

Hercules' Choice:

Virtue, Vice and the Hero of the Twentieth-Century Screen

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Introduction

The predominant image of Hercules on the modern screen is that of the strong-man monster-slayer. No Hercules film is complete without spectacular feats of strength and reference to the Labours, often exemplified by the killing of the Nemean lion, whether the episode is directly narrated or simply alluded to via the presence of the lionskin. This can be seen all the way from Francisci's *Hercules* (1958-9, below), to the neat summary of the Labours in the 'Zero to Hero' sequence of Disney's *Hercules* (1997), and to the tale-telling which opens Brett Ratner's *Hercules* (2014), in which Dwayne Johnson sports a particularly fine lionskin throughout.¹ To a significant extent monster-slaying dominates the hero's image in ancient art and literature, too. In Greek sculpture and vase-painting of the archaic period (c.700-500 BCE), in particular, we have literally hundreds of representations of Herakles (to use his Greek name in this Greek context) killing the Nemean lion and others of the canonical twelve labours, as well as a whole raft of other exploits which involve killing or subduing monstrous enemies. The hero is not so omnipresent in Greek art of later periods and Roman art, but when he does appear he is still most frequently depicted in monster-slayer mode. In literature, too, several of the Labours are referenced as early as Homer's *Iliad* and Hesiod's *Theogony*, composed in the eighth century BCE, and deeds of strength remain a staple feature of Herakles-Hercules' treatment in later Greek and Roman epic.²

¹ On this and two other 2014 Hercules films – Renny Harlin's *The Legend of Hercules* (starring Kellan Lutz), and Nick Lyon's *Hercules Reborn* (starring John Hennigan) – see my forthcoming paper "Hercules: a hero for the 2010s?", in Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds.), *The New Ancient Hero on Screen* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press). For an excellent introduction to Disney's *Hercules*, see Alastair Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen: ancient Greece and Rome on film* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press 2011) 194-215.

² For a survey of the ancient material, with further bibliography, see Emma Stafford, *Herakles* (Gods and Heroes in the Ancient World) (London: Routledge, 2012), especially 23-78 on monster-slaying.

There are, however, other sides to the hero's character, which begin to be elaborated in Athenian drama of the fifth century BCE, when tragedy and comedy push Herakles to extremes of behaviour both positive and negative. Philosophical reflection on this polarisation is epitomised in the tale, attributed to the late fifth-century sophist Prodikos of Keos, of Herakles' choice between two ways of life, symbolised by female figures who personify Virtue and Vice. The contention of this paper is that the dichotomy represented by Prodikos is reflected in twentieth-century screen versions of the hero. I shall not be denying the significance of other factors – commercial pressures to conform with contemporary moral codes, the narrative potential of a polarisation between good and evil – but rather proposing that the ancient scenario of the Choice, mediated by its popularity in the Renaissance, is an underlying influence. This is not an entirely original proposition: Ruby Blondell makes the connection between Prodikos' virtuous Herakles and the abstemious title character of the 1990s *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* (Kevin Sorbo), noting that both figures “eschew pleasures, specifically the pleasures of food, drink, and sex”;³ Kim Shahabudin compares Prodikos' Herakles with the ‘virtuous’ Hercules of Pietro Francisci's *Hercules* (1958-9), and contrasts both with the more ambiguous hero of Vittorio Cottafavi's *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961).⁴ However, there is scope for a more in-depth exploration of the idea, especially in connection with the Hercules-themed films of the late 1950s and early 1960s. I shall begin, then, with a reminder of the original story, and a brief look at its transmission in the Renaissance, to establish the basis for comparison with both the general Choice scenario

³ Ruby Blondell, “How to kill an Amazon”, *Helios* 32.2 (2005) 183-213 (quote from 188); ideas from this are more briefly reprised in Blondell's “Hercules psychotherapist”, in Angela Ndalianis, Chris Mackie and Wendy Haslam (eds.), *Super/Heroes: from Hercules to Superman* (Washington DC: New Academia Publishing 2007) 239-49. Bibliography on *Hercules the Legendary Journeys* is not abundant, but see e.g. Gideon Nisbet, *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (2nd ed.) [1st ed. 2006] (Bristol and Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2008) 55-66; on the spin-off *Young Hercules* series, see Angeline Chiu, “Labors and Lesson plans: educating young Hercules in two 1990s children's television programs”, *Amphora* 11.1 (2014) 1 and 6-7; Chiu notes (6) Prodikos' story as an instance of moral education in the ancient tradition, but rightly distinguishes between the solitary experience and the communal, school context of the 1990s hero's learning.

⁴ Kim Shahabudin, “Ancient mythology and modern myths: *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961)”, in Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin (eds.), *Classics For All* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 196-216 (see 204-5).

and some significant points of detail in the representation of Virtue and Vice. My focus will then be on expressions of the Choice in the so-called ‘peplum’,⁵ or ‘sword-and-sandals’ films produced in Italy c.1958-65, with particular attention to the two foundational pieces of the genre, Francisci’s *Hercules* (1958-9) and *Hercules Unchained* (1959-60).

The tradition of the Choice

Prodikos’s story of ‘The Choice of Herakles’ presents the hero in contemplative mode and explicitly makes virtue (*aretē*) the motivation for his deeds.⁶ We do not have a text by Prodikos himself, but the story is preserved by a re-telling (in the mouth of Sokrates) in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (2.1.21-2), written some thirty years or more after the deaths of both Sokrates and Prodikos:

They say that when Herakles was setting out from childhood into his prime, a time when the young, now becoming their own masters, show whether they will take the path of virtue (*aretē*) in life or the path of vice (*kakia*), he went out to a quiet place and sat not knowing which of the roads to take. There appeared two tall women approaching him, one pretty to look at and of free-born nature, her body adorned with purity, her eyes with modesty, her figure with reserve, and with white clothes. The other was grown into plumpness and softness, her face made up so that it looked whiter and rosier in appearance than it actually was, her figure so that it looked straighter than it was by nature, and she had wide-open eyes, and clothes, so that her charms would shine right through. Often she looked herself over, and looked to see whether anyone was watching her, and she often took a glance at her own shadow.

The women turn out to be Virtue (*Artetē*) and Vice (*Kakia*) personified, appropriately characterised by their contrasting physical appearances. The two figures are represented as

⁵ The term was coined by French scholars in the early 1960s, in (inaccurate) reference to the short tunics worn by both male and female characters: see e.g. several essays in the May 1962 edition of *Cahiers du cinéma*. The term is discussed at some length by Claude Aziza in (ed.) *Le péplum: l’antiquité au cinéma* (CinémAction no.89) (Condé-sur-Noireau: Éditions Corlet, 1998), 7-11, and in *Le péplum, un mauvais genre* (50 Questions) (Paris, Klincksieck, 2009), 13-19.

