GLADIATOR AT THE MILLENNIUM

EMILY ALBU

Gladiator was the blockbuster hit of the year 2000.[1] Nominated for eleven Academy Awards, it won five Oscars including those for Best Picture and Best Actor (Russell Crowe). The film did attract savage criticism from reviewers like Elvis Mitchell of the *New York Times* who called it "grandiose and silly" (Mitchell 2000). Audiences disagreed. Americans have long shown a fondness for stories about reluctant heroes driven to avenge horrific crimes and dislodge a tyrant. *Gladiator* augmented this appealing plot with distinctive characters, inspired acting, breathtaking cinematography, and a haunting musical score. But the movie's success points to a quality greater than the sum of all these parts. For many viewers, the film's cultural and political ideology satisfied quite precise longings. Set in the Roman Empire of 180 C.E., *Gladiator* manipulated this historical setting to express the dreams of Americans at a particular moment in United States history.[2]

Gladiator reached theaters on May 5, 2000, less than six months before the presidential elections. During these months, the political climate grew increasingly contentious, with a deeply polarized electorate.[3]

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1 I am grateful to the students in my film class (Film and the Classical World) for their observations on the American allusions in *Gladiator*. I presented versions of this paper at San Francisco State University (2001), at the American Philological Association meeting San Francisco (2004), at Knox College, and to my reading group (University of California, Davis). Margaret Malamud offered valuable suggestions to improve that draft. Finally, I thank *Arethusa*'s readers for their advice, which compelled me to rethink critical aspects of this argument.

2 For a perceptive discussion that considers a broader time frame, see Cyrino 2004 in a volume, Winkler 2004, that collects excellent essays on the film and its reception.

3 For a detailed post-election analysis, see Ceaser and Busch 2001 and the essays in Nelson 2001b.

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Completing his second term as president, Bill Clinton was presiding over a roaring peacetime economy that had turned enormous budget deficits into surpluses. The rates of both inflation and unemployment were low. Not surprisingly, then, surveys found voters quite satisfied with the direction in which the country was heading. One exit poll in November 2000 asked voters: "Is the Country on the Right or Wrong Track?"[4] Of those responding, sixty-five percent answered: "Right Track." Only thirty-one percent replied: "Wrong Track." But when pollsters asked those same voters: "Is the Country on the Right or Wrong Moral Track?" only thirty-nine percent said "Right," with fifty-seven percent answering "Wrong."

Many respondents implicated President Bill Clinton in their assessment of the country's moral decline. That same exit poll pointedly asked voters: "What is Your Opinion of Bill Clinton as a Person?" and sixty percent answered "Unfavorable." This disapproval of Clinton's personal behavior trumped the general assessment that Clinton was an effective president. For four years, his job approval rating remained higher than sixty percent, "the highest and most consistent ratings for a second-term president in the history of polling" (Nelson 2001a.61). But accusations of improper conduct had haunted Clinton's candidacy in 1992. These intensified during his second term as president, culminating in impeachment proceedings for a sexual escapade with White House intern Monica Lewinsky about which Clinton was less than forthcoming in testimony under oath. These incidents alarmed Americans, who yearned for a leader they could consider guileless, faithful, and honest. Though Clinton remained an appealing, even charismatic, figure to a large number of his core supporters, Republicans seized upon the unease of many Americans who longed to elect a moral man, an American Maximus.

The two presidential candidates in 2000 held quite different positions on critical issues: on education and the environment, on fiscal policy and the military, civil rights and abortion, campaign finance reform, and health care and social security.[5] Many voters, though, lacked the patience to disentangle Al Gore's detailed plans. For his part, George W. Bush addressed policy issues in vague terms. He and his supporters preferred to repeat these promises: "A restoration of honor and dignity to the office of chief executive . . . ; a unifier as leader (Bush) who would bring the country together . . . ;

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4 Source: 2000 VNS Exit Poll, as reported in Ceaser and Busch 2001.28.

5 For the positions of Al Gore and George W. Bush on these issues, see Crotty 2001.17–21.

a President who would return accountability and 'an era of responsibility' to Washington" (Crotty 2001.24–25). The Bush campaign presented its candidate as a Texas rancher and entrepreneur with experience in business and government outside Washington. He was the born-again Christian and devoted family man who would ride into Washington and restore decency through a conservative Christian agenda broadly labeled "family values," while pursuing a hawkish foreign policy to export the American institutions of democracy and capitalism. In a campaign that centered increasingly on personality and character, Gore pointedly distanced himself from his former ally, Bill Clinton, and by inadvertent corollary, from the economic success of the Clinton presidency. Al Gore tried in vain to make policy issues, rather than character, the major focus. Only in the final weeks did his campaign manager, Donna Brazile, aggressively bring Clinton into the campaign to counter Bush's appeal with Clinton's charisma. This move closed the gap in the polls even as it heightened the emotional level of a campaign that centered on issues of morality and goodness.

