyssey*. Aristocratic wealth took the form of treasure or *keimêlion*—a Greek word that means literally “something to be laid away or treasured up.” *Keimêlion* in epic poetry was bronze, iron, gold, silver, or fine cloth; these objects of treasure had some direct use-value and gave aesthetic pleasure, but their real importance was as symbolic wealth or prestige wealth. As Moses Finley says, “The twin uses of treasure were in possessing it and in giving it away.”⁴ Odysseus does not wander the world for nine years racking up stuff for his own amusement. He brings wealth home in order to store it as treasure (establishing his status) and give it away as gifts to other aristocrats (advertising his status). Or at least such is the story that Homer's aristocratic audience wants to hear about its forebears.

Profit is the topic of Moravia's novel *Contempt* and of Godard's movie version of it. Both tell the story of a writer who is hired by a big producer to come up with the script for a film of Homer's *Odyssey*. While he is writing this script the writer's marriage falls apart. Parallels are drawn between writer/wife/producer on the one hand and Odysseus/Penelope/suitors on the other. At the end, the writer's wife drives off with the producer in his sports car and is killed in a freak accident.

Profit brings trouble to the husband and wife of Moravia's *Contempt*. The husband, Riccardo, is well educated, intellectually proud, and given to exhausting analyses of his psyche. He has taken a screenwriting job because he needs the money to pay off an apartment he bought for his wife. He refers to his life as "tainted and crippled" by money.⁵ Screenwriting seems to him "a kind of rape of the intelligence,"⁶ and of his script he says, "Now I shall have to submit the *Odyssey* to the usual massacre, to reduce it to a film."⁷ His wife Emilia is a happy materialist, a former typist, not her husband's equal in education, intellect, or moral sensibility—as Riccardo frequently reminds us (the novel is told in his voice). She regards his bouts of self-reflection with indifference, gives him a blank stare or simply leaves the room. The plot of the novel revolves around the mysterious contempt that Emilia begins to exhibit toward Riccardo shortly after he accepts the screenwriting job. She acts cold, decides they should sleep in separate rooms, and after nine chapters of his ceaseless interrogation admits she doesn't love him anymore, that she in fact despises him. He analyzes this for the rest of the book. Eventually he decides that he offended Emilia the first time they went out to dinner with the producer by allowing the producer to speed off with her in his sports car while he, Riccardo, followed in a taxi. That is, Emilia presumed her husband was pimping her to the producer as part of the scriptwriting deal. As if Odysseus had come home and told the suitors to do what they liked with Penelope. It remains unclear to me whether we are meant to believe this explanation of Emilia's contempt or not. It is only one of a number of hypotheses that Riccardo advances, and Emilia agrees with each of them in turn. Her motives, her real desires, her psychic depths remain opaque to the reader right through the end of the novel. In Riccardo's view she is a person entirely unconcerned with self-knowledge. Of the accident that ends her life Riccardo says, she "died without knowing it."⁸

This inscrutable person is played by Brigitte Bardot in Godard's movie, a casting choice that changed certain quotients of the story and the production. Bardot turned out to be

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what Proust calls his character Odette, "a trouble halo." Not only because she was blonde (the Emilia of the novel is dark) but because she cost five million francs, was followed everywhere by paparazzi and a phalanx of bodyguards, and represented for the France of that time a consummate definition of the female, Brigitte Bardot bent the story out of shape, while ensuring its success at the box office. Godard needed a box office success. His last two films had failed and no one could say where the French New Wave was headed. He didn't like to see it headed for Hollywood and Hollywood's production values, but when he took Brigitte Bardot he took on all the complexities and compromises of a big-budget film. He had to change his methods and surrender authority to an American producer named Joe Levine. In many respects his situation was analogous to that of poor conflicted Riccardo in Moravia's novel: Oscar Wilde would admire the way art stepped forward to be life in this scenario. But wasn't it also Wilde who said, "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it"? Godard yielded so thoroughly to the temptation of cinemascope he created a movie that is a spectacle of compromise. Soaring past the ethical quibbles of the novel, *Le mépris* celebrates its own selling out in a spirit of self-delighted cunning that would make Odysseus proud. Godard is a man who *knows profit*. He is also an artist who can make out of the theme of profit an epic imaginary.