⁶ On Prodikos’ story, see e.g. Mary Kuntz, “The Prodikeyan ‘Choice of Herakles’: a reshaping of myth”, *Classical Journal* 89 (1994) 163-81, and David Sansone, “Heracles at the Y”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 124 (2004) 125-42. For the place of the story in a broader ‘intellectualisation’ of Herakles, see Karl Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme: the adaptations of the hero in literature from Homer to the twentieth century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1972) 101-25. I also discuss the story in “Vice or Virtue?: Herakles and the art of allegory”, in Louis Rawlings (ed.), *Herakles and Hercules: exploring a Greco-Roman divinity* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales 2005) 71-96; and see Alastair Blanshard, *Hercules: a heroic life* (London: Granta Book, 2005) 32-8 on the story’s long-lasting structural appeal.

women in the first place because the nouns they personify are grammatically feminine,⁷ but the elaboration of their appearance owes much to social conventions about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women in classical Athens. Virtue is “pretty to look at”, but her prettiness is natural, her whole body expressive of “purity”, “modesty” and “reserve”, virtues of the citizen wife, all set off by her “white clothes”. The association of white clothing with virtue can be traced right back to Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (c.700 BCE), in which the personifications of Righteous Indignation (Nemesis) and Shame or Modesty (Aidōs) abandon earth at the end of the Age of Iron in protest against mankind’s wickedness, “their fair forms wrapped in white robes” (lines 197-201). Vice, on the other hand, is described in terms one would expect to be applied to the courtesan: her face is made up and her figure made “straighter than it was by nature”, while her clothes reveal, rather than cover, a body which shows signs of an over-indulgent lifestyle.⁸ This calls to mind a fragment of the fourth-century Athenian comic writer Alexis (fr. 103 *PCG*) in which a character complains of the activities of the madam or pimp in remodelling their girls, adjusting their height with the right footwear, padding small breasts, using lamp-black to accentuate fair eyebrows and adjusting facial complexions with white lead and rouge. Though it is not explicitly stated that Vice is beautiful, it is to be assumed that her appearance is superficially attractive, to reflect the superficial attractions of the way of life she offers. Each outlines to Herakles a different road he might take in life. The way offered by Vice is suitably appealing (*Memorabilia* 2.1.23-4):

... you will always be considering what tasty food or drink you can find, what sight or sound may please you, what scent or touch you may enjoy, which boyfriend’s society will gratify you most, how you can sleep most comfortably, and how you can come by all these with the least trouble.

⁷ I consider this question of gender elsewhere: Emma Stafford, “Masculine values, feminine forms: on the gender of personified abstractions”, in Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (eds.), *Thinking Men: masculinity and its self-representation in the Classical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1998) 43-56; and *Worshipping Virtues: personification and the divine in ancient Greece* (Swansea and London: Classical Press of Wales and Duckworth) 27-35.

⁸ On the physical description of the two personifications, see Olof Gigon, *Kommentar zum zweiten Buch von Xenophons Memorabilien* (Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft 7) (Basel: Reinhardt, 1956) 64-7.

The road of Virtue is predictably more like hard work, and (*Memorabilia* 2.1.27-8):

I shall not deceive you with a pleasant preamble, but I shall explain the facts truthfully as the gods have ordained them. For the gods grant men nothing of the things that are really good and admirable without effort and application...

There follows a long list of prerequisites for winning the good opinion of gods and men such as “if you expect to be admired for your virtue (*aretē*) by the whole of Greece, you must strive to benefit Greece...” and “if you want to be physically able, you must accustom your body to be subject to your mind, and train it with hard work and sweat”. We are not given Herakles’ reaction to either speech, but the conclusion – “such, as Prodikos tells it, was Virtue’s education of Herakles” – suggests that Herakles chose to follow the path of *aretē*.

Prodikos is said to have performed his “speech on Herakles” to very large audiences in late fifth-century Athens (*Memorabilia* 2.1.21). To such audiences the tale must have evoked contrasting images of Herakles on the tragic and comic stage.⁹ In tragedy, the hero’s *aretē* is closely identified with his monster-slaying, for example by the chorus of Euripides’ *Herakles* (697-77): “But surpassing even his nobility of birth in virtue (*aretē*), he has made life calm for mortals by his labours, by destroying fearful beasts”. This civilising activity is associated with the particular virtue of piety, recognised even by the goddess Madness (Lyssa), as she prepares to destroy Herakles (851-3):

He has tamed the trackless land and savage sea, and single-handedly restored the gods’ honours when they had been destroyed by sacrilegious men.

By contrast, the Herakles of comedy is characterised by just such a list of vices as held out by Prodikos’ Vice as temptations. Passing references in Aristophanes show that our hero must have been a stock figure of the genre, regularly shown “being tricked out of his dinner” (*Wasps* 60) or “kneading dough and being hungry” (*Peace* 741), with a penchant for hot

⁹ For a detailed survey of Herakles in tragedy and comedy, see Galinsky (1972) 40-125; Stafford (2012) 79-136 provides updated bibliography.

baths (*Clouds* 1045-54). He actually appears towards the end of *Birds*, where Poseidon describes him as “stupid and a glutton” (*Birds* 1604), and he is fixated on food throughout the scene. Likewise in *Frogs* (107-15) Dionysos assumes that Herakles will be able to advise him on food in general, and the provisions for fleshly comforts in the Underworld – the “bakeries, brothels, inns, rest-stops, springs, roads, towns, rooms, the landladies, where there are fewest bedbugs”.

The ongoing popularity of Prodikos’ moral tale is attested by its reappearance in a variety of contexts in later antiquity.¹⁰ Cicero explicitly cites Xenophon’s version of the story when advising his son on career choices in the *De Officiis* (1.118), though he specifies that Virtue’s opposite number is the specific vice of Pleasure (*Voluptas*). He concedes that such goddesses might have appeared to the divine Hercules, although mere mortals have to look to human role-models when choosing a path in life. It is again Pleasure (*Voluptas*) who appears with Virtue (*Virtus*) in Silius Italicus’ *Punica* (15.18-128), where the young Scipio is cast as Hercules, faced with a choice between escape from the dangers and hardships of war, and victory over the Carthaginians. Silius’ figures are close to their models in appearance, Virtue again modest and dressed in white, Pleasure smelling of Persian perfume and attired in extravagant Tyrian purple and gold (*Punica* 15.23-31). The story is greatly elaborated on by Dio Chrysostom in his advice to Trajan *On Kingship* (1.52-84), where Hercules’ choice is between Royalty (attended by such figures as Justice, Peace, Civic Order and Law) and Tyranny (whose courtiers include Cruelty, Insolence, Lawlessness, Faction and Flattery), while Lucian (*The Dream, or Lucian’s Life* 6-9) humorously presents his younger self as faced with a career choice between the beautiful Education (*Paideia*) and the rough, unkempt Sculpture (*Hermoglyphikē*). In the fourth century, yet another variation on the theme appears in the emperor Julian’s *Orations* (7.229c-34c), with Julian himself playing the part of

¹⁰ On these later versions of the story, see Bruno Rochette, “Héraclès à la croisée des chemins: un *topos* dans la littérature gréco-latine”, *Études Classiques* 66 (1998) 105-13

Hercules, but most significantly the story is selected by St Basil, bishop of Caesarea, as an example of the possible Christian moral values to be extracted from pagan literature (*On the Value of Greek Literature* 5.55-77; quote 5.61-5):

When Herakles was quite a young man, and close to being in his very prime, as you are now, as he was deliberating which road to turn his steps to, the one leading through labours towards virtue, or the easier path, two women approached him, and these were Virtue and Vice...