AMERICA AND ROME

Gladiator spoke directly to the questions that haunted the 2000 campaign, using the Roman Empire as a stand-in for contemporary America. The analogy worked so well because filmmakers have long conditioned American audiences to view ancient Rome as a metaphor for western civilization, often specifically as a mirror to American foibles, fears, and aspirations.[6] Like the American Western, a Roman film brings to the screen the mythic quality of archetypal heroes.[7] But the Rome/America metaphor draws unique power from the deeply ingrained belief that our nation's founders modeled the American republic on the Roman republic; that we Americans have always been much like the Romans, with whom we share a love of liberty and a penchant for power; and that these common traits have given both Romans and Americans a manifest destiny to control the world. We look to Rome for models; conversely, we seek lessons from Rome's fall, hoping in this way to avoid the pitfalls that doomed Rome and so to postpone the demise of our own republic.[8]

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6 On the power of the classical heritage to legitimize or enforce an established social order or ideology, see Settis 2004.104.

7 Kirsten Day explores this principle in her paper in this collection.

8 Margaret Malamud, in this volume, discusses the analogy between Rome and America.

Filmmakers have always understood the power of this myth and have used and abused the Roman model for their own disparate purposes. In his 1922 silent film, *Manslaughter*, Cecil B. DeMille pressed the analogy between twenties debauchees and late Roman orgiasts, both taking their respective civilizations down the road to ruin.[9] Watching the wealthy socialite Lydia Thorne as she carouses with her dissolute friends, the film's hero, district attorney Daniel J. O'Bannon, laments (in subtitles punctuated with capitals and exclamation points): "What next? Why, we're no different today than Rome at its worst! This Dance, with its booze and license, is little better than a Feast of Bacchus!" With this comment, the scene morphs into a Roman orgy presided over by that same Lydia in Roman garb, with prowling tigers and gladiators in combat. This scene, in turn, fades back to female boxers at Lydia's 1920s party and O'Bannon's conclusion: "You see it's just the same—Gladiators or Prize Fights! Gambling and Booze—the same in a modern Road-House as it was in the House of the Caesars!"

Later, when Lydia's reckless driving causes the death of a traffic cop, O'Bannon takes her to court, ending the prosecution with allusions to the fall of Rome. At this moment, the scene cuts back to the Roman orgy, now interrupted by huge and hairy barbarians breaking down the gates, with their virile chieftain whipping the presiding orgiast, Roman Lydia, into submission. We return one last time to the American courtroom, as the defense attorney objects that this Roman analogy is irrelevant. But he is overruled, and Lydia found guilty by the men of the jury.

In his *Cleopatra* (1934), DeMille pressed the same ideological points with slightly more subtlety by implying that Cleopatra and her effete Egyptians ruined Antony, whose seduction, in turn, nearly destroyed Rome.[10] By implication, the film slyly blames the Depression of the 1930s on women and foreigners. Foreigners should stay out of America, and women (who had recently won the right to vote) should stay out of the political arena. DeMille's Cleopatra is redeemed only when war shakes Antony from his lovesick swoon and she sees him as a manly warrior. Now the queen, transformed at last by love, can die in peace, after advising her maids (and the women in the audience) to live only for love. The conservative message in DeMille's *Cleopatra* echoes the teachings in his 1932

9 I thank Hal Drake for calling this film to my attention.
10 On the messages of *Cleopatra* and *Roman Scandals*, see Malamud 2004.

Sign of the Cross. This tale of Christian suffering and faith, set in Nero's Rome, features women who look and sound like flappers. The conflation of America and Rome offered both warning and inspiration for Americans during perilous times.

Roman Scandals (1933) adapts *Manslaughter*'s America-to-Rome-and-back cuts to challenge DeMille's assumptions about the sources of America's Great Depression and supposed threats to American morality and prosperity. Here a lower-class Jewish hero, played by Eddie Cantor, homeless in his Depression-era town of West Rome, sleeps in the Roman art museum by night and, by day, feeds and nurtures the downtrodden and dispossessed. Evicted at last for his kindness, he finds himself exiled to ancient Rome, where a dastardly emperor unwittingly gives him the evidence that he takes back home to convict the corrupt police chief and mayor, along with the smarmy banker who had built the Roman museum as a monument to his own pretensions to culture. Eddie's poor immigrants are not the culprits but rather the victims of corporate America, which *Roman Scandals* aligns with the elites of imperial Rome (see Malamud in this volume).

