

---

## Homer on Film: A Voyage Through *The Odyssey*, *Ulysses*, *Helen of Troy*, and *Contempt*

CAMILLE PAGLIA

*The Odyssey*, adapted for television by Andrei Konchalovsky and Christopher Solimine. Directed by Andrei Konchalovsky. Miniseries produced by American Zoetrope in association with Hallmark Entertainment for NBC (May 18 and 19, 1997).

THE MAY 1997 NBC television miniseries of *The Odyssey*, a production of Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope in association with Hallmark Entertainment, should give courage to the faint of heart in the culture wars. The canon lives!

*The Odyssey's* executive producer, Robert Halmi, Sr., 73, who worked in the Hungarian Resistance during World War II, is an author and photographer as well as producer of nearly two hundred feature films and television dramas, such as *Svengali* (1983), *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991), *Lonesome Dove* (1987), and *Gulliver's Travels* (1996). The popular and critical success of *Gulliver's Travels*—the miniseries drew over thirty million viewers nightly and won XX Emmys—led to NBC's quick approval of Halmi's proposal to do *The Odyssey* as a two-part, four-hour telecast. With evangelical fervor, Halmi has now devoted himself to bringing the classics to a mass audience: his productions of Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and Dante's *Inferno* are either nearing completion or in planning.

Andrei Konchalovsky, the director of *The Odyssey*, was born in Russia and was trained as a classical pianist and then as a filmmaker. Lured to Hollywood after his epic, *Siberiade*,

won the Special Jury Prize at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, he has directed a variety of middling films, of which the best known is *Runaway Train* (1985). Konchalavsky has a reputation for Russian emotional intensity and benevolent despotism on the set. For this project, however, his control may not have extended to casting, since producer Halmi, a whirlwind impresario in the old-fashioned studio-mogul style, likes to handpick his principal actors.

Though reliable figures are hazy, NBC's *Odyssey* apparently cost \$32,000,000, more than any miniseries in television history. Much of the budget was consumed by logistics: the four-month shooting schedule required equipment and basic supplies to be flown and trucked into remote areas of Turkey without roads. There were six-hundred local extras and the massive props normally commissioned only for epic movies: a sixty-foot wooden Trojan Horse on wheels; two full-scale, twenty-oar Greek ships costing nearly a quarter of a million dollars; and a water tank longer than a football field erected on a Maltese beach for Odysseus' scenes at sea. Special effects were also costly. London's FrameStore designed the computerized graphics, which created storms, caverns, gods, and the Greek army and war fleet, consisting of mechanically multiplied images of soldiers and ships. The Creature Shop (the Muppet factory now run by the late Jim Henson's son, Brian) built the monstrous Scylla; Laocoön's deadly sea serpent; and the one-eyed Cyclops' giant head, worn by a real-life sumo wrestler, Reid Asato.

How did *The Odyssey* fare? Media reviews ranged from lukewarm to enthusiastic. Part one (Sunday, May 18) drew 28,770,000 viewers and part two, aired the next night, 26,320,000 (these are technically "homes" tuned in, estimated by an A.C. Nielsen media rating); both ranked among the top three programs of their weeks. Many literary scholars and classicists will certainly raise serious objections to the production's historical accuracy, not to mention the fidelity of the teleplay, written by Konchalovsky and Christopher Solimine, to the original poem. However, in a

technological age of declining literacy, popular culture is crucial to sustaining the vitality of great literature and art (which have been systematically undermined by poststructuralists, postmodernists, New Historicists, Stalinist feminists and the rest of that crew). Market saturation by the NBC publicity machine in the month before the broadcast did enormous good for the imperilled field of classical studies. Tie-in paperback special editions of *The Odyssey* were stacked among mass-market bestsellers near cash registers, and eye-catching posters of a fierce, sword-wielding Armand Assante as Odysseus rolled by on the side of city buses.

Film versions of novels, plays, and narrative poems often disappoint because the director and screenwriter have failed to translate word-bound ideas into simple visual form. Plot must be condensed and scenes economically structured: good screenplays look rather skeletal on the page. Character and conflict are more quickly revealed by film because of its basic tools of closeup and soundtrack, which register subtle emotion and create mood. Movies that remain too tied to their literary originals, or that slight the camera's gift for showing space, end up seeming preachy, tedious, and claustrophobic.

Successful movies of great books are rare. *Anna Karenina* (1948), starring a beautifully controlled Vivien Leigh, shows what is possible in the respectful recreation of a vanished, hierarchical society. *Wuthering Heights* (1939), on the other hand, the Laurence Olivier-Merle Oberon vehicle often cited as a peak of Hollywood filmmaking, sentimentalizes and sanitizes Emily Bronte's unsettling novel. The recent feature films of Jane Austen's novels, including a slack, coy *Sense and Sensibility* (199x) starring Emma Thompson, have similarly been vastly overpraised. In contrast, the four-part British television series of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1996), produced by the Arts and Entertainment network in conjunction with the BBC, is extraordinary work of the highest quality, in terms of both history and psychology. Generally, the best films-from-novels, like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Godfather* (1972, 1974), have been

based on popular blockbuster bestsellers rather than revered canonical texts.

Already designed for performance, plays make the transition to film much more easily than novels. Shakespeare's brash, volatile, rule-breaking style, which led to his disrepute among neoclassical critics, is exactly what makes his plays good movie material, first persuasively demonstrated by the Laurence Olivier *Hamlet* (1948). Classic films, directed by Elia Kazan and Mike Nichols respectively, have been made of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). Four favorite films of mine, which illustrate the importance of good casting, direction, and editing, were based on hit stage comedies: *The Women* (1939), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *His Girl Friday* (1940), and *Auntie Mame* (1956).

Pagan antiquity is an ideal subject for Hollywood spectacle, at its zenith during the widescreen Cinemascope years of the 1950s, when the retrenching film industry was trying to compete with the new medium of television. My great faith in Hollywood comes from the fact that I grew up with masterpieces like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben-Hur*, (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), and even *Cleopatra* (1963), whose outstanding military and political content has been overshadowed by the production's financial crises and personnel scandals, not to mention the screenplay's heavy-breathing, one-dimensional treatment of the lead role, played by a sumptuous Elizabeth Taylor.

Attempts to film Homer have been surprisingly few, considering the number of movies based on the Bible, such as *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *Salome* (1953), or on Greek mythology, notably the series of fancifully embroidered Hercules movies starring Steve Reeves and his beefcake imitators that were made in Italy from the late 1950s through the 1960s. Again, plays have proved more manageable. In the 1970s, an exhilarating new age of film adaptations of ancient drama seemed to be dawning: Pier Paolo Pasolini cast Maria Callas in his dust-choked but electrifying *Medea*

(1970), and Michael Cacoyannis, who had already directed *Electra* (1961), released a searing, all-star production of *The Trojan Women* (1971), followed by *Iphigenia* (1977). But with the overall waning of European art film in the 1980s, such experiments ceased.

The best films based on ancient texts, in my opinion, are influenced by or resemble grand opera, which has a rich history of classical adaptation, from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607) and *The Return of Ulysses to His Homeland* (1641) to Richard Strauss' insomniac *Elektra* (1909), *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912), and *Helen in Egypt* (1928). The operatic emotionalism of Jules Dassin's *Phaedra* (1962), an ingenious modernization starring Melina Mercouri (Dassin's wife), Raf Vallone, and Anthony Perkins, with a haunting soundtrack by Mikos Theodorakis, seemed grotesquely overblown to critics and audiences alike, but this excellent film may simply have been ahead of its time. The most dazzlingly artistic film modernization of a classical story is probably Jean Cocteau's surrealist *Orphée* (1949), which shows how a low budget can sometimes stimulate imagination.

Finally, dramatizations of classical stories must take into account the European high art tradition since the Renaissance, which has produced an overwhelming number of iconic Greco-Roman images in painting and sculpture that have entered the world canon. French neoclassicism in particular treated gods, heroes, and warriors in a forceful, luminous way that filmmakers should closely study. Good examples are Jacques-Louis David's seminal *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), with its gleaming weapons and straining muscles, as well as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' glowering *Jupiter and Thetis* (1811) and his daunting *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (18xx). Conventional Salon art soon reduced the spare, severe neoclassical style to mere illustration, but we must still admire the sheer craftsmanship of academic painters like Adolphe Bouguereau and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, with their ancient fantasies of nymphs, satyrs, ephebes, patricians, and emperors. By the fin de siècle, mummification set in:

John William Waterhouse's *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891), for example, with its flying squadron of female-headed vultures, makes the bearded hero lashed to his mast seem like a spoon stuck in a jam pot being eyed by some rather large moths.