St. Basil's Vice is considerably less attractive than her Xenophontic model, "withered up", "squalid" and "severe" to look at (5.71-2), a modification conforming with Cynic ideals.¹¹

The post-classical revival of Prodikos' tale begins with two brief allusions in Petrarch's *Life of Solitude* (1.4.2 and 2.9.4) of 1346, followed at the beginning of the fifteenth century by a more substantial account in Salutati's *De Laboribus Herculis* (3.7.1-4).¹² Neither scholar would have read Xenophon's Greek, but they accessed the story via Cicero's Latin version, and combined it with the Pythagorean idea of the letter Y symbolising a parting of the ways in life. This led to the establishment of the motif of Hercules *in bivium*, "at the cross-roads", followed by all subsequent visual and literary representations of the Choice, despite the lack of such a specific location in the ancient accounts. Modern scholarship, too, almost invariably speaks of "Hercules at the cross-roads", following Panofsky's influential 1930 study of the same name which traces the theme's huge popularity in paintings and engravings in the Renaissance and beyond, discussing more than 50 examples.¹³ The success of the theme was promoted by a number of influential sixteenth- and seventeenth-century handbooks of myth and iconography which associated Hercules with virtue. In Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593), for example, 'Heroic Virtue' (no. 317) is

¹¹ See Nigel Guy Wilson (ed.), *Saint Basil on Greek Literature* (London: Duckworth 1975) ad 5.71.

¹² The re-emergence of the Choice story is traced by Theodor Mommsen, "Petrarch and the story of the Choice of Hercules", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16 (1953) 178-92. See also Galinsky (1972) 185-229, especially 198-201 and 213-14.

¹³ Erwin Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst* (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg 18) (Leipzig: Teubner, 1930)

represented by an image of Hercules, with lionskin, club and three apples of the Hesperides, accompanied by the text:

The Lion and Club denote the *Strength* of Virtue, that is immovable; secondly, the Apples, bridling Anger, *Temperance* in Riches; thirdly, the generous Despising of *Pleasure*, which is heroic. The Club is knotty, to shew the great *Difficulties* to be met with in living virtuously.

Geoffrey Whitney's *Choice of Emblemes* (1586) includes an entry specifically on *Bivium virtutis et vitii* ("The crossroads of virtue and vice", no. 40), which consists of a woodcut of the scene accompanied by a poem which briefly tells the story before reflecting on the relative merits of pleasure and vice, concluding:

But heare, I yeelde oh vertue to thie will,
And vowe my selfe, all labour to indure,
For to ascende the steepe, and craggie hill,
The toppe whereof, whoe so attaines, is sure
For his rewarde, to have a crowne of fame:
Thus HERCULES, obey'd this sacred dame.

The Renaissance artists had no ancient visual prototype to follow,¹⁴ but invariably pick up on the original narrative's interest in characterising Vice and Virtue by their contrasting appearance. This can be seen, for example, in Paolo de Matteis' *Choice of Hercules* (Fig. 1), commissioned by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, to illustrate the vision for a 'history painting' outlined in his *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgement of Hercules according to Prodicus, Lib.II. Xen. de Mem. Soc.* (1713, first published in French in 1712).¹⁵ Here the contrast is accentuated by the fact that Virtue is standing, holding a sword in her right hand and with the left pointing, presumably indicating the hard path of which she is speaking, while Vice reclines on the ground next to an amphora,

¹⁴ Picard's identification of the Choice as the subject of the name vase of the Painter of Louvre G508 (Attic red-figure bell krater, c.400 BC) (Charles Picard, "Nouvelles remarques sur l'apologue dit de Prodicos: Héraclès entre le vice et la vertu", *Revue Archéologique* 42 (1953) 33-7, pls 5-6) is unconvincing, as I have argued elsewhere: Emma Stafford, "Héraklès: encore et toujours le problème du *heros theos*", *Kernos* 18 (2005) 391-406.

¹⁵ The version illustrated here is a small-scale contemporary copy of the Ashmolean's original, made for Shaftesbury's friend Sir John Copley: James Lomax, *Temple Newsam Paintings* (Leeds: Leeds Museums and Galleries, 2000) 17 no.22.

plate and goblet, indicative of a bibulous picnic, looking amorously at Hercules, wearing a flowery garland and with her invitingly loose drapery already revealing both legs and most of one breast. Hercules himself is standing (rather than seated, as in Xenophon's account), draped in his trademark lionskin and resting heavily on his club, facing Virtue although his body leans towards Vice.

[IMAGE WITHHELD FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS]

Fig. 5.1: Paolo de Matteis, *The Choice of Hercules*, 1712 (Temple Newsam House, Leeds). Photo: Temple Newsam House (Leeds Museums and Art Galleries); Photographic Survey, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

The Choice in the Peplum

With this tradition in mind, let us now turn to twentieth-century film, and specifically the peplum. Though not highly regarded by critics at the time,¹⁶ the genre has received a good deal of scholarly attention, especially in recent years. This scholarship falls roughly into three categories: work focusing on the peplum's place in the history of Italian cinema;¹⁷ work concerned with its cultural significance;¹⁸ and work considering the genre in the context of cinematic receptions of the classical world.¹⁹ There is of course some overlap between these

¹⁶ Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 61-2 discuss the contemporary reception of *Hercules* (1958-9): see e.g. Richard Nason, "Screen: Weak 'Hercules': Italian-made spectacle opens at 135 theatres", *New York Times* (23/7/1959) 32. See also Mark Jancovich, "'An Italianmade spectacle film dubbed in English': cultural distinctions, national cinema, and the critical reception of the postwar historical epic", in Robert Burgoyne (ed.), *The Epic Film in World Culture* (London and New York: Routledge 2011) 161-75.

¹⁷ Domenico Cammarota, *Il cinema peplum: la prima guida critica ai film di Conan, Ercole, Goliath, Maciste, Sansone, Spartaco, Thaur, Ursus* (Rome: Fanucci 1987); Michele Giordano, *Giganti Buoni. Da Ercole a Piedone (e oltre) il mito dell'uomo forte ne cinema italiano* (Rome: Gremese Editore 1998); Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York: Continuum 2009) 159-79; Gian Piero Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema: a guide to Italian films from its origins to the twenty-first century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2009) 161-4; Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York: Continuum 2009) 159-79;.

¹⁸ Michèle Lagny, 'Popular taste: the peplum', in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds.), *Popular European Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge 1992) 163-80; Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge 1997) 145-83; Maggie Günsberg, "Heroic bodies: the cult of masculinity in the peplum", in *Italian Cinema: gender and genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005) 97-132; Robert Rushing, "Gentlemen prefer Hercules: desire/identification/beefcake", *Camera Obscura* 23.3 (2008) 158-91; Frank Burke, "The Italian sword-and-sandal film from *Fabiola* to *Hercules and the Captive Women: texts and contexts*", in *Popular Italian Cinema: culture and politics in a postwar society* (London and New York: IB Tauris 2011) 17-5.