The analogy between Rome and America may be as covert as in DeMille's *Cleopatra* or as overt as in his *Manslaughter* or Cantor's *Roman Scandals*.[11] The analogy is at its most contentious in the 1960 *Spartacus*. This epic of the famous slave revolt pays homage to simple people who rise up to fight the elites who have enslaved them. The respective authors of the book and the screenplay, Howard Fast and Dalton Trumbo, were victims of McCarthyism, and producer and star Kirk Douglas hired these black-listed writers to create a film that celebrated the struggle against tyranny (Futrell 2001.90–98). President John F. Kennedy made a political statement when he crossed a picket line to view the film (Wyke 1997.71). When conservative Americans finally chose to view the film as a tribute to freedom—and so embraced *Spartacus* in the end—each side claimed *Spartacus* as vindication of its own ideology. All agreed on the film's obvious relevance to American politics.

DeMille and Cantor (and Cantor's producer Sam Goldwyn) all understood the weight of the Roman metaphor and its ability to seduce and persuade. Their choice to make a Roman film was deliberate. But the intrusion of contemporary mores into a Roman setting sometimes jars viewers

11 For more on these films and their analogy between Rome and America, see Malamud in this volume.

into seeing our own world in a new light, offering insights into the society inhabited by the filmmaker.[12] *Gladiator*, too, reflects the pressing concerns of Americans in the year of its release, as the film situates the Roman Empire of 180 C.E. at a moral crossroads.

GLADIATOR AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE

Gladiator opens with a battle at the empire's northern frontier and the last in a string of victories that, we are told, finally secures the borders. Released from the foreign wars that have dominated his reign, the aged emperor Marcus Aurelius can now turn his attention to the corruption that has assailed the heart of his empire. He aims to reinstate the virtuous republic by adopting the virtuous general Maximus as his heir. Though Commodus, the emperor's amoral biological son, murders his own father and plots the death of his rival, eventually Maximus prevails and, with his dying breath, instructs his former lieutenant: "Quintus, free my men. Senator Gracchus is to be reinstated. There was a dream that was Rome"—here he echoes language that recurs as a leitmotif throughout the film—"it shall be realized. These are the wishes of Marcus Aurelius."[13]

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12 A striking example comes from a *Star Trek* episode of 1968, "Bread and Circuses," when the crew of the Enterprise stumbles upon a parallel universe where the Roman Empire has never fallen. In this smug and self-congratulatory critique of inequality, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy actually defy the Prime Directive, which insists that they "may not interfere in the affairs of others," so repulsed are they by a slave society. In one scene, the officers of the Enterprise offer to ally themselves with a community of escaped slaves who have created an egalitarian society of their own, 1968 hippie style. Their leader responds that the whole collective will have to discuss their offer before he can reply. "Come over here," he shouts to the cave full of his comrades. The men join him in a huddle, while the women remain seated, scattered throughout the cave, taking no part in this democratic decision. No one remarks on their failure to participate, least of all the freedom-loving officers from the Enterprise. Here, as more notoriously elsewhere in this episode on social equality, the issue of women's equality with men lies completely off the radar screen.

13 At the film's beginning, Marcus Aurelius had confided to Maximus: "There was once a dream that was Rome. You could only whisper it. Anything more than a whisper and it would vanish. It was so fragile, and I fear that it will not survive the winter." It is a dream that Commodus cannot understand. Lucilla tries to explain to him the true greatness of Rome: "It's an idea, greatness. Greatness is a vision." Commodus nearly succeeds in replacing this grand vision with the vulgar distraction of gladiatorial games. These may satisfy the mob, but they only anger the hero. So Maximus says of these gory spectacles: "Marcus Aurelius had a dream that was Rome, Proximo. This is not it. This is not it!" Peter Rose calls attention (2004.160) to Lucilla's failure to challenge Commodus's "conception of politics as the manipulation of images"—a failure that highlights assumptions current in contemporary American culture.

Gladiator—like virtually all Roman films—deviates a great deal from the historical record, but never more so than in this ending, as the film, against all evidence, kills off Commodus within months of his father's death and wills back the republic.[14] A few classicists complained about this tinkering with historical fact. But if audiences knew that the film strained history, most viewers did not seem to care. In our films, we are quite used to artistic license that runs roughshod over historical events, as, for instance, when *Pearl Harbor* (2001) presents an American near-victory against Japanese warplanes in the 1941 "surprise attack on an American love-triangle," in the words of film critic Roger Ebert (2001). Roman history, especially, can shift cataclysmically in film to accommodate the American metaphor. And audiences liked *Gladiator*'s ending. They liked the promise that all can be right if good politicians, a good wife and mother, and good soldiers ally with one another under a virtuous and strong leader. This conclusion would satisfy nearly any American audience at any time, but it also spoke to the particular conditions of the spring of 2000. Rocked by scandals and allegations of scandal in the Clinton presidency, many Americans longed for what they saw in this ending, a restoration of republican/Republican values. One of my students affirmed the rightness of the film's resolution and offered this interpretation: "The film advocates a return to democracy here in America. Americans must overthrow the tyrannical incumbents and vote for people who will restore democracy."