NBC's *Odyssey* must be measured against all these precedents in the depiction of ancient culture. Each viewer will of course bring his or her premises to such a project. My own, as set forth in my book, *Sexual Personae* (1990), are that Homer is an instinctively "cinematic" artist and that he bequeathed his long sight lines and striving, densely visualized personalities to the rest of Western literature and art. While convinced that superlative films of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* can and should be made, I also think, as a fan of sensationalistic Hollywood "B" pictures and television soap opera, that my expectations of what network television can provide its mass audience are realistic.

Homer's poem opens with an assembly of the gods, from which Athena descends to Ithaca to help Odysseus' beleaguered son Telemachus step over the borderline into manhood. The warrior goddess disguises herself as a travelling prince for her visit, where she sees firsthand the disorder in the palace caused by queen Penelope's callow, carousing suitors. Odysseus' twenty-year absence has left a power vacuum in his realm. Telemachus receives the stranger with great hospitality, which in the ancient world had a moral meaning. The guest is seated comfortably, his hands are washed, and he is liberally provided with food and drink.

To discard these two matched, smoothly formulaic scenes, with their backdrop of human chaos, a modern screenplay writer had better come up with something better. Homer's practical experience as a bard, reshaping and refining a huge, contradictory mass of inherited oral material, shows everywhere in the decisions he made about exposition, development, and climax. The NBC *Odyssey* begins in disorder, but for a newfangled reason: we see Odysseus himself running

madly through the woods. Penelope (Greta Scacchi) has gone into labor, and all the men are hysterical. The servants are shrieking for Odysseus' mother, Anticleia (Irene Papas), who drags her feet and never does get there in time. Instead, the infant Telemachus (suspiciously clean and dry) is born virtually in the open in Eumaeus' hut, supervised by the handy Odysseus himself.

This arbitrary alteration of Homer's plot is as ridiculous an example of political correctness as we have seen in years. Lest anyone think the production is glorifying machismo, evidently, we must have the great Greek warrior introduced as Mr. Mom, Lamaze graduate. Nowhere in world history until the advent of the obstetrician with the proliferation of modern medical specialties did men have any role in the birthing process. On the contrary, until this century, the latter was the primary occasion for women as a group to assert their special knowledge, power, and solidarity. Not only is it absurd to imagine that the king of Ithaca would make a spectacle of himself by running toward the scene (hightailing in another direction would be more the male style), but a man of any rank who tried to force himself into a childbirth would likely get swatted in the chops. In this case, Odysseus' own nurse, Eurykleia (a wan Geraldine Chaplin), is already on the scene and would have automatically taken charge.

Director Konchalovsky made a big point of convincing the cast that they were depicting, in his words, "a tribal lifestyle"—something he appears to know little about. Modern touchy-feely liberalism is clueless about the formality and strictness of tribal life, which was a web of sacrosanct conventions. Konchalovsky misses every important theme in Homer's opening: in this production, the gods are either omitted or feminized; no attention is paid to good government or household economy; there is not a shred of feeling for the rituals of hospitality, food preparation and consumption, or gift-giving—all major themes in Homer.

Armand Assante was a credible choice to play Odysseus, but he obviously didn't get much help from the director in

understanding his role. Like Richard Burton as Mark Antony in *Cleopatra*, he seems to lack brawn and certainly wasn't helped by the costume designers, whose prime inspiration seems to have been the daily garb of medieval serfs. Wobbling in approach from mumbling Marlon Brando to tactiturn Sylvester Stallone, Assante changes very little in age or expression over the twenty-year span of the story; much of the time, he resembles a blowsy, unshaven, and very haggard Paul McCartney. Apparently, the cast and crew were constantly sick with flu: Assante had it four times and was later hospitalized with pneumonia.

The kick-off plot conceit of the NBC *Odyssey* is that the hero is abruptly called away to Troy on the day of his son's birth—as if preparations of supplies for voyages, much less war, were not elaborate operations. Papas (a perennial in Greek movies) is excellent as Odysseus' fierce mother, who bids him farewell (“Turn Troy to dust!”) by daubing his forehead with blood. However, Odysseus' divine patron, Athena, despite her chillingly archaic statue in his household shrine, is treated abysmally. Her “advice” consists mainly of whimsical smirks and giggles, and except for one effective shot of her cold, blue eye, through which we pass to the next scene, there's never any sense of what proficiencies of technical skill or mental agility the goddess represents. The casting is ludicrous: Isabella Rossellini might play Aphrodite, but never Athena. Here she looks like she stepped straight out of her usual Lancôme cosmetics ads. She's dressed not in armour or a simple robe but in a poorly cut, pleated, dull khaki silk dress that I suspect is supposed to be olive-green, alluding to Athena's connection with the olive tree. Her aegis is a gloppy pectoral that's basically a brassy bib. Odysseus recognizes her by her garish golden sandals, which look like something Leona Helmsley might bag on Rodeo Drive.

The ramparts of Troy are impressively done by computer simulation, even if the beige stone is too clean and evenly planed: one would expect a more intimidating and rough-hewn surface, as on the megalithic walls at Mycenae. The



battle scenes on the plain are cursory and badly shot, mere skirmishes that look like a schoolyard shoving match. Assante looks good in Odysseus' leather armour, but why is he fighting without a helmet? And why is Achilles, a Fabio lookalike with long blonde surfer tresses, fighting bare-chested? This production has completely missed the symbolism of armor as artifact in Homer: in the *Iliad*, the forging of Achilles' armor and shield, with its multiple narrative scenes, is a metaphor for the poem and ultimately for civilization itself. The production also ignores an important class distinction between the foot-soldiers and the chariot-riding kings and princes, whose plumed helmets were invitations to single combat. Konchalovsky is a lousy anthropologist: like the Marija Gimbutas school of goddess feminism, he thinks preliterate tribes were egalitarian.

The pivotal fight between Achilles and Hector is given short shrift (and Patroclus is conspicuously missing), but we get a dramatic helicopter shot of Achilles's chariot dragging Hector's body at full speed along a cliff road—a scene stolen from *Phaedra*, where Anthony Perkins as hysterical Hippolytus is killed in a crash while zooming his sports car along just such a road. What is Achilles doing with Hector's body out there anyhow? The whole point is to drag it around the city walls to torment and humiliate the Trojans by abusing a princely corpse. And where exactly is that cliff? Troy was a promontory overlooking a now-receded harbor. Has Achilles' Californian hair transported him to Big Sur? Bizarrely, we never see him get killed in turn—one of the most famous lucky hits in history, when Paris' arrow strikes the vulnerable tendon that still bears Achilles' name. We do get to see Achilles' body (a large wax doll) burning up on its bier. Odysseus looks like he's exhorting the troops with a showy funeral oration (à la Brando as Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar* [1953]), but wouldn't that privilege have belonged to a commander like Agamemnon or Menelaus?

Meanwhile, back on Ithaca, there's trouble brewing between Penelope and her mother-in-law, whom Papas plays

like Helen Hayes as the weary, haughty empress in *Anastasia* (1956). Anticleia is picky, picky about Penelope's leniency with Telemachus. Penelope oversees the making of olive oil, which is credible, but surely servants rather than the queen would be doing the actual muscle work of toting baskets of olives and pulling the press pole (though even today Mediterranean dowagers typically horn in to demonstrate to the useless young precisely how things should be done). At night, pining Penelope cools her libido off with indecorous and very un-Homeric sitz baths in the harbor, a scene that smacks of skinny-dipping Hedy Lamarr or lonely, pill-dazed Barbara Parkins staggering onto the dark beach in *Valley of the Dolls* (1967).

At Troy, the Greeks have left their trick gift of the wooden horse, which is convincingly done in rough, dun wood. Laocoön's warning lacks punch, and when he is attacked by the sea serpent, guffaws surely shook the nation. We know this grisly scene too well from the restored Hellenistic statue group of a giant serpent strangling the heroically muscular priest and his two sons. NBC's wormy monster, certainly at some pain to the budget, looks like a pretzel combined with a hair dryer, and it awkwardly whips Laocoön into the harbor like an errant jet ski at Disney World. The horse's stately passage through the gates is done extremely well. The city falls, of course, but not apocalyptically. The writers failed to glean a few hints from Vergil's *Aeneid*, so the burning takes very little time, and the slaughter is minimized. Some random profanation of altars would have been nice, but we do get a potent flight of hubris when Odysseus, seen against a natural rock arch pounded by heavy surf, insults Poseidon by boastfully taking full credit for Troy's destruction.