¹⁹ Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: myth and history* (London: Routledge 1984) 13-24 and 52-66; Maria Wyke, "Herculean Muscle! The classicizing rhetoric of body-building", *Arion* 4.3 (1997) 51-79; Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 2nd ed. [1st ed. 1978] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 117-23 and 306-

approaches, and one might add the further categories of the catalogue,²⁰ and of ‘scholarly journalism’, not aimed at an academic audience though replete with useful detail.²¹ Despite this wealth of discussion, however, very few commentators make explicit reference to the Prodikeyan Choice: apart from Shahabudin (above), I have only found one brief reference in a footnote of James Clauss’ paper on *Hercules Unchained*, and Luigi Spina’s comment on the significance of the Choice as “a crucial feature” of the hero’s ancient career, which is not developed by any specific reference to the films.²² Indeed, some commentators appear to be unaware not just of the particular story, but of the whole tradition of a more reflective, even philosophical hero – Bondanella, for example, summarises the mythological background by listing the twelve labours, concluding that Hercules was “considered to be more brawn than brain”.²³ While such an understanding of the tradition is reasonable in terms of the dominance of the monster-slaying motif across all periods, it overlooks some notable correspondences between the genre’s characterisation of Hercules and his ancient incarnations.

Both continuity and discontinuity with the mythological tradition are exemplified already in Pietro Francisci’s *Le fatiche di Ercole*, released in Italy in 1958 and, as *Hercules*, the following year in the United States and UK, heavily promoted by Joseph E. Levine.²⁴

323; Blanshard (2005) 157-66; Martin M. Winkler, “Greek myth on the screen”, in Roger D. Woodard (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2007) 453-79; Nisbet (2008) 45-55; Arthur J. Pomeroy, *Then It Was Destroyed by the Volcano: the ancient world in film and on television* (London: Duckworth, 2008) 29-59; Spina (2008); Shahabudin (2009); Fernando Lillo Redonet, *Héroes de Grecia y Roma en la Pantalla* (Madrid: Evohé, 2010) 85-105; Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 58-76; Stafford (2012) 232-6; Arthur J. Pomeroy, “The women of Ercole”, in Konstantinos P Nikoloutsos (ed.), *Ancient Greek Women in Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013) 189-206.

²⁰ Gary A. Smith, *Epic Films: casts, credits and commentary on over 250 historical spectacle movies* (Jefferson NC: McFarland 1991); Patrick Lucanio, *With Fire and Sword: Italian spectacles on American screens 1958-1968* (Metuchen and London: Scarecrow Press 1994); the latter includes some useful comment on the genre as a whole (12-56).

²¹ Notably the essays gathered in Aziza (ed. 1998) and Aziza’s monograph (2009).

²² James J. Clauss, “*Hercules Unchained: contaminatio, nostos, katabasis*, and the surreal”, *Arethusa* 41 (2008) 51-66 (58 n.20); Luigi Spina, “By Heracles! From satyr-play to *peplum*”, in Irene Berti and Marta García Morcillo (eds.), *Hellas on Screen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steine 2008) 57-64 (see 58-9 on Prodikos).

²³ Bondanella (2009) 167.

²⁴ As the film which initiated the whole genre, *Hercules* features in all discussions of *peplum*. On the original Italian production costs, Levine’s \$1-million publicity campaign and the film’s impressive profits, see Günsberg

The plot is very loosely based on the ancient Argonautika story, in which Hercules traditionally plays only a subsidiary role, with two of his better known labours worked into the story early on to demonstrate, first, the superhuman strength of a demigod in despatching the Nemean lion and, second, the still-impressive achievement of the hero in vanquishing the Cretan bull after he has renounced his immortality. There is also an oblique reference to ancient tradition in the naming of the heroine as Iole, though her position is in most respects far removed from Iole the princess of Oichalia portrayed in Sophokles' *Women of Trachis*. The plot, in this and subsequent pepla, is secondary to requirements of the performance context for which the films were designed. This is generally assumed to be the *terza visione* cinemas which had sprung up in Italy after WWII in rural and peripheral urban areas, especially in the South, as celebrated in Giuseppe Tornatori's *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), where the viewing experience was chaotic: such a context promoted variety and episodic spectacle over complex plot and sustained characterisation.²⁵ The casualness of the viewing experience was replicated in the American drive-in-movie context, and the broad nature of the audience is reflected in a comment made by Joseph Levine to an interviewer in 1961 about *Hercules*:²⁶

It had something for everybody. It had a dragon for the kids, musclemen for growing boys, a shipwreck scene for waiters and clerks. Who doesn't dream of getting stuck on an island with some broads? And the picture had Steve Reeves. He appealed to women.

(2005) 98-9; Brunetta (2009) 161-4; Pomeroy (2013) 189-90. A particularly detailed account of the promotional campaign is provided by Anthony McKenna, *Joseph E. Levine: showmanship, reputation and industrial practice 1945-1977* (diss. University of Nottingham 2008) 87-116.

²⁵ On the viewing context, see Dyer (1997) 165-9; Günsberg (2005) 7-13; Shahabudin (2009) 201-2; Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 58-9. On the Italian audiences' post-WWII immersion in American film, see Gian Piero Brunetta, "The long march of American cinema in Italy: from Fascism to the Cold War", in David Ellwood and Rob Croes (eds.), *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of Cultural Hegemony* (Amsterdam: VU University Press 1994) 139-54.

²⁶ Gay Talese, "Joe Levine unchained: a candid portrait of a spectacular showman", *Esquire* (1st January 1961) 68. Quoted in McKenna (2008) 108; as McKenna notes, in a 1974 interview (Pat O'Haire, "This Levine guy – he's a real Joe", *Sunday News, New York's Picture Newspaper* (29/9/74) Levine repeated this soundbite with the significant addition "and some men".

The American bodybuilder Steve Reeves did indeed appeal to women, and to men too, for a variety of reasons. Reeves had previously had a number of minor acting roles since achieving his ‘Mr Universe’ title in 1950, but it was his impressive physique which earned him the role and set the standard for later stars of the genre.²⁷ The film builds in plenty of opportunities for the display of Reeves’ muscles, in poses borrowed from the bodybuilding repertoire: in addition to his fights with the lion and the bull, his first action in the film is to uproot an entire tree to throw in the way of Iole’s out-of-control chariot, he must bend an iron bar to prove his identity on arrival at Pelias’ court, and towards the end he “exhibits a prize-winning V-shaped flex before Samsonesquely destroying the palace of Iolco”.²⁸ As Dyer and others have discussed, the hero’s phenomenal strength would have appealed especially to the rural working class in Italy, and to a new urban working class, (re)asserting the value of their physical strength, as well as placing him in the popular tradition of the cinematic strongman, a popular figure especially since the first appearance of Maciste in Giovane Pastroni’s *Cabiria* (1914).²⁹ It is also significant that Reeves was American, unlike the rest of the cast and crew, an exceptionality which would be replicated in the stars of most subsequent pepla. As the outsider who comes to the defence of the oppressed, Reeves’ Hercules might be read as symbolising American intervention in WWII, while being distanced from Mussolini, whose appropriation of athletic imagery had potentially compromised the strongman figure.³⁰

In addition to these socio-political considerations, the potential for Hercules’ erotic appeal (for viewers of either sex) is clear: Reeves’ costume, a very short brown tunic rather cursorily pinned over just one shoulder, leaves more than half of his glorious upper torso on display throughout the film, and he periodically strips down to an even skimpier loincloth.