Yet this ending does not secure democracy as we understand the term and as Marcus Aurelius expresses it when he surprises Maximus with this confession: "I want you to become the protector of Rome after I die. I will empower you, to one end alone, to give power back to the people of Rome and end the corruption that has crippled it." *Gladiator*'s final scenes may seem to fulfill the second part of the old emperor's wish, an end to corruption through Maximus's sacrifice. The film's advertising slogan was "A Hero Will Rise." This is a popular theme in American films: a hero will surface in a time of crisis, often an uncorrupted country boy, as in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). But Maximus is a hero with special appeal to a millennial audience. As the film repeatedly reminds us, the savior of Rome was a Spaniard who had never actually been to the Rome that he idealized

14 The historic Commodus ruled for twelve years before his assassination. His murder did not produce a restoration of the republic. Instead, the Roman Empire devolved into the crisis of the third century, which was only resolved by the still more autocratic rule of Diocletian and Constantine.

until, transported there as a gladiator, he finally saw the city in all its splendor and all its decay. Recalling his fellow Spaniards, Hadrian, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius himself, the good emperors of the second century, Maximus is Roman without being sullied by the city's endemic intrigue. He has the purity and decency that no one raised in the city could have.

Specifically, the hero Maximus is everything that Americans thought Clinton was not: a general with a long record of success in leading men in battle, an outsider untainted by political intrigue, and a devoted and faithful husband. Here is a man who could return Rome to its former greatness, remove the corruption of its leaders, and restore power to the righteous without claiming any profit for himself. As many have observed, Maximus is clearly a new Cincinnatus, the ex-consul who, according to Roman tradition, was summoned from his farm to muster an army in a time of crisis.[15] Like that Cincinnatus, who returned to his plough as soon as he had dispatched the enemy, Maximus is the dutiful and talented citizen who harbors no political ambitions and only yearns for his simple country home.[16] His tie to the soil is expressed in his daydreams of running his hands through fields of grain and in his habit of fingering the earth beneath him whenever he is about to go into combat. But while Maximus feels a strong bond with the land and happily recalls the beauty of his modest estate, he desires even more to be with his wife and son. Their murders justify his vengeance—how we love vengeance films that validate counter-violence!—and drive the film to its conclusion, both in the killing of Commodus in the arena and in the reunion of Maximus with wife and son in a heavenly reproduction of their Spanish homestead.[17]

The intermingling of religious piety and familial devotion recurs throughout the film, especially in the appearances of the little figurines that Maximus carries with him to create a family shrine wherever he goes. In the first drafts of the screenplay for *Gladiator*, the writers introduced them as the images of the "ancestors" that Maximus prays to, seeking "solace

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15 See, for instance, Cyrino 2005.229.

16 Cincinnatus was an especially appealing model for the first generation of Americans. On the lure of this paradigm for many Colonial leaders, including George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, see Reinhold 1984.98–99.

17 The reunion resembles a scene featured in a film screened in August 2000 at the public open house for the new Mormon Temple in Boston. The film, explaining Mormonism to curious visitors, showed a happy family welcoming the newly dead to their brilliant eternal home.

and . . . wisdom" for himself and safekeeping for his wife and son.[18] The final film version replaced these six images with two of that wife and child, neatly conflating religious devotion, home, and family. At the film's conclusion, Juba, Maximus's African comrade, buries these figurines in the dirt of the Colosseum, where Maximus had died. This ties together, one last time, all the intertwined symbols, including the earth that Maximus rubbed between his fingers before battle, to symbolize the otherworldly restoration of the family.

The film repeatedly emphasizes the devotion of Maximus, the benevolent paterfamilias who adds images of his wife and son to the gladiator's breastplate that he wears in the Colosseum. He is loyal not only to his family but also to his emperor, to Rome, and to the men in his command. Commodus, on the other hand, is Maximus's opposite, a villain desperate for adulation, twisted by unrequited love for his father. As Marcus Aurelius admits with dismay to each of his children in turn, he has failed them both. There is no sign of a mother who might have filled the vacuum left by an absent father. Perverted by this loveless childhood in his dysfunctional family, Commodus kills his father and attempts to kill the man who has been like a brother to him. And in their place, he tries to create his own unnatural family. As he explains to a senator: "I call it love, Gracchus. The people are my children, and I am their father. I shall hold them to my bosom and embrace them tightly." These lines ominously recall how he smothered his father to death, and they anticipate his murderous embrace of Maximus.