Now begin Odysseus' attempts to get home. The scenes on ship are too farcical at times, as if Joseph Papp had imported one of his go-for-the-lowest-common-denominator Shakespearean comedy casts, with their oafish, gratingly jolly "types." I kept wondering where all the Trojan booty was on board; they're travelling awfully light. The episode in

Cyclops' cave is fairly well-done, especially the giant's zestful, crunching bisection of one of Odysseus' men. But the stone blocking the cave entrance should be a boulder rather than a wheel, which looks too much like a rolling tomb door of old Jerusalem. In the escape from the cave, the screenplay inexplicably omits Homer's memorable detail of Odysseus hanging from the belly of a ram.

The approach to Aeolus' rocky island captures the constant anxiety of ancient seafaring in unknown waters. But then we hear Aeolus' lispy voice emerging from an interestingly ghoulish apparition in a waterfall, and it's Papp time again: in an irritating piece of stunt casting, Aeolus is played by a tittering, roly-poly Michael J. Pollard, who looks the part but whose braying New Jersey accent and smarmy Whoopi Goldberg shtik are foolishly disruptive. Nevertheless, the special effects wizards make this episode a spectacular success: summoned by Aeolus on his parapet, the winds come whistling down in a black tornado (inspired by the parting of the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments*) and disappear into a leather bag. The sound effects are superb here—first the whooshing winds and then, onboard, the creaking of ropes and timbers. When the men see Ithaca—and get blown sky-high by the surreptitiously opened bag of winds—I was vexed by another matter: these sailors look way too pale for men who have spent their lives outdoors under a Mediterranean sun. For heaven's sake, how much could body makeup cost these days, when self-tanning creams are a staple in every drug store?

The Circe episode begins inauspiciously when the entire story of the men's disastrous metamorphosis into swine is told in advance, with excessive verbosity—a rare case where a film might improve on Homer by just showing the scene unmediated. Odysseus' search for his men, however, is extremely well-done. He explores a rocky gorge filled with a menagerie of exotic animals from all over the world and then sweats and strains up the sheer face of a cliff, with a magnificent panorama behind him of forests and sea. Suddenly,

floating next to him in midair, with taunting supernatural ease, is the god Hermes (Freddie Douglas), a dimpled pretty boy with frosted curls, bare chest and feet, and winged, gold greaves who looks like a cross between David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust and John Phillip Law as the effete blind angel in *Barbarella* (1968). The contrast between human frailty and divine perfection is brilliant. After smirkingly delivering his instructions (and force-feeding Odysseus some tufts of grass, allegedly protective Moly), the Ariel-like Hermes flits and dives away into the distance, with the exhilarating freedom of a bird.

When, with scraped hands and bloody fingers, he finally hefts himself to the top of the cliff, Odysseus oddly finds a complete Karnak-type Egyptian temple with a lion pacing the peristyle courtyard—not the most domestic of arrangements, even for a demigoddess. The music is appropriately eerie. But then all this tremendous, evocative build-up is wasted when we get a gander at the NBC Circe: Bernadette Peters, an over-the-hill musical comedy star who's never done anything deeper than *Dames at Sea* and *Pennies From Heaven*. Why would anyone think that diminutive, cutesy-pie Peters, with her button mouth and squeaky, little-girl voice, has a prayer of playing one of the most seductive, sinister femme fatales in world mythology? Words like asinine and moronic spring to mind. Perhaps chits from past relationships were cashed in here, since Peters sure didn't win this choice role on talent alone.

Back on Ithaca, Penelope is bickering with Telemachus and trying to stop Anticleia, the ultimate guilt-tripping Jewish mother, from killing herself. After a lot of screeching on all sides, Anticleia, who misses her son a bit too much, marches off to drown herself in broad daylight in the very tranquil harbor—where one expects a bevy of *Baywatch* beauties to come bounding earnestly to her rescue. The scene is so misconceived and clumsily directed that it seems like a parody on the old *Carol Burnett Show*. Circe, meanwhile, is jealous that, despite all the amnesiac, edible lotus flowers that she

and her Egyptian maidens have been pressing on the Greeks, her lover Odysseus still can't forget Penelope, so she realizes she must let him go. But first there's Hades: poor Bernadette Peters, having to deliver lines like, "You must cross the river of fire and sacrifice a ram," is as inept as Madonna in *Shanghai Surprise* (1986).

The voyage to Hades is highly effective. In fact, the sea always looks great in this production—its choppy waves, its changes of color from grey-black to turquoise-green. As Odysseus' ship approaches Hades, with its burning water, smoke, and meteor showers of fiery rocks, there are some spectacular shots that resemble Turner paintings. Assante looks his best in this episode, as he disembarks and, hefting an unwieldy and sometimes impatient ram, strides up a corridor of huge pillars—a conception of hell far too architectural, incidentally, for this period in ancient mythology. Part one ends as the ghosts appear, materializing ominously from the air. When part two resumes at the same point, the follies begin. We meet a phlegmatic, then madly cackling but disappointingly non-androgynous Teiresias sitting by a steaming lava bath—a detail stolen from Fellini's prelates-at-the-spa scene in *8½* (1963). Homer correctly, *tribally* had Odysseus dig a trench in the earth and cut the sheep's throats over it, so the ghosts would drink the blood and speak. Here he tosses the ram cavalierly into the magma—which takes the Society of Sophists' Dopey Writing Award. After two decades of slasher films, beloved by American adolescents, did the producers think incineration more decorous for the bourgeois home? Through all of this, we are inundated with spooky synthesizer music in the now clichéd Eurotech style.

The looming rocks of the straits of Scylla (forecast by Teiresias rather than Homer's Circe) are impressive, but when Odysseus' ship gets closer, things degenerate. It seems like we're in another generic, dusky cavern instead of between towering, open-air rocks, and Scylla is photographed so poorly that the enormous expense of her construction is wasted. There's a blindingly fast in-and-out of

something that looks vaguely like an aluminum can-opener capped with plastic dandelions, accompanied by the whizzing, slicing sound of a scythe and a grisly shower of blood and sawdust, and that's it. With her spindly arms, lunging claws, serpent necks, and bared teeth, Scylla just seems like a rip-off of the *Alien* monster whom Sigourney Weaver started grappling with eighteen years ago, leading to inevitable sequels. Scylla would be much more frightening, in my opinion, if she were recognizably female and therefore part of Homer's ongoing sex theme.

Charybdis—the whirlpool formed by sea-water rushing through the Straits of Messina between Sicily and the Italian peninsula—is very well-done by the special effects unit. Again, this scene is too short, but what's here is extraordinary. As the men grunt at their oars, trying to get past rapacious Scylla, the ship topples over the edge of the maelstrom and, sailors flying, falls a dizzying distance. The column of thundering water blooms like a carnivorous flower and turns into huge, living claws closing over the ship, which vanishes in a churning swirl of white water. Bravissimo! In Homer, however, the ship is lost not in the whirlpool but in a divine storm sent to avenge the Greeks' killing of the cattle of the sun-god.

As Odysseus undergoes these travails, we keep cutting back to Ithaca, where Penelope is trying to stall the suitors. Greta Scacchi has a regal bearing and a melancholy, Mona Lisa quality that suits the role, and she looks particularly beautiful in her public address, where she steps forth in a deep-blue robe with her face half-covered. The design of the shroud she weaves—Odysseus' ship, its red sail adorned with Athena's apotropaic Gorgon face—is no great shakes. Eurycleia is in a constant snit, rocketing around the house and doing a lot of spitting at suitors, which Geraldine Chaplin is too ladylike to really carry off. Also, Chaplin looks way too young and frail for the role of Odysseus' nurse, who needs a bossy robustness like that of Hattie McDaniel's Oscar-winning Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*.

Now comes one of the production's most successful episodes, Odysseus' long sojourn with Calypso, beautifully played by singer Vanessa Williams, who had lobbied for the part of Circe and, because of her acclaimed Broadway performance as the lead in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, deserved to get it. Ironically, Assante has much more chemistry with Williams than he does with Scacchi (or Peters!), proved by the fact that NBC's official publicity photos present him and the latter two ladies in separate, solitary poses: the sole joint photo, which was widely reproduced (and interracial to boot), is of sensuous, strong-willed Calypso tenderly shielding an exhausted Odysseus. This episode shows the hero weeping for his lost men—a rare example of a screenplay admirably capturing the charming Mediterrean tearfulness of Homer's warriors.