²⁷ Giordano (1998) devotes a whole chapter to ‘Steve il magnifico’ (73-85).

²⁸ Solomon (2001) 122 (caption to fig. 79).

²⁹ Dyer (1997) 168-9; Günsberg (2005) 101-2. On the cinematic tradition of the ‘gentle giant’, see Giordano (1998); Wyke (1997) traces the story back further, to nineteenth-century strongman acts. Specifically on Maciste, detailed discussion is now available in Jacqueline Reich, *The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema* (Indiana University Press 2015).

³⁰ Dyer (1997) 170-6; Burke (2011) 28-9; Pomeroy (2013) 191; Reich (2015) 187-237.

The loincloth-clad male body is particularly foregrounded early on in the film in the training scene in which Hercules supervises the youth of Jolco as they practise a variety of sports, the link with both classical athletics and the modern Olympics being signalled by the opening shot of our hero, flanked by Castor and Pollux, arranged on a hillock like Olympic victors on the medal stand.³¹ As Günsberg and Rushing have argued, the viewer may identify with Iole as she watches the subsequent display of male bodies, or with the young Ulysses (Gabriele Antonini) as he both craves Hercules' approval and aspires to emulate him ("I want to be like you!"); the scene thus maintains a superficial heteronormativity though allowing of 'deviant' responses.³²

Hercules' character in the film has attracted comment for its naive cheerfulness and lack of political ambition.³³ Only Shahabudin, however, has remarked upon this Hercules' kinship with his Prodikeyan ancestor, and then only in general terms of his virtuous character.³⁴ I would argue that a further correspondence can be seen in reflection upon different ways of life. This can most clearly be seen in the sequence which follows the death of Iole's arrogant brother Iphitus, mauled by the Nemean lion, for which Hercules is (rather unreasonably) blamed: in search of atonement, the hero sets himself a kind of Choice, visiting 'the Sibyl' in an anachronistically ruined Greek temple on the cliff-tops:

HERCULES: I can't stand being superior. Let me experience the real things – love, or hate.

SIBYL: Those are mortal states, Hercules.

HERCULES: If it's my immortality making me unhappy, then I'll do without it!

SIBYL: That's dangerous, Hercules. Don't you know how foolish you'd be to renounce it? To be born a man and see everything die is not to be immortal. Stay as you are, be a god – don't exchange immortality for fear, pain and sorrow.

³¹ Rushing (2008) 170 notes that this shot also 'presents a camp vision of gay erotica'. Wyke (1997, 59-63) links *Hercules* with the classicising rhetoric of 1950s homoerotic photography.

³² Günsberg (2005) 131; Rushing (2008) 170-5; see also Wyke (1997) 66-7, and Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 70-3.

³³ Günsberg (2005) 174; Pomeroy (2013) 191.

³⁴ Shahabudin (2009).

HERCULES: I want to live like any other mortal man. It is my prayer to have a family. I want children of my own. To see the children growing up.

SIBYL: Enough, Hercules. As you chose.

HERCULES: I accept!

This rejection of immortality in favour of domesticity is, of course, dependent on a very modern conception of the superiority of decent humanity to the dubious attractions of a supernatural existence,³⁵ and a traditional twentieth-century vision of the ideal nuclear family. However, the scene does present us with a reflective hero alone in a quiet place, hearing at least one side of the argument from a divinely-inspired woman. Hercules' subsequent adventures in search of the Golden Fleece in fact take him *away* from the creature-comforts of domesticity, and he steadfastly refuses to indulge in the alternative pleasures offered during the course of the quest, willingly facing hard work and physical danger: in effect he follows the Prodikeyan path of virtue, despite his apparent choice of a softer life.

The film's other notable correspondence with the Choice story is in its personification of Virtue and Vice in its female leads, Iole (Sylvia Koscina) and Antea, Queen of the Amazons (Gianna Maria Canale), on whose island the expedition takes refuge after a storm, unaware of the inhabitants' penchant for killing the men of whom they make use. The casting and costuming of the two women is often noted by commentators, but is most thoroughly discussed by Günsberg and Pomeroy:³⁶ Koscina's blonde hair and sporty figure, as well as her youth and relative obscurity, fitted her for the role of innocent Good Girl, in

³⁵ The immortality insisted upon by ancient myth as Herakles' reward for his labours is a perennial problem for modern story-telling, potentially a barrier to audience identification with the hero, and certainly complicating his relationship with any mortal heroine. Disney's *Hercules* (1997), like Francisci's, resorts to the tactic of having the hero renounce his immortality, but only at the last minute. On the radical solution adopted by NBC's made-for-TV *Hercules* (2005), see Meredith E. Safran, "Re-conceiving Hercules: divine paternity and Christian anxiety in *Hercules* (2005)", in Monica S. Cyrino and Meredith E. Safran (eds.), *Classical Myth on Screen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 133-46.

³⁶ Günsberg (2005) 104-32; Pomeroy (2013) 193-99. Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 74 cite a 'Display advertisement' in the *New York Times* (22/7/59 p.7) for an opposition in the film's marketing between the 'classical beauty of Sylvia Koscina' (Iole) and the 'lethal loveliness of Gianna Maria Canale'.

contrast to the Bad Girl of Canale, a “statuesque, raven-haired beauty”,³⁷ six years older than Koscina, who had already appeared in *femme fatale* roles in Riccardo Freda’s *Sins of Rome* (*Spartaco* 1953) and *Theodora, Slave Empress* (*Teodoro imperatrice di Bisanzio* 1954).³⁸ The opposition worked well for different audiences: the original Italian audiences would read Koscina as American or upper-class Italian (she was actually born in Zagreb, of Polish and Greek parents, but moved to Italy as a child), while appreciating Canale as the southern-Italian *maggiorata fisica* type of beauty; subsequent American(-influenced) audiences could easily identify Koscina as the wholesome ‘girl next door’, while revelling in Canale’s seductively-dangerous, foreign otherness. The polarisation of female types was of course already well established in cinematic convention, the figure of the ‘vamp’ having been developed in the silent era by such stars as Theda Bara, her opposition to the virtuous heroine quickly becoming something of a commonplace, with notable incarnations in de Mille’s *Cleopatra* (1934) and Mervyn LeRoy’s *Quo Vadis* (1951).³⁹ The idea is even enshrined in one of the rules for peplum production drawn up by the screenwriter/director Duccio Tessari: rule number 3 states that there should be an older (evil) and a younger woman (good).⁴⁰

It could therefore be objected that the opposition in *Hercules* is quite independent of the Greek mythological theme – and yet the neatness of the correlation between the two women’s appearance and that of Prodikos’ figures is striking. Like Prodikos’ Virtue, Koscina is relatively lightly made up and dressed in white: Dyer discusses the tradition of the

³⁷ Lucanio (1994) 26.