The film also dwells on Commodus's chilling obsession with his sister, Lucilla. For his part, Marcus Aurelius utterly fails to protect either of his children from this incestuous attraction. Instead, he thrusts them in harm's way, first by emotionally abandoning both and then by compelling Lucilla to accompany Commodus to the frontier. As he hints to his daughter when they meet in Germany, Marcus Aurelius expects Lucilla to comfort Commodus in his anticipated disappointment at being disinherited. Here the philosopher-emperor endangers his daughter and fatally misjudges the son he has not troubled to understand. The film's Marcus Aurelius, it seems, is not entirely blameless. It is not enough, the film suggests, to be a tireless ruler who aspires to do the best for his empire. It is certainly insufficient

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18 For the second draft, John Logan's revision of David Franzoni's original, see http://www.hundland.com/scripts/Gladiator_SecondDraft.txt. Nick Lowe has written a knowing assessment of the successive scripts and screenwriters (2004.18–19).

to be an intellectual, consumed with reading, writing, and the realm of ideas. This philosopher-king is a bad father, and that lamentable trait brings disastrous consequences. Poor parenting has produced the monstrous Commodus, with his grandiose ambitions and incestuous passions. These passions terrorize Lucilla, who fears for her young son Lucius Verus as well as for herself. Ultimately, they also doom Maximus and almost destroy the resistance to tyranny when the thwarted and unhinged Commodus compels Lucilla to reveal details of the plot that she has engineered against him. Commodus uses Verus as a hostage to try to force his sister Lucilla to bear his children.

With the character of Lucilla, the film plays at gender politics and toys with feminist ideals. Peter Rose discusses "the film's ideological pattern of sexual repressions and fear of assertive women," especially as expressed in the gleeful slaughter of female archers in the Colosseum (2004.169). When we discount these ineffectual Amazons, Lucilla is the only female among the large cast of principal characters in *Gladiator*. In meetings as filming was about to begin, *Gladiator*'s production staff decided to kill her off in the final Act 3 so that her suicide could provide the impetus for Maximus to attack Commodus. Only the vigorous protests of Executive Producer Laurie MacDonald kept Lucilla alive. The sole woman in those meetings, MacDonald was reportedly "aghast" at the prospect of removing the one female connection for women in the audience.

Indeed, Lucilla is an attractive and nuanced figure, who might have appeared even more complex had the theatrical release kept the scene with Senator Gracchus that probes her motivation. The actress Connie Nielsen lamented the excising of the scene she considered her best in the film.[19] Even without this, however, Lucilla is a formidable presence. She is intelligent and skillful, a politician with a social conscience. On the eve of his death, her father Marcus Aurelius admires Lucilla, exclaiming: "If only you had been born a man. What a Caesar you would have made!" Later we see evidence of this assessment, as Lucilla mediates between her brother and the senate, successfully navigating treacherous waters.

The film elsewhere hints at childhood traumas—an inattentive father, a mother never mentioned, and a too-attentive brother—and adoles-

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19 She offers her assessment in the DVD *Gladiator: Extended Edition* (2005), Disc 2, "Echoes in Eternity: Release and Impact." On the complexity of Lucilla's character, see Cyrino 2005.235–37. For more on this scene, see below, pp. 200–201.

cent transgressions; Lucilla blames herself for the unhappy ending of a love affair with Maximus when they were young. Lingering sadness from these old pains has molded her sensitive nature, leaving her for too long protective of her unbalanced brother, so that she even encourages Commodus to take stern measures against those who let Maximus escape as a warning to the Praetorian Guard. Yet as her brother increasingly menaces her son Lucius, her most basic instinct overrides all others, and she moves to protect him. So at considerable risk to herself, Lucilla engineers the rebellion against her brother, bringing Maximus into contact with the senators. But her gender leaves her vulnerable to a fatal flaw. Motherhood dooms her leadership to failure, as she betrays Maximus and Rome to save her son. Even the most able woman from the governing elite, *Gladiator* suggests, cannot be trusted to put her country first. Governance of household and realm demands a compassionate patriarchy. A woman may play an important supporting role, but feminine sensibilities leave her unfit to rule.

GLADIATOR AND ITS SOURCES

Traditional families and dysfunctional families in *Gladiator* had particular resonance for the American audience in 2000. For a deeper understanding of the film's characteristically millennial position, we need to compare it with its principal source. This was emphatically not Cassius Dio.[20] Filmmakers rarely go directly to Roman historians for their material, and *Gladiator*'s screenwriters were particularly adept at borrowing material from earlier films. As critic Elvis Mitchell remarked (2000): "Much of 'Gladiator' was inspired by other movies, enough to make you wonder if it's homage, or if it's actionable."

Gladiator's primary source was Anthony Mann's 1964 film epic, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. This movie had the bad fortune to be in production when Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* disappointed audiences, killing the second era of films set in the ancient world and dooming *The Fall of the Roman Empire* before it reached the big screen.[21] After *Cleopatra,* no

20 His *Roman History*, begun c. A.D. 202 and surviving only in excerpts and through later epitomes, supplies information on the reign of Commodus. Winkler provides excerpts from Dio and other ancient sources (2004.173–204).