Calypso is attended by a troop of sexy ladies in black, who do lots of Calvin Klein-like lounging amid pretty green pools on salt cliffs hung with Persian rugs. (It would be oh, so wrong of us to be reminded of Vanessa Williams surrendering her Miss America crown in 198x because of old lesbian photos resurfacing in *Penthouse*.) The scene where the cast-away Odysseus is spotted by these giggling girls with their stand-tall mistress is a direct copy of the scene in *The Ten Commandments* where the exile Moses comes to the aid of the shepherdess daughters of the Sheik of Midian. There is a superb moment when effeminate Hermes arrives to nag Calypso about letting Odysseus return home; they spar and quibble, and then Hermes sternly darts off, disappearing again over the blue sea. If only the entire production had been executed at this level of excellence!—though there are several awkward shots where Hermes appears to be sporting a Cupid-like diaper and where Odysseus, who has gone native, is soulfully beating a drum. Williams is so good as Calypso that she has become my leading candidate to play the unplayable—Shakespeare's fierce, "tawny", mercurial Cleopatra, whom no actress has yet been able to do. The scene where a desolate Calypso watches Odysseus grittily

building his raft with makeshift tools is truly well-done.

Telemachus, meanwhile, is having tantrums—trying to string his father’s bow and throwing things around when he can’t—and finally calls an assembly of Ithacans. Here the venerable Mentor, whom Odysseus left in charge of his household and whose name has entered our language, is shockingly shown as a fat buffoon resembling a gouty W. C. Fields. Travelling to Sparta to find news of his father, Telemachus passes a strikingly out-of-place camel and arrives at the surely too brightly painted palace of dark-haired Menelaus (whose Homeric epithet is “red-haired” but whose long kinky locks are well-cut here in a kouros-like triangle). Some nifty, bronze-wheeled chariots go by that are right off Geometric vases of the period. Bizarrely, Telemachus is not honorably received and lavishly entertained by Menelaus, as in Homer. Instead, after a brief chat, Telemachus is sent off without even a bite for the road. I especially missed Helen’s presence—not only her drugging everyone’s wine for forgetfulness but her “Silly me!” account of how she caused the whole war by running off with Paris.

Odysseus is cast ashore on his last stop, Phaeacia, by the wrath of Poseidon, whose big, blue, cartoonlike face and speaking mouth appear in a giant wave of *Hawaii Five-O* dimensions—not incredible considering the tsunami after the cataclysmic eruption of Thera that may have destroyed the Cretan ports and even reached Egypt (influencing, some speculate, the account of God’s vengeance against Pharaoh in Exodus). The clever recreation of Poseidon, with his deep, rumbling voice (like God’s on Mount Sinai in *The Ten Commandments*), makes one lament all the more the failure to exploit cutting-edge morphing technology for Athena’s transsexual disguises, an au courant theme of psychic androgyny which the production for some reason completely ignores: Isabella Rossellini is the same boring, orchid-heavy flirt from start to finish. Discovered unconscious by the Phaeacian princess, Nausikaä, who is very authentically beating laundry on the rocks with her maids, Odysseus is



certainly not as battered or “salt-begrimed” (in Homer’s phrase) as one might expect after punishing near-death at sea. Nausikaa, one of my favorite characters from ancient literature, is left undeveloped. She’s a mere girl here; Odysseus makes no fine speech-in-the-nude to prove his rank, and no premarital sparks fly between them. At court, her father the king wears a surprising amount of makeup, and her ripely fleshy mother looks like Rahotep’s wife Nofret, in a splendid dual tomb sculpture from Old Kingdom Egypt.

Carried back to Ithaca on a Phaeacian ship, Odysseus now undertakes his complex homecoming, which Homer draws out into so many fascinating stages. Naturally, this production is too obtuse to catch the ritual symmetries of it all. The swineherd Eumaeus immediately recognizes his long-gone master, so there’s no suspense there, and we’re left to wonder why Eumaeus is living in what looks like a see-through, faux-palm Daytona Coke-and-fries stand. At the first encounter of father and son, far from Telemachus courteously giving the stranger the best seat, the young man hamfully draws his menacing sword instead. As for Argus, the old, neglected hound who has waited faithfully for his master for twenty years—well, no Argus, doggone it!

When Telemachus returns to the palace, the suitors twit him about his wispy, newly sprouted whiskers (“Does he have a hormone imbalance?” I asked myself. “The guy’s twenty!”). In a very badly photographed scene, Eurycleia washing the beggar’s feet recognizes Odysseus’ identifying scar more by sight than by shadowy touch; worse, the scar is shown as a simple, shiny shin scrape, contradicting Williams/Calypso’s earlier flirtatious palpation of the boar wound correctly placed above Odysseus’ knee. Alas, there’s no resounding clang—that wonderful Homeric detail—as the joyful Eurykleia drops Odysseus’ foot into the basin, nor does he grip her by the throat to silence her (there’s real tribalism for you). As we see and clearly hear when it is being swept, the floor of the banquet hall where the suitors will

meet their deaths is paved with stone—a terrible error, since Homer specifically describes how the primitive dirt floor must be scraped afterward to remove the buckets of blood.

There's a nice shot (like an Alma-Tadema painting) of Telemachus brooding near a window in his airy bedroom, with weapons hung behind him on the wall, attractively painted in Minoan hues—orange-red and green with bands of blue. Odysseus' great bow has been sharing a storeroom with wonderful, giant terra-cotta amphoras, which are glimpsed far too briefly and could have given a better sense of ancient household operations. The stringing of the bow scene—surely one of the most thrilling episodes in the history of literature—is poorly directed. When the beggar Odysseus picks up the bow, the suitors shouldn't stop dead in their tracks and gawk; they should be laughing, careless, inattentive, dismissive. When the beggar not only easily strings the bow but sends the arrow through the ax-heads, *then* the suitors should pause, puzzled but still uncomprehending. When Odysseus throws off his rags and leaps onto the threshold, their bafflement must turn to horror. This production jumbles the brutal, escalating, unstoppable rhythm of Homer's scene, reducing its power. Interestingly added, however, is the slamming of the doors (already secretly locked in Homer) as Odysseus strings the bow, followed by his magical transformation into a red robe after he lets the first arrow fly. But things get incredible as Odysseus lackadaisically seats himself on his throne and jaws at the curiously slow-moving and witless suitors, who are felled far too easily.

An unlikely piece of casting that does work is Eric Roberts (Julia's alienated brother) as Eurymachus, the vilest of the suitors. Roberts, who worked with Konchalovsky more than a decade ago on *Runaway Train*, is surprisingly effective, not only looking like a Greek warrior but projecting exactly the right degree of decadent insolence. A single arrow ingeniously pierces both Eurymachus and his lover, the treacherous maid, Melanthe, when she tries to save him by opening the door (in the poem, she's hanged later with her sister quis-

lings). Penelope, meanwhile, has un-Homerically fainted at all the slaughter. There is no final testing scene between Odysseus and his wife, but the marriage bed carved out of the living olive tree is indeed gratifyingly shown. However, the teleplay, unhelpt by sluggish editing, misguages the timing of the finale, which is too drawn out. Odysseus and Penelope mind-meld to awful, synthesized *Little House on the Prairie* music. As William Blake said, "Enough! or Too much."

With the video of the NBC miniseries released to stores in August 1997, classical studies will be stuck, for better or worse, with this version of *The Odyssey* for the foreseeable future. Whatever its deficiencies, it will prove a useful pedagogical tool for courses on both the high school and college levels. I have had good luck with comparative projects: students enjoy and find profitable term papers that analyze a literary text and its adaptations by opera and film. Despite the fact that I have taught *The Odyssey* many times (using E.V. Rieu's Penguin prose translation), the miniseries gave me renewed appreciation of Homer's masterful shaping and structuring of plot. Nine out of ten times, the teleplay went wrong when it tried to improve on Homer, who after nearly three millennia has never lost his relevance and broad appeal.

My view of the miniseries is probably biased by my long devotion to the Italian-made movie version of Homer's poem, *Ulysses* (1954), starring Kirk Douglas, which I first saw on late-night television in the early 1970s. It is available on Warner Home Video but difficult to find. The miniseries will probably spark the video's re-release and wider distribution, but a new copy ought to be made from a fresh or restored print of the film, since the colors have dulled. *Ulysses* was a risky venture produced by the then-unknown Dino De Laurentiis and Carlo Ponti. The director was Mario Camerini, and seven people, including Ben Hecht and Irwin Shaw, worked on the screenplay. The dialogue often sounds stilted to contemporary ears, since everyone in the international cast

spoke the lines in his or her own language, with dubbing done afterward for each country where the film was shown.

