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HERCULES UNCHAINED: CONTAMINATIO, NOSTOS, KATABASIS, AND THE SURREAL

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H*ercules Unchained* (1959, originally released in Italian as *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*) has not enjoyed critical success over the years. In fact, its wooden acting and thought-defying dialogue earned the film a spot on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, a television show dedicated to the systematic abuse of bad movies.¹ By setting Hercules, Ulysses, and Oedipus in the same story—an impossible collocation of heroes—and by focusing their cinematic gaze on the provocatively clad Steve Reeves (Hercules), Sylva Koscina (Iole), and Sylvia Lopez (Omphale), director Pietro Francisci and screenwriter Ennio De Concini appear to be more interested in manufacturing an amusing mythological pastiche and in fetishizing the body than in recreating a plausible ancient narrative or offering a thoughtful analysis of some of the best-known figures of Greek legend.

Other aspects of the film and its marketing suggest that it was conceived as little more than a profitable celluloid romp through the chronicles of Greek mythology. The villains come across as insipid caricatures of bad guys and one very bad girl; Ulysses and the Argonaut Aesculapius, in particular, have been given inane lines and exaggerated modes of delivery that are almost painful to watch; and American producer Joseph E. Levine mass-marketed this movie, as well as its predecessor *Hercules* (1959), in

1 The structure of the show is very clever. A human and a pair of robots are forced to watch aesthetically challenged movies and can only cope with the trauma by ridiculing what they see. Although this paper will appear in a professional classics journal, due to the theme, non-professionals may have reason to consult this issue, therefore I shall provide some information that will be unnecessary for readers of *Arethusa*.

the most meretricious fashion.² As if to confirm the level of the intended audience of both films, comic-book versions of *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* were immediately produced by Dell Comics.³ And then there were the posters that “teem with heroes in rippling muscles and skimpy loincloths, frail beauties in diaphanous gowns, pointy-bearded tyrants, and evil queens with heavy makeup and beehive hairdos—these were all the classic lures that were used to tempt patrons into theaters to see the sword-and-sandal movies of the 1960s.”⁴

Should anyone, then, take *Hercules Unchained* seriously? As outrageous as it may seem, the sum of its various parts, whether intentional or not, presents a remarkably coherent narrative that creates fascinating—and I dare say significant—connections between the three central figures in the movie. What is more, if you consider the time of release and focus on the experiences that Hercules, Ulysses, and Oedipus share, both in the film and in the traditional accounts, the storyline and mode of presentation can be experienced in an entirely different manner than was probably ever imag-

2 After Levine discovered Francisci's first Hercules movie *Le Fatiche di Ercole* (1957) and prior to its release in America as *Hercules* (1959), he sought to generate considerable interest in and enthusiasm for the film with a campaign he described as a “herculean explodation.” “We are going to explode Hercules throughout the nation this summer,” he is reported to have said (Chapman 2002.8). Levine then set the stage for its sequel, *Hercules Unchained*, at “a huge garden party in Hollywood, complete with a large statue of Hercules made out of ice, with variously colored light bulbs for muscles. To seven hundred press and movie people, he gave four-pound chocolate statuettes of his mythological strongman” (Solomon 2001.120). For more on the promotion of this film, see Lucanio 1994.12–13 and 180–81.

3 Pictures of the covers can be found in Chapman 2002.13. Lucanio 1994.21 notes that critics compared the color photography of Mario Bava in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* to contemporary Italian *fumetti* (“comics”); on Bava's contribution to sword-and-sandal films, see Bozzato 2005. What Eco 1972.22 states about comic-book heroes, in particular Superman, applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the figure of Hercules in both films: “Each of these heroes is gifted with such powers that he could actually take over the government, defeat the army, or alter the equilibrium of planetary politics. On the other hand, it is clear that each of these characters is profoundly kind, moral, faithful to human and natural laws, and therefore it is right (and it is nice) that he uses his powers only to the end of good. In this sense the pedagogic message of these stories would be, at least on the plane of children's literature, highly acceptable, and the same episodes of violence with which the various stories are interspersed would appear directed towards this final indictment of evil and the triumph of honest people.” Frayling 1981.71–78 applies Eco's model of the comic superhero to the spaghetti western, a direct descendant of the sword-and-sandal film (cf. Di Biagi 2003.55–60). On the parallels between ancient mythological and western heroes, see Winkler 1985 and 1996.