21 See Solomon 2001.1–35 (for a survey of the genre), 67–77 and 83–95 (on *Cleopatra*, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, and *Gladiator*).

one wanted to produce (or watch) another Roman movie. Thirty-six years would pass before *Gladiator* marked the return of the Roman epic film. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* also doomed itself with bad acting (a hyperdramatic Sophia Loren as Lucilla and a pretty but wooden Stephen Boyd in the Russell Crowe role), a sluggish pace (it takes over a half hour to work its way to the battle that opens *Gladiator*), and a painfully intrusive score. But this Cold-War epic does let us see the story that *Gladiator* had to work with. The message of the earlier film is one of international harmony, set decidedly against the rhetoric of armaments and war. This Marcus Aurelius has no thought for restoring the republic. He wants only peace from the wars that have haunted him—a permanent end to the arms race—to be won by turning enemies into friends. As he says during a formal review of troops assembled from the farthest frontiers of his empire:

> You have come from the deserts of Egypt, from the mountains of Armenia, from the forests of Gaul, and the prairies of Spain. You do not resemble each other, nor do you wear the same clothes, nor sing the same songs, nor worship the same gods. Yet like a mighty tree with green leaves and black roots, you are the unity which is Rome . . . We've had to fight long wars. Your burdens have been great. But we come now to the end of the road. Here, within our reach, golden centuries of peace, a true *pax Romana*.

Commodus, the son of this peaceable Marcus Aurelius, has a different vision. To feed his own love of luxury, he demands doubled tribute from the eastern provinces, thereby courting war. It is this disdain for consequences that especially marks him as the villain. Livius, on the other hand (the prototype for Maximus), wants the peace that will come from granting citizenship to all the good Germans. When corrupt Roman senators in league with Commodus call them barbarians, the philosopher, who speaks for Marcus Aurelius and Livius, responds: "Hatred means wars," which only lead to hunger, disease, and higher taxes. "The answer is simple. We must have no war . . . Let us do what is profitable—and right . . . [Let us have] the Roman peace that Marcus Aurelius promised." Commodus's sycophantic senator mocks "equality, freedom, and peace" as a weakness inviting the end of the Roman Empire, but Livius eventually counters: "Marcus Aurelius spoke of an empire of equal nations. Here we meet in friendship—the

blond people from the north, the dark people from the south. What we have done here can be done the whole world over."

Gladiator pretends to pay its respects to this ideal of racial equality and harmony. The role of Juba, the Nubian slave paired in the arena with Maximus, appears at first to support this ideal, with its reminiscence of Draba, the heroic African gladiator who begins the slave revolt in *Spartacus*. But as Peter Rose shows, the "subordinate and obedient" Juba is the polar opposite of the defiant and heroic Draba. In Juba, *Gladiator* offers "a specifically Republican image of nostalgia for a lost golden age of race relations, in which blacks do not question whites and obey their white superiors" (Rose 2004.162–63).[22]

The Draba and Juba connection is only one of several allusions that invite comparison with *Gladiator*'s greatest American predecessor in the genre of Roman film. *Gladiator* also recalls *Spartacus* in its intelligent and able heroine loved by the hero and the villain. *Spartacus* more pointedly inserts feminist ideals, though both films eventually relegate their heroines to a restricted maternal role. At least one other character in *Gladiator* has a Spartacan forerunner. The good Senator Gracchus derives ultimately from the Gracchi, champions of the Roman people during the class warfare of the second century B.C.E., but he also bears a shadowy resemblance to Charles Laughton's Senator Gracchus, who struggles for the people and against tyrannical aristocrats in the 1960 classic.[23] *Gladiator* also recalls *Spartacus* in the martyrdom of the hero, in the expression of hope that good lies waiting to be tapped in some men and at least one woman, and in the portrayal of untraditional sexuality (homosexuality in *Spartacus* and incest in *Gladiator*) as a marker of evil. *Gladiator* exploits these allusions to spray a Spartacan patina on a work that fundamentally endorses conservative Republican values.

This is a compassionate conservatism that pays some tribute to the ideals of racial harmony espoused in *Spartacus* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Maximus the gladiator does become fond of Juba, a man, like him, ripped violently from family and home. In a similar vein, Maximus the general respects his warlike Germanic foes, whose homeland the Roman army has invaded. There is empathy in Maximus's response to their refusal

22 On the Draba/Juba ties, see also Cyrino 2005.228–29.

23 The casting of Derek Jacobi as Gracchus was a brilliant stroke, as audiences at some level would connect this character with Jacobi's benevolent Claudius in the 1976 BBC miniseries, "I, Claudius."

to surrender their own freedom or their way of life. When his lieutenant scorns the Germans' resistance with a dismissive: "People should know when they're conquered," Maximus asks: "Would you, Quintus? Would I?" But these Germans are also unmistakably barbarians who need to be civilized by the superpower that has earned its domination of the world through the martial ideal of "Strength and Honor."