The imaginative quality of *Ulysses* is shown even in the credits, which contain a story in themselves, sweepingly scored: a tranquil sea gradually darkens until a storm batters and overwhelms a Greek sailing ship; then the sea quiets, and the sun returns. (The credits claim the production's "exteriors" were shot on "the Mediterranean coasts and islands described in Homer's *Odyssey*.") Perhaps the film's most daring innovation is to have Penelope and Circe played by the same actress, Silvana Mangano, De Laurentiis' wife. Ulysses as Everyman therefore encounters the two faces of Eve, the ambiguous duality of woman that Western culture polarizes as Madonna and whore.

The story begins as it should with Ulysses' house invaded by suitors, over whom his wife struggles to maintain authority. Mangano makes a very grand and statuesque Penelope, whose inner suffering we feel. The nurse Eurycleia, I am happy to say, is as old as she should be, but the suitors are too fat, middleaged, and epicene. We quickly get a performance by the Ithacan bard, Phemius, playing his lyre with a gorgeously ornamented mother-of-pearl pick, seen in closeup; his tale is the fall of Troy, which takes us into flashback.

Bearded Kirk Douglas as Ulysses is crouching inside the belly of the wooden horse. When the Greeks emerge to take the city, the chaos in the streets is done far more completely than in the NBC miniseries. Fire, massacre, and rape are shown, as well as the insult to Neptune's shrine by a gloating, wild-eyed Ulysses, who topples the god's statue and gets a curse laid on him by the ranting princess, Cassandra. Even though the gods are never actually seen in this film, Italian Catholic culture, with its residual pagan superstition, seems to have given the makers of *Ulysses* an instinct for the crucial religious elements of Homer's story.

Now we jump back to Ithaca in the present: Penelope boldly chides the suitors, who are carousing with the slutty

maids. We clearly catch the Homeric dirt floor of the great hall, with its central open pit where meat turns on spits. The dark stone walls, however, with their flat, squared blocks, look too medieval. As Penelope mourns her absent husband, there is a spectacular dissolve from her pensive face to the open sea; the camera pans down to find Ulysses lying face down in the sand, his body entwined with seaweed; a broken mast and shredded sail bob further out on the rocks.

Nausikaa (Rossana Podestà), who gets a satisfyingly full-scale treatment in this film, is playing ball with her maids. Unfortunately, the girls are decked out in glaringly anachronistic, off-the-shoulder, rainbow-pastel prom dresses with frilly bodice ruffs. Still, the scene captures Homer's moving contrast between the bruised, traumatized castaway and the merry young people of peacetime affluence, who think they've stumbled on a corpse. The screenplay's sustained plot device is for the shaky, near-drowned Ulysses not to remember who he is or where he's from. Nausikaa is instantly smitten but comports herself with a princess' proper dignity.

At her father's court, the jewelry-laden king and his men are peculiarly wearing glittery, décolleté dresses with puffed sleeves and have their hair styled in dangly, oiled, Louisa May Alcott ringlets. Ulysses naturally comes across as very masculine in this near-drag environment. At the poem's festive Phaeacian games (omitted by the miniseries but included here), the baited Odysseus reluctantly proves his mettle by hurling a heavy discus and challenging the vain young bucks to a test in any sport. In *Ulysses*, Douglas, who was a wrestling champion in college, does a great job of Greco-Roman wrestling with Umberto Silvestri, an Olympic gold medalist in this event. Regrettably, Homer's inter-generational theme—the seasoned veteran vanquishing novices who are the suitors' age—is overlooked.

Meanwhile, back on Ithaca, Eurycleia, with true tribal vigor, is furiously whipping the servant maid who betrayed the secret of Penelope's nightly undone shroud to the suitors. The latter are busy outside with competitive games; the

Homeric prominence of athletics in this film again exposes the conceptual weakness of the NBC miniseries. Antinous, the obnoxious head suitor, is well-played by a swaggering Anthony Quinn in elegant, Darth Vader black. The Ithacan marriage theme is paralleled on Phaeacia, where the wedding day of Ulysses and Nausikaä has dawned. The princess' bridal dress is an exact copy of the full-skirted, cinch-waisted costume of Cretan snake-priestess statuettes—minus the bare breasts; a modest cloth panel censors that glorious pagan display for modern consumption. But where's the groom? The troubled Ulysses has wandered off to brood on the beach: "My name, my deeds—who am I?"

Now we again move gracefully into flashback, as Ulysses slowly begins to remember the disasters that led to his marooning on Phaeacia, most of all his boastful self-confidence and sacrilegious denial of the gods. The screenplay treats the Cyclops episode with great respect. For example, when the trapped Ulysses begs for mercy by appealing to Zeus' sacred "laws of hospitality," Polyphemus scornfully laughs: "What have I to do with *Zeus*? I am Neptune's son!"—at which Ulysses' men groan in despair. As the leader who must sustain morale and find some stratagem for escape, Douglas is charismatically convincing. I've always loved the lusty way, on arrival in Cyclops' cave, he is shown grabbing a fistful of soft cheese and cramming it greedily in his mouth. In his autobiography, Douglas reveals that filming this detail was no easy matter: "We did seven takes of a scene where I had to taste giant white cheeses. They used the real thing, strong Italian goat cheese. I was so nauseated, for the eighth take, I had them slip in little pieces of banana."<sup>1</sup>

Later, as the Greeks barely escape on their ship, Ulysses cannot resist tempting fate. "Who's master now—Neptune or Ulysses?" he exults. Roughly shoving past his own men on deck, who try to restrain him, he shouts back at the Cyclops howling on his cliff: "When your father asks who took your eye, tell him it was *Ulysses*! Ulysses—destroyer of cities, sacker of Troy, son of Laertes, and *king of Ithaca*!"

Douglas delivers these soaring, trumpet-like lines to perfection, grinning, laughing, and roaring like a rampaging lion. Nowhere in film have I ever seen a better depiction of the terrifying vitality and half-mad hubris of ancient warriors.

With a powerful sense of dynamics, the film cuts momentarily back to Ulysses in the glum present, as he stands mute and uncertain on the Phaeacian shore; then we return to him on his ship, where he is relaxed, leaning on the rail and staring out at the twilight sea. Chuckling, he says wistfully to his companion: “There’s a part of me that loves the familiar, the end of the journey, the cooking fires at home. There’s always the *other* part—that part loves the voyage, the open sea, storms, strange shapes of uncharted islands, demons, giants. Yes, Eurylochus, there’s part of me that’s always homesick for the unknown.” As an example of deftly condensed screenplay writing, this passage is as fine an adaptation of a major work as any scholar can ask for. And Douglas again shows his virtuosity: he is as eloquent with these quiet, rueful, poetic lines as he is in his paroxysmic, full-volume insults to the Cyclops.

In another smooth segue, the two men conversing at the rail become aware of an eerie calm on the water and then an odor of dead flowers: they are approaching the fearsome island of the Sirens. We see a broken ship, then dismembered skeletons strewn on rocks. The latter might well be impressive on a theater screen, but in miniature video format, the bones just look like random paper litter under a boardwalk. Homer visualized it much more horrifically—the Sirens sitting in a meadow heaped with rotting male skeletons, from which the withered skin still hangs. Having ordered himself tied to the mast, Ulysses is tormented by the Sirens’ song, which, in a nice touch by the screenplay, takes the alluring form of the voices of his wife and son, urging him to come ashore, for this is “Ithaca.” Deceived, he screams in agony and grief, his neck muscles bulging as he struggles to get free.

Freely altering the poem’s sequence of events, the film next brings Ulysses to landfall on Circe’s island: she herself has

pulled the ship off course. When she first appears, Circe is standing eerily in the dusk in an archetypal rocky cleft on a hill. She wears magical sea-green veils over a svelte beaded gown; even her hair is sea-mist green. Silvana Mangano gives Circe all the serene, evil magnetism that Bernadette Peters utterly lacks. Circe lives not in a stone house, as in Homer, but in a cavern dripping with underground water, like a mineral-encrusted Gustave Moreau painting. Once he falls under her spell, Ulysses loses track of time. When his men come to berate him, six months have passed in the blink of an eye, and he is paddling in Circe's indoor pond, with its floating, forgetfulness-inducing lotus blossoms (as in the miniseries, borrowed from the omitted episode of the Lotus-eaters). Emerging, he narcissistically primps in a mirror and dons a metallic-green robe—signifying his enslavement by Circe. This hedonistic transformation and loss of manhood are made completely believable by Douglas' nonchalant charm.