4 Chapman 2002.4. His book includes posters of these and other muscleman films.

ined by those involved in the making of the film (on the roles played by Oedipus in film, see the essay by Martin Winkler in this volume). In fact, the similarities in the legendary experiences of these three heroes not only reveal something substantial about the nature of myth in general, but also apply specifically to the universal theme of coming home at a time when this issue engaged contemporary audiences. In this paper, I hope to show how the interweaving of traditionally discrete mythic plots in the film (*contaminatio*), despite the comic-book appearance of the production, reveals a profound link between the experience of returning home (*nostos*), a decisive change in the human psyche articulated through the motif of death and rebirth (*katabasis*), and the crisis of identity that attends each.⁵ I shall conclude by reading this film, not as the tacky sword-and-sandal film that it is, but as a surreal portrayal of social reintegration following the aftermath of a foreign war and the disquieting mockery of the experience. Was so complex a reading imagined by Francisci, De Concini, or the cinematically shrewd Levine? Almost certainly not. Can a viewer proceed beyond the tawdry production and perceive that what is at issue here effectively evokes and then parodies our longing for home and quest for self-discovery? Perhaps.⁶

Before proceeding to a sequential reading of the film, I would like to call attention to some of the notable similarities that existed among the

5 For those unfamiliar with these terms, the Latin word *contaminatio* was coined from the prologues of *Woman of Andros* (15–16) and *Self-Tormentor* (16–19), comedies written by the second-century B.C.E. playwright Terence. He complained that his critics did not like the fact that he was mixing scenes from different plays from Greek authors, thus “spoiling” (*contaminare*) them for other Roman adaptors. *Nostos* is the Greek word for “return” that is frequently used in epic of the hero’s homecoming. *Katabasis*, also Greek, literally means “descent” and is used to refer to the hero’s journey to, and expected return from, the Underworld.

6 Lucanio 1994.1–7 offers a helpful discussion of the place of this and other myth-based films that flooded the market between 1958 and 1968. He argues that they emerged as a reaction against Italian neo-realism and, in place of verisimilitude, offered up fantasy in which beefy heroes conquer evil (although, as an anonymous referee aptly pointed out, such a role was already present in the character of Maciste in *Cabiria* [1914] and his many reincarnations in the numerous spin-offs). He further suggests that the anxieties of the Cold War encouraged escape to a simpler, unambiguous world where the good guys always win; cf. Frayling 1981.73, who sees in sword-and-sandal films the celebration of “muscle power” as the solution for all problems and cites one example of the genre that even involves thermonuclear weapons! I find this avenue promising. Where I hope to complicate the issue is in the argument that the myths selected by the director and screenwriter bring with them the emotional issues that gave rise to the archetypes in the first place. Any sense of comfort that might be elicited from the triumph of good over evil in this film is undermined by the anxieties latent in the ancient stories.

traditional legends involving the three central heroes with regard to the motifs of *nostos* and *katabasis*. The returns of Oedipus and Ulysses, each of whom received a defining scar as a child (Oedipus on his ankles, Ulysses on his thigh), occur after the consultation of a prophet (Apollo at Delphi, Tiresias in the Underworld), and lead to the winning of a bride with whom each hero was already intimately associated (mother, wife) by way of a test (riddle, archery), although the results are obviously different in each instance.⁷ As for Hercules, his final *nostos* among the ancient stories also involves some of the same features that are central to the Oedipal and Odyssean narratives: following the capture of Oechalia (cf. capture of Troy), Hercules returns home with Iole, whom he had previously won in an archery contest (cf. Odysseus's contest for Penelope);⁸ to save their marriage, his wife Deianira uses a love philter that accidentally poisons Hercules, on account of which she commits suicide after she recognizes what she has done (cf. Jocasta). Hercules asks to have his body set afire, which, in turn, leads to his deification as a reward for his many heroic achievements (cf. Oedipus, who was miraculously assumed into the Underworld and rewarded with heroic status in compensation for his great suffering and resulting wisdom). The parallels are, in fact, quite stunning.

Regarding *katabasis*, both Hercules and Ulysses succeeded in going to and returning from the Underworld: Hercules to fetch Cerberus as one of his twelve labors and Ulysses to gain essential information from Tiresias, the same Theban prophet who tried to warn Oedipus against searching for Laius's killer.⁹ Unlike Hercules and Ulysses, Oedipus did not return from Hades, and yet his one-way *katabasis* established his heroic status thanks to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, which play the opening credits state was employed as a major model for *Hercules Unchained*. In short, the climactic *nostoi* and *katabaseis* of all three heroes share elements that render their

7 I should add that, in *Hercules*, we find the same nexus of prophetic consultation, *nostos*, winning of the bride: Hercules consults the Sibyl, who mediates his change of status from divine to human so that he can win the hand of Iole, which he does when he returns from the Argonautic expedition.