GLADIATOR AND THE PEOPLE

Most of all, the post–Cold War *Gladiator* has less interest in befriending foreigners than in restoring the moral fiber of Rome. Marcus Aurelius wishes to recreate the old Roman republic, but his plan seems utterly foiled when Commodus kills him and plots the murder of Maximus, the designated agent of justice. Forces align behind Commodus. Maximus's restless and ambitious lieutenant Quintus joins Commodus to condemn his commander.[24] Evil senators, too, bolster Commodus's autocracy. Even more alarming is the dull indifference of the people, who are easily diverted by the violent entertainment of gladiatorial combat. When Commodus offers 150 days of games, ostensibly to honor his late father but actually to appease the mob, the good Senator Gracchus remarks:

> He is cleverer than I thought . . . I think he knows what Rome is. Rome is the mob. He will conjure magic for them, and they will be distracted. He will take away their freedom, and still they will roar. The beating heart of Rome is not the marble of the Senate. It is the sand of the Colosseum. He will give them death, and they will love him for it.

The film gives us no reason to think otherwise. It features no individuals from the common people, except—pointedly—soldiers like Maximus's loyal aide Cicero. There are decent and virtuous men in Rome's army, but apparently none among the civilian populace, who seem to live only for the mindless and bloody games. Another Spartacan comparison makes this point clearly. Recalling a famous scene in *Spartacus* where the camera lin-

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24 There is, perhaps, unintended irony in Commodus's replacing Maximus ("the greatest") with Quintus ("the fifth").

gers on the faces of loving family members within the slave encampment, *Gladiator* dwells on the weary faces of Maximus's soldiers after they have won another victory for Rome and then, by implicit contrast, on the dulled faces of spectators presumably bribed by Commodus's senatorial allies to cheer the young emperor as he enters Rome after killing his father. While *Spartacus* idealizes individuals among the poor and enslaved, *Gladiator* disdains the people. So, too, Maximus loves the men who have fought loyally at his side, but he scorns the Roman rabble. When he slaughters fellow gladiators for their amusement, he chastises the crowd: "Are you not entertained? Are you not entertained? Is this not why you are here?" And they respond to his rebellious taunt with yet more adoration.

The film does not contradict the fears of Maximus and Senator Gracchus. The mob's addiction to violent entertainment *does* distract them from political agency. When that crowd at the Colosseum chooses Maximus, the celebrity entertainer, over Commodus, the pseudo-gladiator who has paid for their entertainment, we see no intelligence at work in their vote, no longing for freedom from tyranny. The fickle fans merely acquiesce in this restoration of the oligarchy with its militaristic underpinnings.

The 1964 prototype had a different ending. Its hero Livius survives, and the army offers him the throne. But he has seen the corruption of Rome close-up. His own soldiers have deserted, bought out by Commodus's gold. The people have turned the streets into a gargantuan orgy. The senators have fallen over themselves to deify Commodus and to rename Rome "Commodus's Town" (as in Dio). So Livius refuses the imperial title, takes Lucilla's hand, and walks away from Rome, seeing that it is irretrievably corrupt and so doomed to fall. As they leave, we hear Rome being auctioned to the highest bidder. The voiceover intones: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."

From this pessimistic conclusion, *Gladiator* fashioned an ending that seems quite different on the surface: Maximus dies, and the legacy of his heroic life and death inspires the restoration of the republic. At their ideological core, however, the two conclusions are not so far apart. Like Livius, who retreats from the public sphere to seek private happiness, Maximus finds eternal happiness in death, reunited with his wife and child in a heavenly version of his idyllic Spanish estate. *Gladiator* professes optimism, with "the dream that was Rome" realized once more. But what is this Rome? What vision of democracy does it really hold? As Arthur J. Pomeroy observes (2004.111–12): "Instead of celebrating freedom, the film reinforces reactionary social attitudes." Pomeroy shows how director Ridley Scott used

images that recall Fascist neo-classical architecture and Nazi propaganda cinema, complemented by Hans Zimmer's "neo-Wagnerian score," to give the film "Fascist overtones." While he concludes that "it is perhaps best to regard the portrayal of politics in *Gladiator* as being no more than deeply conservative" (Pomeroy 2004.120), we are left with an uneasy sense of a conservatism that celebrates the aristocratic senate as the custodians of the restored republic, with a loyal military as their ally.