The screenplay sinks Ulysses' ship and drowns his men when the latter try to leave Circe's island. When he finally steels himself and starts to build an escape raft, Ulysses (like Jesus in the wilderness) is subjected to the wiles of the Tempter: Circe offers him immortality—a detail, like the raft, transferred from Homer's Calypso idyll. The screenwriting here is splendid. Circe declares, "This very night, Olympus shall welcome a new god—Ulysses." He pauses with tool in hand, a look of wonder on his face. But then comes his firm answer: "No. There are greater gifts: to be born and to die—and in between to live like a man." Kirk Douglas and Charlton Heston are among the very few, genuinely masculine American actors who can give such stirring lines their proper sturdy sound.

To try to convince him, Circe now summons the dead, so that Homer's voyage-preceded descent to the underworld is collapsed into this single scene by the raft. Agamemnon, Ajax, and Achilles, in full armour, step out of the fog to urge Ulysses to stay with Circe and accept her offer. But just as he starts to yield, his mother—ever the wet blanket!—arrives to



put the kabosh on the idea. Circe furiously yells at Anticleia but (as in modern Italy, where mothers still rule) must concede her greater power over her son, whom Circe bitterly releases to return home.

The screenplay immediately takes us back to Phaeacia, where Ulysses's memory is now fully restored, just as the frantic wedding party discovers him on the shore. To young Nausikaa's poignant disappointment, he cannot take a new bride, when another wife waits for him in Ithaca. Ulysses' dramatic homecoming is done with enormous energy, but Homer's details have been trimmed. There is neither swine-herd nor scar, and while Argus does appear, he seems to be resting comfortably indoors instead of abandoned on a dung heap. If this recognition scene seems muted, it's because it had to be shot fifteen times: the blasé Italian dog kept exiting as Douglas entered and finally had to be drugged. Argus' undetectable acknowledgment of his master (Douglas has to grip and fondle its snout) unconvincingly produces the passing Telemachus' recognition of his father—perhaps the film's weakest moment, though the men's bonding is touchingly quickened and sealed by the sound of Penelope weeping upstairs.

The contest in the great hall is presented with due formality. Penelope descends, elegant in white, and the film conveys what the miniseries, despite lovely Greta Scacchi, does not: the blindingly charismatic desirability of this ultimate trophy wife, whose classiness makes the relatively well-born suitors look like clods and ruffians, much like early medieval warriors before the spread of chivalry and the courts of love from southern France. The beggar Ulysses is mocked, scorned, and spattered with wine; Quinn as Antinous is properly loathsome, kicking the beggar's alms dish out of his hands. The bending-of-the-bow scene is long and riveting; Antinous comes closest to succeeding—and is later, as in Homer, the first to die, with an arrow gorily piercing his throat. Vengeful Ulysses goes into full furor, even yanking an ax head out to chop a cringing suitor savagely in the face.

Running to her quarters, while the battle still rages, to thank Athena for Ulysses' return, Penelope flings herself down on an enormous, thick, white sheepskin blanketing the steps beneath the goddess' image. This seems to be a substitute for the marriage-bed motif, which is otherwise missing. Below, the hall is in total shambles—with corpses, cushions, robes, vessels, and utensils heaped and thrown about. The film understands the importance in Homer's poem of the house, another symbol for civilization. Surveying the mess, Douglas magnificently delivers, with raw, throbbing voice and simple, expressive gestures, these superb lines: "Many terrible things have happened to me, Telemachus, but none more terrible than to bring death into my house on the day of my homecoming. Tell the servants to purify the room with fire, and may the revenge of the dead never overtake us." After washing his bloody hands and arms, Ulysses goes upstairs to embrace his wife, and the story crisply ends.

Despite its strident dubbing and plot omissions—I particularly lament the absence of Calypso, as well as the gods—*Ulysses* is a model of well-paced, emotionally rich, and intelligent moviemaking about ancient culture. Even the film's final image is arresting. A script unrolls: "For the immortality that Ulysses refused of a Goddess was later given to him by a poet . . . And the epic poem that Homer sang of the hero's wanderings and of his yearning for home will live for all time." Then "THE END" is superimposed on Penelope's shroud: it is woven with authentically period figures of a man in a long Greek robe driving a bull pulling a plow, watched by a quizzical dog and a woman with a babe in arms while a vine of grape leaves swirls overhead. The scene seems to allude to the post-Homeric legend of Odysseus, who feigned madness to avoid going to Troy and was exposed by the warrior Palamedes' trick of tossing infant Telemachus before his father's plow. But in historical context of the film's production in ravaged postwar Italy, the image seems to celebrate the return to love, family, fertility, and prosperity, made possible by peace.

If *Ulysses*, with its lean narrative and psychological astuteness, makes NBC's *Odyssey* seem fragmented and superficial, what can we say about *Helen of Troy*?—a pretentious, American-Italian extravaganza based on the *Iliad* that, at its superheated release in 1956, aimed for greatness and fell flat on its face.

Starring as Helen is Rossana Podestà, whom we last saw as Nausikaa in *Ulysses*. Others in the cast include Stanley Baker, Cedric Hardwicke, Harry Andrews, and a very young, brown-haired Brigitte Bardot in a bit part as Helen's slave, Andraste. It's hard to say which is more awful, the screenplay or the direction. Remarkably, Robert Wise, the director of *Helen of Troy*, is one of the most accomplished figures in Hollywood history: he edited *Citizen Kane* (1941) and directed *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Run Silent, Run Deep* (1958), *West Side Story* (1961), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), and *Star Trek* (1979). But whatever special combination of skills is needed to direct a successful ancient epic is woefully beyond Wise's repertoire.

On the same tape as its color video of *Helen of Troy*, Warner Home Video has released four black-and-white publicity segments produced for television and introduced by a very dapper Gig Young as host of *Warner Brothers Presents*, a short-lived ABC drama series that ran from 1955 to 1956. In the first, Young touts the spectacular wide-screen Cinescope of *Helen of Troy*, which was to be presented in a first-time-ever worldwide premiere, opening simultaneously in (a presumably numerological) fifty-six cities. Young steps over to a placard propped on an easel: it's a cutaway section map, "Walls of Homeric Troy—Built 1500 B.C.," showing the city's pancaked levels from the Stone Age through the Roman period.

In the second segment, Young in his sleek business suit jauntily visits a makeshift Trojan battlement, where he is accosted by a soldier in full armour who barks, "Whence

came you?”—the standard corkscrew Hollywoodese that passes for archaic diction. Unfazed, Young ambles over to chat with Helen, the glowingly fleshy, petite, white-blond Podestà, who was being groomed as a Marilyn Monroe lookalike but whose career never took off. (She more resembles the winsome Arielle Dombasle of Eric Rohmer’s *Pauline at the Beach* [1983].) In the next segment, Young appears posing with a Greek bow, then takes us to visit the sound engineers who must reproduce the twang of an arrow leaving its string or the thud of it striking flesh, illustrated by a clip of Achilles felled by Paris. The technicians are also shown simulating iron doors echoing, siege platforms dropping, chariots charging, and the footsteps of kings on marble floors—as Young grandiloquently puts it, “the sounds that haven’t been heard for 3000 years.”

In the final segment, we’re treated to the in-theater trailers or “coming attractions” announcing the film’s release: “Her name was burned into the pages of history in letters of fire”. We then see the yellow script of the title, *Helen of Troy*, literally catching on fire! We’re promised “All the Storied Wonders of Homer’s Immortal ‘Iliad’,” which includes “the sweeping saga of the mortal struggle between the legions of imperial Greece and the forces of impregnable Troy,” not to mention “Bacchanalian revels of unbridled abandon.” However, even as our hopes are raised, there’s something dispiriting about the brief glimpses we get of the Kewpie doll Podestà (shades of Bernadette Peters) and her equally artificially blonde co-star, Jacques Sernas, who seems a bit too Troy Donahue to be a credible Paris.

*Helen of Troy* is prefaced with a five-minute “Overture,” designed to increase suspense as theater-goers were taking their seats and fiddling with popcorn. A grand columned ancient hallway occupies the screen, with a weird statue at the far end that looks inappropriately Hindu. Meanwhile, generic movie music is pouring at us—probably the most mediocre score in Max Steiner’s illustrious career. The story begins with a booming voiceover, as we are shown a map of

the Hellespont and informed of its commercial importance. The first person we see is the Trojan prince Aeneas pulling up in a chariot—and we might as well bolt into the aisles and go home. For such a high-budget film (it was shot at Cinecittà near Rome), the flimsy costumes, wiry beards, and cotton-candy beards are dreadful beyond belief.