A few examples of Godard's play with profit. Let's begin with his use of things German. In Moravia's novel, the movie producer hires a German director to collaborate with Riccardo on the *Odyssey* script. His name is (helpfully) Rheingold and Riccardo describes him like this:

Rheingold was a German director who, in the pre-Nazi film era, had directed, in Germany, various films of the "colossal" type, which had had a considerable success at the time. He was certainly not in the same class as the Pabsts and Langs; but, as a director, he was worthy of respect, not in the least commercial, and with ambitions with which one might not perhaps agree but which were nevertheless serious. After the advent of Hitler, nothing had been heard

of him. It was said that he was working in Hollywood, but no film under his signature had been shown in recent years in Italy. And now here he was . . . I looked at Rheingold with curiosity.⁹

Rheingold has the noble head of an Olympian, framed in shining silver hair, the head of a great man. But on closer examination Riccardo sees that this nobility lacks substance:

The features were slightly coarse and at the same time spongy, flimsy, as though made of cardboard, like those of a mask; giving, in fact, the impression that there was nothing behind them, like the faces of the enormous heads that are carried round by tiny little men at carnival-times. Rheingold rose to shake me by the hand, giving a little bow with his head only, and a slight click of the heels, in the stiff German manner.¹⁰

To play this cardboard Olympian “not in the same class as the Pabsts and Langs,” Godard hired Fritz Lang himself, the great director of such films as *M* and *Metropolis* during the silent era in Germany, who fled that country when the Nazis came to power. Lang ended up in Hollywood in the '50s, making film noir and westerns like *The Big Heat* and *Rancho Notorious*. New Wave directors (especially Godard) regarded these films highly and revered Fritz Lang as one who had tried to remain true to the “classical” principles of cinematography while the world around him fell into barbarity. In *Contempt* he comes across as a resigned idealist, given to quoting Dante or Hölderlin and gazing off into the Olympian distance through his monocle. He is the only incorruptible figure in the movie (and functionally represents Godard, who appears in a cameo as Lang’s assistant director). But he is also a man of a bygone era, an anachronism, weighed down by a burden of culture he cannot pass on. His literary allusions escape the boorish American producer (Jack Palance) and the glimpses we get of his *Odyssey* look hilariously bad. Godard has developed this Fritz Lang character out of the Rheingold of Moravia’s novel but he has turned Rheingold inside out. Moravia’s Rheingold is a Freudian, who reads the *Odyssey* as a psychological allegory and dis-

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misses what he calls “neoclassical storytelling claptrap” in these terms: “A masquerade in technicolor with naked women, King Kong, stomach dances, brassières, cardboard monsters, model sets!”¹¹

This is exactly the film that Fritz Lang is making of the *Odyssey*. In the rushes, we see an Aegean background with large cardboard heads and painted eyes that seem to be Greek gods; a smaller non-cardboard actor in heavy makeup who must be Odysseus; a bunch of nymphs cavorting naked in an ocean. This is highly mediated Homer. And not even *Gymnasium*-trained Fritz Lang has the heart to object when the script calls these characters Minerva, Neptune, Jupiter, and Ulysses instead of using their proper Greek names.

Yet he is very aware of the power of names, this Fritz Lang character. Godard gives him a pun to make this clear. In a scene where the production team is leaving the screening room, Fritz Lang turns to the screenwriter and quotes a poem of Bertolt Brecht’s. Written during Brecht’s Hollywood exile, “The Ballad of Poor B.B.” tells of a poet who goes down to the marketplace each morning to sell his dreams. But of course to Godard’s audience the initials B.B. stand for Brigitte Bardot, nationally known as “notre chère B.B.” Which returns us to Brigitte Bardot and her connection with the various kinds of profit Godard was after in this movie. In a 1963 interview, Godard acknowledges that he failed to transform Brigitte Bardot into the Emilia of Moravia’s novel. “Bardot,” he says, “is a block. You have to take it as a block, all in one piece, that’s why it’s interesting.”¹² Certainly this interesting block is not the Emilia of Moravia’s novel. Let’s reconsider Emilia, in light of the question how Homer influenced Moravia and Godard.

Moravia knows something about Homer or did a bit of research. He has constructed his novel, as Homer constructed his poem, around the two most important social rituals of the epic world, hospitality and supplication. Scenes of supplication are dispersed throughout the novel, as Riccardo again and again entreats his wife to explain why she has stopped

loving him—most dramatically, at the center of the story and at the climax of a ten-page nonstop marital argument, Riccardo, who is seated before Emilia standing, grabs her around the knees and presses his head into her lap, demanding the truth: this is a precise enactment of the formal gesture of *hiketeia* (supplication) depicted routinely in Homer's poems. A ritual act of *xenia* (hospitality) also proves crucial to Moravia's plot when the movie producer invites Riccardo and Emilia to his villa on the island of Capri so Riccardo can work on his script and Emilia sunbathe. It is a tense and tricky weekend bringing all relationships—master/slave, lover/loved, host/guest—into wicked complication.