GLADIATOR IN 2000—AND IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The enthusiastic reception of this film in May 2000 should have disquieted anyone hoping for a Democratic victory in the presidential election of November 2000. The handlers of George W. Bush, clearly reading the national mood as acutely as Ridley Scott had, positioned their candidate as the outsider who offered traditional values and might. He was a Maximus who would restore the moral fiber of his country with Republican rule. The rhetoric of the Bush camp and the ideology of *Gladiator* seemed to echo one another.

Early in the campaign, Democrats tried to claim the moral high ground of *Gladiator*'s hero. Observers have pointed to Clinton's march to the podium of the Democratic National Convention as a *Gladiator*-inspired moment. Democratic Congressman Dick Gephardt even roused his faithful campaigners by showing them a clip of Maximus's speech before combat in the Colosseum.[25] *Gladiator* proved a sufficiently complex film so that both ends of the political spectrum could eagerly align themselves with the heroic struggle of Maximus against tyranny, just as in 1960, when wary conservatives at last made peace with *Spartacus*, redefining its socialist sympathies as a battle for freedom.[26] Still the Republicans of 2000, much more quickly and deftly than Democrats, claimed *Gladiator*'s immensely popular themes as their own.

Several years later, however, some critics of the film saw Bush as eerily similar to Commodus in his irritable petulance and "demeanor of anti-intellectual swagger and macho posturing," with each "immature, unreasonable, and ill-prepared for the demands of governing" (Cyrino 2004.145–46). The verbal similarities, cited by Monica Silveira Cyrino (2004.146), are

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25 I especially thank *Arethusa*'s reader for these observations.

26 On the reception of *Spartacus,* see Wyke 1997.71–72.

especially striking. Reacting to political problems of his own making, for instance, Commodus complains: "The whole thing is like some crazy nightmare!" In similar circumstances, Bush grouses: "This looks like watching a rerun of a bad movie, and I'm not interested in watching it."

The extended version of *Gladiator* issued on DVD in 2005 seems to invite a comparison between Commodus and Bush by restoring a key scene omitted from the theatrical release of 2000. Here Lucilla joins Senators Gracchus and Gaius in a scathing indictment of Commodus. Lucilla begins with the lament: "They are arresting scholars now, anyone who dares speak out, even satirists and chroniclers." In addition to this trampling on basic freedoms and the imposition of martial law, the three also decry the ruler's inattention to fundamental matters of governance, failure to consult the senate, and depletion of the coffers to support the violent and extravagant homage to his father. They cannot fathom his intentions in committing these dangerous acts. "And what pays for it?" asks Gaius. "These daily games are costing a fortune, yet we have no new taxes." "The future," replies Lucilla, "the future pays for it. He has started selling the grain reserve . . . The people will be starving in two years." Reviewing her brother's crimes and horrific threats, Lucilla calls for the tyrant's death. In his commentary on the 2005 DVD release, editor Pietro Scalia reports that he and his colleagues cut this scene because it took away from the main story and, especially, because they preferred to leave Lucilla's motivation vague. Its presence on the extended version significantly sharpens an analogy between Bush and Commodus.

When the theatrical release premiered in May 2000 without this scene, the first reviewers could not easily get to the heart of their disquiet about the film's point of view. By early 2001, when analyzing the film as an Oscar contender and then as huge Oscar winner, some critics already saw the film's message in a clearer light. The other primary nominee for best picture was *Traffic*, a film on the illegal drug trade set in contemporary Mexico and the U.S. After noting the apparently vast differences between these films, critic Neal Gabler concluded (2001):

> Yet *Gladiator* and *Traffic* are remarkably similar beneath the surface. They seem to have tapped the same wellsprings of discontent and anxiety in modern America, and deal with the same subject. Only the metaphors are different.

That subject, he believed, was "a society in the throes of amusing itself to death"—at a devastating cost. *Gladiator*'s savvy and unscrupulous ruler, Commodus, understands that he can continue his tyranny simply by manipulating and entertaining his vacuous subjects. The plan seems to be working beautifully. But this tyrant, unhinged by his upbringing in a dysfunctional family, is undone by the man of virtue, a hero whose sacrifice returns him to his own loving family who await him in the heavenly version of his beloved homeland.

The appeal of traditional family values comforted a society agitated by Bill Clinton's infidelity and, perhaps just as much, by Hillary Clinton's feminism. So when George W. Bush positioned himself as the outsider poised to restore those values as the bulwark of a strong *patria*, his opponent was in trouble. The phenomenal success of *Gladiator*, with its crypto-conservative agenda, signaled the appeal of Bush's self-presentation as a moral man. In subsequent years, those self-proclaimed Bush and Maximus analogies would yield before suspicions of Bush and Commodus affinities. Yet *Gladiator's* popular reception in 2000 might have warned observers that the culture wars would play out in the way that they did in the fractious 2000 election.

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