The opening scene takes place in the council room of King Priam, whose wavy-backed throne (like Odysseus' in the miniseries) is a copy of the Minoan one found at Knossos. Hector seems awfully long in the tooth, and Paris has great biceps and pecs but looks like he's wandered in from an Alan Ladd movie. Like Hippolytus, Paris is chided for worshipping Aphrodite too much. Lining the chamber is a row of what look like white papier-mâché statues of gods: a hideously ugly Athena grimaces, and Aphrodite seems to be vaguely waving. Right from the start, the movie takes the Trojan side: the Greeks are coarse, greedy, quarrelsome Nazi fools without German organizational sense, and the Trojans are mellow, cultured, peace-loving innocents (though their taste in sculpture needs improvement).

The initial plot device is that Paris, who sets sail on a diplomatic mission to Greece in a wonderfully imposing ship with two tiers of oars, gets marooned after he bravely climbs a mast in a lightning storm and is knocked into the sea. Shamelessly pirating the Nausikaä episode of the *Odyssey*, the movie has the Spartan queen Helen discover the unconscious Paris washed up on shore: ex-Nausikaä Rossana Podestà must have felt she was stuck in a casting rut. Paris thinks she's Aphrodite and then, when mutual attraction kindles, accepts her story that she's a slave. This is probably a cautious 1950s device to whitewash the blatant adultery of the famed romance. Paris determines to buy the comely slave from her owners so that he can make her "princess of Troy" ("Oh, sure," I said to myself. "That's just how Trojan princesses were made!").

Paris' political timing could not be better, since at that very moment a council of Greek kings is meeting up at Menelaus'

palace. They all look pasty, paunchy, fuzzy, and ill-dressed, but they love to josh each other with macho brio. Odysseus, a cross between Abe Lincoln and a leprechaun, is teased for the babe-in-the-furrow tale, and Achilles, a repulsive braggart, takes his licks for dressing like a woman on Scyros until Odysseus collars him. When the shipwrecked Paris is dragged in, he must prove his identity by an ad hoc cestus match, where he fights Ajax and wins. On the sidelines, however, the overconcerned Helen—prettily dressed in a pink and blue costume based on the Archaic kores of the Athenian Acropolis—blunderingly betrays her love to the much older (and predictably dark-haired) Menelaus, who glares and plots.

There's a nice scene where Bardot as Andraste (who's never without her pet whippet) is combing Helen's hair, but one starts to feel that this movie that's supposedly about Troy is taking *forever* to get out of Sparta. The best thing in this sequence is the queen's big heavy bronze doors, ornamented with Medusa's face; they get impressively pounded on, to the credit of the sound engineers kvelled over by Gig Young. Running away together, Paris and Helen leap off a cliff into the sea, while an orgy rages back at the palace, which is presented like Elsinore disarrayed by morose king Claudius' beer parties in *Hamlet*.

When the lovers arrive at Troy, thanks to a Phoenician rental bark, not everyone is thrilled with Helen. "Her name is *Death!*" snaps Cassandra, an unexpectedly pert, freckled, button-nosed teen in the Anglo-American style of Kathleen Widdoes. The fickle people quickly turn against Paris (who does look spiffy in leopardskin), and the city prepares itself for war. Now there is a rushed montage of armaments manufacturing that could have been truly brilliant. Hephaestus knows the production expense of these scenes!—smiths hammering iron and forging gleaming rows of sword blades; forests of spears being sorted and propped on racks; wood being cut for bows, then plunged in treatment baths and gathered up after air drying. This fascinating material about

artisanship represents the very substance of premodern life. But the makers of *Helen of Troy*—we don't know exactly who; directors sometimes lose control during editing—gave these technical scenes brusquely short shrift, in the general haste to return to Helen and Paris' soggy, tedious, banal affair.

When the Greek ships arrive, it's night, and there is a wonderful scene of Priam and the other elders, summoned by signal gong, as they stare out from the battlements at the sight of hundreds of lights ominously glowing in the harbor. An unnecessary expenditure was surely the laborious footage of the Greeks assembling their wooden siege engines, which are unremarkable objects that don't photograph well. The Greeks on the march definitely make a good impression, with their sharp assortment of round shield designs—geometric emblems of bird, snake, horse, and so on. But don't look too closely at the battalions, since the budget clearly didn't stretch to arming the rear rows of extras, who trudge along in plain burlap tunics.

Considering the size of the opposing forces, it's quite coincidental that rivals Menelaus and Paris, as well as Achilles and Hector, manage to come face to face for some tense swordplay in a stairwell after the Greeks first pour over the wall—an engagement from which the latter abruptly flee, though suffering no discernible reverse. Just to make sure the audience stays on the right side, a voiceover informs us that the Greeks later “looted and raped the small surrounding villages”: we get a few shots of girls doing excessively enthusiastic, midair butterfly kicks as they are hauled away by their raptors.

An indeterminate amount of time must have passed, since we next see Helen at home complaining about air pollution: “Must the Trojans always put their funeral pyres so near this house? How long will they accuse me?” No wonder she's aggravated: her view out her patio-balcony is spoiled by rising smoke columns. I loved this scene, since it seems inspired by Gustave Moreau's *Helen at the Scaean Gate* (1880; reproduced in *Sexual Personae*), where like a promenading man-

nequin, Helen turns her back on the heaps of bloody corpses and smouldering pyres. The very dignified Queen Hecuba, meanwhile, is quite warm and welcoming to beleaguered Helen—unlike the way Elizabeth II, I groused, treated the Princess of Wales. We begin to warm up to Paris, since the clean-shaven, neatly tressed Sernas (a mildly homoerotic, gracefully athletic Jean Marais type) doesn't force us to look at bad wigs and mossy face fur.

The occasional excellent scene makes us more impatient with the rest of the film. For example, the aborted surrender of Helen to her husband must have looked superb on the big screen: outlined against the sky as they rigidly stand, exuding hostility, on an open road, Agamemnon, Ulysses, and Menelaus, outfitted in their splendid armour of contrasting hues, look as statuesque as the Colossi of Memnon. So unforgettable a tableau reminds us how rarely these films capture the proud, disciplined spirit of Homer's glamorous warriors. The classic scene, on the other hand, where the armed Hector tenderly takes leave of his wife Andromache is strangely mishandled, so that their son is frightened not, as in Homer, by a great nodding plume on Hector's helmet but rather by an ordinary broom-style pate brush that could double as a tidy whisk.

Among the major liberties taken with Homer's plot is the collapsing of Hector's death with Achilles', so that Paris' arrow strikes just as Achilles, who scarcely has time to gloat, begins to drag Hector's corpse. Ulysses, however, is given a great line at Achilles' fall: "So dies Greek courage, but not Greek cunning." As the Greeks mope in their tents, Ulysses pitches his plan to them. They're skeptical: "What are you dreaming of, Ulysses?" He replies, "I'm dreaming of my wife, the good, constant Penelope, and in my dreams I see myself returning to her with all the treasures of Troy." Why couldn't the screenplay maintain this quality of dialogue?

The Trojan horse is sprightly and snappy-looking, its rear legs thrust back like those of a champion purebred dog. Our trusty sound engineers again deserve kudos for the nice



raspy, creaking sound of its wheels. “Beware the Greeks bearing gifts,” says Helen, looking down from the city wall. This line from the *Aeneid* belongs to Laocoön, but he didn’t make it into the screenplay. The thought obviously doesn’t go very deep with Helen anyway, since she immediately changes her mind and turns pro-horse. The contrarian Cassandra, of course, wants it burned and lobbies her parents about it. Even though it’s night, Priam orders the thing immediately dragged into the city, which strains credulity.

The very prolonged shot of the majestically moving horse, spotlighted against the dark sky and coming directly at us through the huge metal doors and towering pylon of Troy, must have been overwhelming on the wide screen. This is great cinema, and Steiner’s score here is wonderfully funereal, music for a death march. Now all the Trojans, starved for a party, rush toward the horse, and the orgy begins. We get the usual biblical Golden Calf scene, where girls in short skirts do the hula or are carried around on platters. There’s also body surfing in the mosh pit under the impressively tall horse and then a rather quickly invented amusement of dangling on vine-covered rope swings attached to its belly. Wine is quaffed from helmets until everyone passes out.