But by far the most convincingly antiquarian aspect of Moravia's novel is his idea of the female, as it is filtered to us through Riccardo—an idea that would have made sense to Homer and to Aristotle and to most Greek men in between: an idea of woman as a formless content that takes its form and activation from the male. One example of this kind of thinking is the philosophical text called *The Pythagorean Table of Oppositions*, cited by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*.¹³ It arranges the components of reality in two opposing lists. So on one side the concept "masculine" and the concept "boundary or limit" are set over against "feminine" and "the unbounded" on the other side. Woman is regarded here as a creature whose boundaries are unstable, whose power to control them is inadequate. Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated. Think of the female life cycle with its bloods, its pregnancies, its changes of shape. Think of the monsters of Greek myth, who are mostly women with de-ranged boundaries, like Skylla, Medusa, the Sirens, the Harpies, the Sphinx. Self-control is a virtue—physical, mental, and moral—that women do not possess. So it makes sense that in Moravia's novel when Riccardo looks closely at Emilia he frequently sees her disintegrating. Typical passage:

She looked at me . . . I noticed then a peculiarity which I already knew: her beautiful, dark, serene face, so harmonious, so symmet-

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rical, so compact, underwent, through the irresolution that cleft her mind, a process almost, as it were, of decay: one cheek seemed to have grown thinner (but not the other), her mouth was no longer exactly in the middle of her face, her eyes, bewildered and dim, seemed to be disintegrating within their sockets as though within a circle of dark wax.¹⁴

Emilia remains for Riccardo a locus of ambiguity. He cannot grasp her. Since she is “just a typist” he puts it down to her being irrational or corrupt or both. We never find out if this is true; Emilia’s character is always out of focus, seen through the lens of Riccardo’s exasperation. In the movie, when the Bardot-block takes over this character, its ambiguity is amplified but the ambiguity takes on a depth of interestingness it doesn’t have in the book. Bardot is a secret. She remains a secret. I can’t analyze this. I’ll give an example of how it works in the movie—of how she and Godard collaborated to make it work, to keep her secret.

There was a critical issue of profit involved. Oscar Wilde again: “Morality like art means drawing a line somewhere.”¹⁵ When he shot the film, Godard had drawn a line at Bardot’s body; he did not exploit it. There is a bathtub scene, but it shows her lying in the bath with a very large book of film criticism (about Fritz Lang) obscuring her body. When the American producer Levine saw the first cut of *Contempt* he was irate, felt he’d been cheated, and demanded nudity. He wanted to get his five million francs’ worth out of that body. So Godard added a scene at the start of the film, before the credits. It shows a naked Bardot lying on a bed with her husband beside her. They are talking. She is asking him if he likes her body. She itemizes every body part. “Do you like my toes, do you like my knees, do you like my ass?” she asks. “Which do you like better, my right toes or my left toes? My right knee or my left knee? My breasts or my nipples?” Meanwhile the camera roves around her body, dwelling most lengthily on her backside. Riccardo answers each of her questions solemnly and finally says, “I love you totally, tenderly, tragically.” To which Bardot with

majestic ambiguity replies, "Moi aussi," and the scene ends.

Bardot performs this scene entirely without contempt. Her gestures are simple, transparent; her tone of voice quietly banal; her attitude as innocent as water. And somehow from the pure center of this total and totally imposed exposure of herself, she disappears. Even as she puts herself on sale, toe by toe and nipple by nipple—to her husband's judgment, to Godard's camera, to the moviegoers' gaze—she eludes the transaction. She becomes something exorbitant, as a secret must be. We could never afford her.

And from this moment on she is the soft master of every scene. By far my favorite of her tactics of soft mastery is the wrap gesture. There are three (I think) places in the movie where Bardot puts on a bathrobe. In each case as a single action she shrugs it on, flings the belt around her waist, draws it tight with both hands, and leaves the scene. It's stupendous. She wraps herself and goes. She wins. Every time she does this, she wins the movie. "Are you an innately unbounded thing?" the movie asks Bardot, and instead of answering she wraps herself in boundlessness and exits.

Bardot is the hero of this epic. She too *knows profit*. From the opening shot, she comports herself as a *keimêlion*, as a treasure laid up, and she seems able to retain and to impose on us a sense of this *keimêlion* as exorbitant, beyond price. Like Odysseus, she has the power to possess it or to give it away. And in collaboration with Godard she manages to make us believe that profit, for those who know it, can have a transcendent face, or at least a transcendent ass.

notes

1. Alberto Moravia, *Il disprezzo* (Milan 1954); quotations from *Contempt*, translated by Angus Davidson (New York 1999).

2. *Odyssey* 1.351–52.

3. *Odyssey* 19.282–86.

4. Moses Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York 2002), 61.

5. Moravia (note 1), 233.

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6. Moravia (note 1), 41.
7. Moravia (note 1), 99.
8. Moravia (note 1), 249.
9. Moravia (note 1), 79–80.
10. Moravia (note 1), 80.
11. Moravia (note 1), 206.
12. Interview with Jean Collet, 12 September 1963, cited in T. Mussman, *Jean-Luc Godard* (New York 1968), 146.
13. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.5.986a.
14. Moravia (note 1), 68.
15. Actually, it was Chesterton who said this, but when I gave this paper at a conference I thought it was Wilde.

The following were also helpful:

Leo Bersani and U. Dutoit, *Forming Couples: Godard's Contempt* (Oxford 2003).

Carol Dougherty, *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford 2001).

C. MacCabe, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy* (New York 2003).