³⁸ As Pomeroy (2013) 203 n.43 notes, Canale would go on to play Antea again in *La regina delle Amazone* (1961) and she takes another vamp role (as Astra) in *Maciste contro il vampiro* (1961).

³⁹ On the development of female types in early film, see Brunetta (2009) 43-50; see also Shahabudin (2009) 207-11, and Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 22-3. Cf. Reich (2015) 238-43 on the opposition in the final Maciste film, *Il gigante delle Dolomiti* (1926). On the ‘Madonna/whore gender dichotomy’ in peplum, see Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 73-5.

⁴⁰ Günsberg (2005) 103, citing G. Ghigi, “Come si spiegano le fortune dei pepla su cui sembra si ritorni a puntare”, *Cineforum* 17.12 (December 1977) 733-46. Tessari appears in the credits of *Hercules and the Captive Women*, amongst other pepla.

equation between white clothing and virtue from the Renaissance onwards,⁴¹ but Xenophon's account and the Hesiod passage (cited above) demonstrate that the association is in fact older still. Canale, meanwhile, like Prodikos's Vice, is immaculately made-up, her first outfit being little more than a low-cut black and silver swimsuit, displaying shapely legs with one shoulder completely bare, a leopard-print cloak pinned to the other; she later appears in a long dress, black with a silver bodice, set off by a red scarf, but still with one shoulder bare; throughout her black hair is elaborately adorned with gold. The comparison is slightly weakened by the fact that it is Jason, rather than Hercules himself, who is the subject of Antea's attention, his youth adding to the impression of the queen's predatory nature. But the strength of Hercules' opposition to the Amazons is remarkable – Günsberg comments on his "violent forbidding of illicit heterosexual desire",⁴² as he beats the drum to keep the men to their task of rowing away from Lemnos as quickly as possible – suggesting that he too feels the attraction. My equation of Iole with Virtue is also complicated by the film's – and indeed the whole genre's – ambivalence towards domesticity: it is at once the goal the hero pursues, shared by all right-thinking men, and the state on which he must turn his back if wrongs are to be righted. The motif of the hero's departure from home, repeated in most pepla, may reflect contemporary concerns with South-North migration in Italy,⁴³ but it is driven by the narrative requirements of the genre: 'happily ever after' and adventure do not mix.⁴⁴ Thus domesticity is at once the virtue Iole embodies *and* the pleasurable vice Hercules must reject.

The vicious quality of domesticity is underlined early on in Francisci's *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (1959), released in the USA as *Hercules Unchained* (1960).⁴⁵ While the first

⁴¹ Dyer (1997) 70-81; see also the discussion of blonde hair in Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London: Chatto and Windus 1994) 362-86.

⁴² Günsberg (2005) 126.

⁴³ Günsberg (2005) 116. Cf. Clauss (2008) for a reading of *Hercules Unchained*, from a more American point of view, as dealing with the theme of the homecoming soldier.

⁴⁴ Pomeroy (2013) 204. Blondell (2005) 186 comments on the same problem in *Legendary Journeys*, solved at the beginning of the TV series by having Hera kill off Hercules' family.

⁴⁵ In addition to discussion in works on the genre as a whole, see Clauss (2008).

film's main plot had some connection with the ancient Herakles' story, the sequel's framing narrative is based on a myth with which the hero had no connection at all in antiquity: the Seven Against Thebes story, in which Oedipus' sons Eteocles and Polyneices fight over the kingship of Thebes. At the beginning, Hercules (Reeves again) and Iole (Koscina again) are presented as newly-weds travelling home to Thebes, accompanied by their young friend Ulysses (Antonini again). Hercules has retired to sleep in the back of their proto-spaghetti-western-style waggon⁴⁶ when they encounter the giant Anteus (Primo Carnera), and takes a long time to be roused in spite of the threat to those he should be protecting: as Günsberg remarks, this shows the "debilitating effects of domesticity on masculinity", "masculinity is literally put to sleep by marriage".⁴⁷ The scene is also interesting for its possible political overtones, elaborating on the potential identification we noted above between Mussolini and the cinematic strong man. As Bondanella suggests, noting Carnera's *floruit* as World Heavyweight champion 1933-7: "Thus, the strong man from America overcomes the strong man of the Fascist era, at least in the movies".⁴⁸ From a narrative point of view, the scene provides a link to the ancient mythological tradition, in which the fight with Antaios is one of Herakles' more famous *parerga* (exploits beside the twelve labours), including the motif of the hero's victory by holding the giant away from strength-giving contact with his mother Earth. This exploit was particularly popular in the post-classical tradition, having being promoted to the status of a labour by the medieval poet Boethius and being a popular subject in Renaissance art.⁴⁹

The episode heralds Hercules' metaphorical awakening and fresh rejection of the domestic sphere. After an encounter in a cave with Polynices, travelling with his Argive allies, and his father Oedipus, Hercules volunteers to intercede with Eteocles and proceeds to

⁴⁶ The first Spaghetti Western appeared in 1964: Wagstaff (1992) 246.

⁴⁷ Günsberg (2005) 115.

⁴⁸ Bondanella (2009) 169.

⁴⁹ Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* Book 4 poem 7.13-35. On the tradition of Antaios, see Stafford (2012) 55-6 (ancient sources) and 203-6 (post-classical tradition).

Thebes, only to leave again after extracting the king's unreliable agreement to abdicate. Despite Iole's reluctance to let Hercules go, he himself characterises the decision as inevitable: "I have no choice, Thebes is in danger". Iole is left behind at Thebes, under the dubious protection of Eteocles (Sergio Fantoni "in top villainous form")⁵⁰, a tyrant clearly modelled on the cinematic tradition of the Bad Roman emperor, with an effeminate hairstyle, a maniacal look (Ulysses: "Did you ever see a man so close to madness?"), and an amphitheatre full of tigers.⁵¹ Meanwhile, Hercules sets out with Ulysses to negotiate with Polynices, but not far into the journey makes the mistake of drinking the Waters of Forgetfulness, debilitated by which he is carried away by red-cloaked soldiers to Omphale's island. Although this is really a sub-plot, with no relation to the film's main narrative except insofar as it delays Hercules' intervention at Thebes, it is arguably substantial enough to justify the film's original Italian title. Omphale is played by Sylvia Lopez, whose "flaming red hair, ample figure, and implied wild sexuality"⁵² once again make her the perfect foil for Koscina's Iole, with whom she is here in direct competition for Hercules' allegiance (the opposition is well illustrated in Fig. 2). Her characterisation as a vamp-ish Vice is effected not only by her make-up (lusciously-painted lips, carefully delineated eyebrows, heavily mascara'ed lashes), lavish costumes and jewellery, but by the setting: her palace is marked as exotic by elements reminiscent of both Ankor Wat and Egyptian art, and she reclines on her bed petting a lion cub. Omphale's importance is signalled by the fact that we first see her in a pre-title sequence, taking delivery of a new male victim while her soldiers despatch the current incumbent – a scene repeated almost exactly on Hercules' arrival.