When the Greek SWAT team rappels down from the Horse and opens the gates, the scraping seems like a thunderclap in the heavy silence. The enemy pours in. “Troy is lost,” Priam very simply says. The sack of the city is fairly good, with rope trains of women led along to enslavement with tied hands, and wagons piled with booty rolling out the gates before the fire begins. We see Cassandra brutally seized by Ajax while she is praying at Athena’s shrine, but it’s difficult to understand why Pyrrhus’ gory, impious murder of Priam at the palace altar (recited even by the player in *Hamlet*) is always missing from these films, since a king’s fate symbolizes that of the nation.

Somehow, in the middle of this mess, the fleeing Paris and Helen manage to run smack into Menelaus. A test of arms occurs, and Paris naturally falls only because he is stabbed

from behind by a cowardly Greek. The last image of Troy is of the horse outlined against rising clouds of smoke, as chaos swirls below—another beautifully composed scene that must have been astonishing in the theater. The story ends there, except for a farewell shot that seems borrowed from *Queen Christina* (1933), where Greta Garbo stares mournfully out to sea. On the stern of a ship taking her back to Greece, the melancholy Helen is clearly thinking of her lost love. But barely a trace of the tragic destruction of an entire civilization seems to have left its mark on her smooth, rosy cheeks.

By odd synchronicity, a month after the NBC *Odyssey* was broadcast, Jean-Luc Godard's classic 1963 film, *Contempt* (*Le Mépris*), based on an Alberto Moravia novel, was re-released in restored form in the United States, to the ecstatic plaudits of critics. It was the avant-garde director's first experience with Cinemascope, the eye-seducing medium of the 1950s ancient epics. The producers of *Contempt* were Joseph E. Levine and Carlo Ponti (who produced *Ulysses*).

Like Fellini's *8* and Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973), *Contempt* is a movie about making a movie—in this case, of the *Odyssey*. Rugged Jack Palance, speaking in English (like Kirk Douglas as Ulysses), plays a pushy American movie producer, Jeremiah Prokosch, who descends on Rome like an angry god to deal with the project's continuing problems. Asked why he hired a German director (Godard's idol, the legendary Fritz Lang, playing himself), the producer invokes Heinrich Schliemann by name and declares, "The *Odyssey* needs a German director because the Germans discovered Troy."

Palance's character wants new scenes invented for the *Odyssey* screenplay and hires a serious, intellectual writer, Paul (Michel Piccoli), to do them. The men's first, tense encounter, mediated by an attractive female translator, occurs as Prokosch impatiently prowls the deserted Cinecittà lot. Surreal, intercut classical images flash before us: chalky, white, plaster casts, with garishly painted details (red eyes, blue lips, gold hair), of a kouros, Athena, Poseidon, the

Apollo Belvedere, the Capitoline Venus, and Homer himself, presiding forlornly in a sunny meadow. Whether Godard is suggesting that the classics are dead and that, for better or worse, we have lost our link with the past, or whether he is portraying modern individuals as emotionally frozen and petrified, as in Alain Resnais' sculpture-filled *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), the effect of *Contempt*'s kitschy statuary is somewhat ridiculous. Compare, in contrast, Truffaut's stunningly successful use of a Greek Cycladic idol in the garden of *Jules and Jim* (1961) to mirror the weathered beauty and sexual mystery of Jeanne Moreau.

Attractions and rivalries among the characters of *Contempt* begin to parallel those of the *Odyssey*. The writer's young wife, Camille (Brigitte Bardot), becomes the central point of an erotic triangle: feeling that Paul has in effect prostituted her by forcing her into the producer's sports car, she turns against her husband and eventually abandons him. As their marriage chills, Paul muses about Homer: "Maybe Ulysses is really fed up with Penelope, and that's why he goes to war." There are scattered rereadings of the poem throughout the film: the *Odyssey* is about "a wife not loving her husband," or Ulysses is gone for so long because "he doesn't want to get home". Even the producer tries his hand: "I rewrote the *Odyssey* last night," Prokosch announces at one point. The poem becomes a prism through which the film's shifting relationships are examined. The cynical director Lang has his own, more impersonal take on the material. He remarks, "The world of Homer was a real world that developed in harmony with nature. Homer's reality is what it is. Take it or leave it."

While the principal characters dance and spar, the actual filming of the *Odyssey* is under way. A rather slackly unathletic Ulysses, wearing a sad-looking, off-the-shoulder, plaid smock, is seen padding around at the periphery of things; sometimes he has a bow and arrow and sometimes a sword, which in *Contempt*'s final shot he lifts skyward as he gazes, paralyzed, across the flat sea. Far more dynamic is the saucy

script girl in short shorts and a striped halter top. “Act one, scene one!” she barks, whacking the clapper-board labeled “ODYSSEY” in front of the camera lens. Casting is still in flux: *Laugh-In*-like auditions for a floozy-class Nausikaä go on in an empty theater (interesting but not nearly as well-done as the scene in Fellini’s *8½* where Marcello Mastroianni as the philandering director auditions actresses for the roles of his wife and mistress, as his real wife steams nearby).

*Contempt* is full of ironic play with classical minutiae. Having a fit in a screening room, the producer kicks a stack of film cans and pretends to hurl one like a discus—like Myron’s statue but also like Odysseus on Phaeacia. Later, he hands Paul a book of Roman paintings—“to help with the *Odyssey*”—that Camille will listlessly leaf through. In their chicly furnished apartment, Paul slouches around in a white towel wrapped like a Roman toga (another borrowing from *8*), while Camille, announcing her future plans to sleep alone on the Italian-moderne red couch, perversely covers her blonde mane with a helmet-like black wig that critics see as an allusion to Godard’s estranged wife, actress Anna Karina, but that could also evoke the “thinking,” untouchable virgin goddess, Athena. The plucky, multilingual woman translator also has Minervan mental qualities.

As a *rewriter*, Paul the reluctant script doctor resembles Homer the bard, who reshaped the heroic lays of the Bronze Age Aegean. *Contempt* opens with a massive Cinemascope camera sliding down its track on a Mediterranean village street and turning to loom over us like one-eyed Polyphemus, a monstrous invader from infernal Hollywood. “The Cyclops scene” is explicitly announced on set later in the film, but what we actually see is a glum Camille in sunglasses (self-blinded?) moving away in a rowboat with Prokosch, morosely watched by Paul from a cliff. Is she the Cyclops’ stolen sheep? Helen eloping with Paris? or an impatient Penelope who sails for adventure while, in a modern sex reversal, her husband waits? The producer who kicks things around and aggressively guns his red sportscar around cor-

ners is like Antinous, the cock-of-the-walk suitor who finally wins his unfaithful Penelope.

The luxurious, Olympian hilltop house on Capri where jealousies simmer recalls both the emperor Tiberius' dissolute villa on that island and, in its broad steps and bare platform roof, the ruined temple of Apollo at oracular Delphi. The pistol which Paul secretly begins to carry but which the plot stops him from using is like Odysseus' bow, held in reserve for future vengeance. Fate or the gods intervene instead: Prokosch and Camille, bound for Rome in the sports car, collide with a gas truck and are killed. (Another gas truck as *deus ex machina* saves the hero from airborne destruction in *North By Northwest* (1959) directed by the New Wave's ultimate auteur, Alfred Hitchcock.) As in the traffic-clogged *Week-End* (1967), Godard presents highway accidents as modern shipwrecks, like those barely survived by tenacious Odysseus.

Brigitte Bardot has been a persistent presence in our Homeric tour. A bubbly ingenue in *Helen of Troy*, she is in full, sulky flower in *Contempt*, where she has become the archetypal sex bomb still imitated by Claudia Schiffer and Pamela Anderson Lee. But Bardot also has an unexpected connection to *Ulysses*. In Venice on a break from shooting that film, Kirk Douglas saw "the most gorgeous creature—long, silky blond hair, beautiful breasts, never-ending legs—running toward me in a bikini, a sight I will remember long after my eyes fail me."<sup>2</sup> The then-obscure, seventeen-year-old Bardot had met Douglas when she was playing a bit part in *Act of Love*, the film he completed in France before leaving for Rome to do *Ulysses*. Seeing her for that visionary moment in Venice, he sensed her future stardom. In the gratuitous seminude scenes demanded by the producers of *Contempt*, the camera caresses Bardot's glossy curves as if she were an Arcadian landscape. Fusing Penelope with Circe and Calypso, she ultimately embodies eternal Aphrodite, the goddess of love herself.

NOTES

1. *The Ragman's Son: An Autobiography* (New York 1988), 210.
2. *Ibid.*, 211.