⁵⁰ Elley (1984) 55.

⁵¹ Pomeroy (2013) 200 notes a scene in which the Thebans imprisoned below this arena look up through the bars, in a 'stock portrayal of Christian martyrs awaiting their doom'.

⁵² Pomeroy (2013) 202; see 199-202 on the Iole-Omphale opposition in *Unchained*. This was one of Lopez's last films, released in the year of her untimely death from leukemia, aged just 26 years.

[IMAGE WITHHELD FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS]

Fig. 5.2: Poster for the French release of *Hercules Unchained*, featuring Steve Reeve's Hercules between Omphale (Sylvia Lopez) and Iole (Sylvia Koscina).

A period of enslavement to Omphale is genuinely part of the ancient Hercules' story, but the queen's characterisation as a seductive enchantress owes much to Homer's Circe, perhaps influenced by Mario Camerini's *Ulysses* (1954). The point is surprisingly rarely noted,⁵³ but in fact the *Odyssey* story is evoked throughout the film by the constant presence of the young Ulysses as Hercules' faithful companion, by several brief shots of his home on Ithaca, and by the fact that his father Laertes leads the expedition which comes to Hercules' rescue. Like Circe's Aiaia, Omphale's kingdom of Lydia is an island, rather than a section of Asia Minor, and like Circe Omphale bewitches the men who come to her realm – although, rather than turning them into animals, she has them embalmed and turned into statues in classically Greek poses. Like both Circe and Calypso, the other divine female who detains Odysseus, Omphale offers Hercules a life of luxury and ease, with all the pleasures of the flesh proffered by Prodikos' Vice.⁵⁴ And like Odysseus, Hercules enjoys this distraction for some time before being brought back to his senses and remembering his home: we see him kissing Omphale and then the next day lounging on a couch, his joking with Ulysses that "You should sleep in the daytime and stay awake at night!" clearly implying a night of passion, and having copious quantities of food and drink delivered by Omphale's retinue of pretty girls. Even Vice's offer of a boyfriend (*paidikos*, the junior partner in a typical ancient Greek pederastic relationship) is hinted at by the young Ulysses' daily task of giving Hercules a massage. The emasculating effect of all this pleasure is neatly signalled by

⁵³ Bondanella (2009) 169 calls Omphale a 'Circe-like temptress', but only Clauss (2008) 58-61 develops the comparison.

⁵⁴ As briefly noted by Clauss (2008) 58 n.19.

Hercules' inability, when challenged to do so by Ulysses, to bend an iron lampstand, a stock strongman feat seen in most pepla. While there is little indication of the ancient motif of Hercules and Omphale swapping clothing, Hercules' awakening is portrayed in a scene in which he gazes into a mirror where he sees himself wearing a very feminine garland of flowers while hearing reminders of his proper masculine identity.⁵⁵ A last twist is given to the question of identity as Hercules escapes through "the gloomy womb-like cave with its *vagina dentata*-style entrance, and into the sunlight":⁵⁶ he sees an empty plinth with the name 'Herakles' written (rather badly) in Greek letters. A final important respect in which Omphale is *unlike* her ancient forebears is her reaction to Hercules' eventual escape from her clutches: she throws herself into the vat of embalming fluid usually employed on her victims.⁵⁷ The moment is quickly past, but it brings 'closure' to Omphale's affair with Hercules, allowing him to return to the pursuit of virtue back in Thebes, battling tigers in Eteocles' private amphitheatre and toppling siege-engines in the final spectacular battle around the city walls. His reunion with Iole is uncomplicated by any reference to his dalliance, and the couple are last seen with Iole declaring, to soaring orchestral accompaniment, "Somehow the gods will be kind if we just love one another!"

Several features of the two Francisci films are usefully thrown into relief by brief comparison with Vittorio Cottafavi's *Hercules and the Captive Women* (US title) or *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (UK title) (*Ercole alla Conquista di Atlantide*, 1961). Burke discusses this alongside Sergio Leone's *Colossus of Rhodes* (1961), both of which "avail themselves of the subvertive energy potential within the absurdities and contradictions of *Hercules* and turn it into sustained parody".⁵⁸ Shahabudin likewise comments on the film's parodic qualities, but she also explores the scope for more serious readings, such as an anti-nuclear-weapons

⁵⁵ Günsberg (2005) 127 reads this as 'a classic repetition of the Lacanian mirror episode'. On the ancient Omphale tradition, see Stafford (2012) 132-4.

⁵⁶ Günsberg (2005) 128 and fig. 6.

⁵⁷ Clauss (2008) 60 suggests Dido and Jocasta as possible referents for the suicide.

⁵⁸ Burke (2011) 33; see 38-46 on *Captive Women*.

message in its narrative concerning the danger “out of the west” and the Atlantideans’ worship of Uranus, and the nightmarish vision of an army of identical blonde super-warriors bred by Atlantis’ evil queen; she also traces the influence of Pierre Benoit’s popular novel *L’Atlantide* (Paris: Albin Michel 1919).⁵⁹ The film stars another bodybuilder, the English (Leeds-born) Reg Parke, who had won the ‘Mr Universe’ title in 1958 and would do so again in 1965. In contrast to the Francisci films, as remarked by various commentators, it presents Hercules as a hero who is reluctant to the point of laziness:⁶⁰ near the start of the film he is seen reclining on a leopard-skin at the council of Greek leaders, and refusing to join the expedition to be led by his friend Androcles, king of Thebes, against the unknown “peril from afar” because he wants to stay in his comfortable home with his family (here Deinaneira and a teenage son Hylus); he actually has to be drugged and bundled onto the ship, where, on waking to discover his friends’ deceit, he promptly goes back to sleep; when a party goes ashore in search of water, he stays on the beach, asleep once again. He does, however, reassert his virtuous credentials by feats of strength, such as preventing the mutinous crew from rowing the ship away by hauling on its anchor-chains, battling the shape-shifting monster Proteus (another borrowing from the *Odyssey*), and driving a chariot pulled by more than a dozen horses. Unlike Reeves’ Hercules, Parke’s also easily resists seduction by Antinea, Queen of Atlantis (Fay Spain), whose black wig, heavy make-up and fabulous silver dress make her every bit as Vice-like as Canale’s Antea or Lopez’s Omphale, as does the cruelty of her reign. Pomeroy suggests that “the plotline of voluptuous vamp seducing the hero is close to being played out”,⁶¹ but in 1961 there were still a fair few such plots to run. Rather, the whore/wife dichotomy is complicated by the film’s introduction of ‘doubles’ for Hercules and Antinea, their respective son Hylus and daughter Ismene – not to mention their

⁵⁹ Shahabudin (2009) (not noted by Burke (2011)). See also Elley (1984) 58; Giordano (1998) 46-7; and Pomeroy (2008) 52-3 fig. 4.

⁶⁰ Elley (1984) 58; Giordano (1998) 45-6; Pomeroy (2008) 52; Bondanella (2009) 171; Shahabudin (2009) 204-5.

⁶¹ Pomeroy (2011) 203.

diminutive companion Timoteo (Salvatore Furnari).⁶² The opposition here, then, is not so much between Antinea and Deianeira (who is only seen briefly in the early stages of the film) but between Antinea and Ismene – who duly dresses in virtuous white, plays the damsel in distress to be rescued by Hercules or Hyllus, and eventually sails away into the sunset in the latter’s embrace.

The extent to which the makers of these films were aware of, or interested in, the details of the ancient Greek and Roman versions of Hercules’ story is of course debatable. Even those educated at a *liceo classico* or with a relevant university degree (Cottafavi studied Law, Philosophy and Literature) would not necessarily have been concerned to follow the ancient sources in their films. Indeed, Giordano records an interview with Ennio de Concini, sole scriptwriter for *Hercules Unchained*, and one of the team who worked on *Hercules*, in which he describes a rather chaotic-sounding process with several writers gathered in his home, working on three or four films at once.⁶³ However, as we have noted, there are always some details of plot and/or characterisation which seem to fit with classical precedent. The credits for Francisci’s *Hercules* also include acknowledgement, albeit slightly inaccurate of “*The Argonauts* by Appollonius of Rhodes (Third Century BC)”, while *Hercules Unchained* is apparently “based on the legends of Hercules and Omphale from the works of Sophocles, Aeschylus” – even if slightly tongue-in-cheek, these references show some recognition of the value of associating the film with the ancient literary tradition.⁶⁴

Final proof that at least one film’s makers knew of Prodikos’ Choice story is provided in Giorgio Capitani’s *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus gli invincibile* (aka *Combatei dei giganti, Samson and His Mighty Challenge, Le grand défi*, 1964). The plot is preposterous even by the standards of peplum, driven by the unlikely premise of strongmen from four

⁶² Günsberg (2005) 118; Rushing (2008) 178.

⁶³ Giordano (1998) 38-40.

⁶⁴ Space here does not permit a discussion of the films’ use of the ancient *visual* tradition, but see e.g. Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 65-9 and Nacho Garcia, “Classic sceneries: ancient Greece in film architecture”, in Irene Berti and Marta García Morcillo (eds.), *Hellas on Screen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steine, 2008) 21-38.

different traditions being brought together to fight. The film is indeed best known for its use in the Australian cult classic *Hercules Returns* (1993), in which the dialogue is comically over-dubbed – but the original is already quite clearly parodic.⁶⁵ Various conventions of the genre are gently subverted: the wicked queen Nemea is blond, and played by an actress (Lia Zoppelli) known for her comedy roles; the innocent princess Omphale (Elisa Montés) has black hair and too much makeup, preferring the physically-unimpressive Inor (Luciano Marin) to Hercules; the young couple are helped by a dwarf ironically named Goliath (Arnaldo Fabrizio); Samson (Nadir Moretti) is of orthodox Jewish appearance – with appropriate facial hair⁶⁶ and a hat which resembles the Lubavitch or Yeshivish-style hat – and spends much of the film as a weakling, having had his hair cut by jealous wife Delilah (Moirá Orfei, a peplum regular); dramatic moments are signalled in the score by the ‘Fate motif’ from Beethoven’s fifth symphony. All four of the strongmen have previous peplum credits, especially Hercules, played by Alan Steel (Sergio Ciani), an Italian bodybuilder who had started his acting career as a body double for Reeves in *Hercules Unchained* before appearing in a dozen pepla. The tone of the film is set by the opening scene, in which Hercules, on horseback, arrives at a crossroads, where he is brought up short by a clap of thunder:

HERCULES: Zeus, my father!

ZEUS: You are at a crossroads, Hercules.

HERCULES (*looking around him*): I’m aware of that.

ZEUS: Hercules, my son, there are two roads ahead of you. The one on the left is the path of virtue, and the other will lead you to pleasure.

HERCULES: I understand, father. Then I’ll take the right one.

(*Begins to gallop along the path to the right, but is stopped by a thunderbolt.*)

ZEUS: Hercules, the path of virtue is on the left!

⁶⁵ Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 174 mention the film in passing as an example of the later peplum’s tendency to parody, and see 192-3 on *Hercules Returns*. The film is otherwise largely unremarked by commentators except Lucanio (1994)270-2 and Giordano (1998) 45 both of whom note its ‘spoof’ credentials. I am indebted to Kim Shahabudin for loan of the DVD.

⁶⁶ Resembling the *Peot*/Yiddish *payis*, Heb. “sidelocks”, the growth of hair in accordance with the command of Leviticus 19:27.

HERCULES: I know that, father, but am I choosing or are you? For years I've walked the road of virtue, and now I'll try the road of pleasure. The kingdom of Lydia is famous for having the world's most beautiful women.

ZEUS: I warn you, Hercules, if your decision leads you into grave trouble, do not invoke my aid. You shall not have it.

HERCULES: When it comes to women, father, I don't think I need anyone's help. That's my decision, father – and thanks for the advice.

(Gallops away as Zeus calls after him.)

ZEUS: Hercules, I gave you fair warning!

Hercules' 'wrong' choice here does indeed lead to trouble, which Zeus eventually intervenes to resolve, if only for a quiet life – “And do not disturb the gods again!”. But the film's final shot is of the four strongmen riding off into the sunset together, unencumbered by any women, in an overt demonstration of the genre's underlying theme of the primacy of male comradeship: “the main agenda of these films is to reaffirm patriarchy's baseline of homosocial relations”.⁶⁷

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, I am not claiming that the majority of the film-makers concerned were consciously drawing on Prodikos. There is more work to be done in demonstrating the precise routes by which classical motifs have made their way not only to the peplum but to other cinematic genres and other modern media, too. However, the popularity of the Choice story in the Renaissance assured its transmission to later periods alongside the traditional image of Hercules as the monster-slayer, so that there is certainly scope for it to have exercised an unconscious influence on the peplum. While the requirement of such a popular genre to include a happily-concluded romance complicates the issue, I hope to have shown that the twentieth-century Hercules can be seen facing a choice between the paths of virtue and vice in every film, the two ways being embodied in female figures whose appearance echoes that of the Prodikeyan figures, as do the lives they offer. The hero must always

⁶⁷ Günsberg (2005) 130; cf. Pomeroy (2013) 199 (on the escape from Lemnos in *Hercules*).

ultimately chose Virtue, for the sake of both contemporary morality and the continuance of the story – but his flirtation with Vice along the way provides the audience with vicarious indulgent pleasure. Ironically, it is the comic subversion of the Choice scenario in *Samson and His Mighty Challenge*, with Hercules explicitly opting for the path of pleasure/vice, which demonstrates the story's fundamental significance for the peplum genre.

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