8 In *Hercules*, Francisci calls our attention to this similarity by having the titular hero of the film teach Ulysses archery skills, with the advice that someday a bow might save his life.

9 In fact, Homer anticipated Francisci and De Concini in putting Hercules and Ulysses on the same stage in the *Odyssey*. When Odysseus travels to the Underworld, among the various people with whom he speaks is the "form" of Heracles—he himself was not actually there but resided with the gods after his death, as the poet tells us (*Od.* 11.601–26).

association in the film all the more comprehensible, even natural—*mira-bile dictu*.

Hercules Unchained advertises itself as confrontational right from the start. We enter the theater expecting a movie about Hercules and soon discover in the opening credits that the plot is based on Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*, neither of which involves Hercules.¹⁰ Following a short scene preceding the credits that alerts us to the presence of a dangerous, man-destroying woman, Queen Omphale, the narrative begins where its cinematic predecessor ended: at the conclusion of the Argonautic expedition.¹¹ As part of the mythological mayhem in *Heracles*, not only does Hercules marry Iole, now daughter of King Pelias, but the crew of Argonauts includes a young Ulysses.¹² These two pair up in *Hercules Unchained* in the time-honored combination of primary and secondary heroes, the "dynamic duo" that one finds everywhere in myth, literature, and film (e.g., Achilles and Patroclus, Don Quixote and Sancho Panchez, Batman and Robin, Ethan Edwards and Martin Pauley in *The Searchers*,¹³ inter alios). While the credits are rolling, we see the Argo sailing along on its way toward Attica, where Hercules, his new bride Iole, and his young apprentice Ulysses will disembark and make their way to Thebes. As the trio sets out, Hercules expresses his longing to return home with nostalgic reminiscences

10 For those familiar with Greek mythology, this statement is as striking as the claim made at the beginning of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) that the action of the plot takes place in Texas; not long into the film, it is obvious we are actually in Monument Valley (Arizona). Similarly, in the same film, the Native Americans who are identified as Comanches are actually Navajos, as is clear from their language. Such inconcinnities were probably viewed as inconsequential, given the presumed ignorance of the audience. And yet, as the light of familiarity illuminates a film's fault lines, interesting and evocative shadows can emerge, as I hope will become clear from my discussion of this film.

11 Omphale's penchant for loving and then destroying the men she loves finds parallels among the various Earth goddesses in Greek and Near Eastern mythology (e.g., Gaea, Demeter, Cybele, and Aphrodite). Another such figure is Circe, after whom Omphale was modeled. I shall discuss Circe and Omphale below.

12 According to traditional accounts, Hercules was married to Deianira when he became enamored of Iole. Not only did he not marry Iole, but his longing for her led to his death at the hands of his wife, as mentioned above. Odysseus belongs to the generation of heroes who lived after both the expedition of the Seven against Thebes and the Argonautic quest. There are many resources for classical Greek mythology, both in print and online. The most thorough and readily available source of information on the oldest variants among the stories is Gantz 1993.

13 That Ford seems to have had such a combination in mind is suggested by the fact that he has the Comanches call Ethan "Big Shoulders" and Marty "He Who Follows." On the role of Martin as Ethan's sidekick, see the essay by Kirsten Day in this volume.

of his native city and people. *Hercules Unchained*, as we shall see, entails the adventures of a hero whose journey home after a foreign expedition is about to encounter serious obstacles, including a journey to the Underworld, loss of identity, and suitors eager to take his wife—a veritable *Odyssey*.

After saying goodbye to Laertes and the last of the heroes still sailing on the *Argo*, the threesome make their way toward Thebes and pass through a valley that belongs to Antaeus, the Earth-born giant whom Hercules traditionally encounters in North Africa. Antaeus, played by Primo Carnero, a former heavyweight boxer and professional wrestler, threatens to take their possessions, including Iole, until Hercules confronts and defeats him—not by crushing him in the air as in the usual account, but by throwing him into the sea. While the episode is comic in tone and was surely included to show off Reeves' musculature and pit Mr. Universe against the celebrated athlete,¹⁴ its placement immediately prior to the encounter with Oedipus, who is about to enter the Underworld through a gateway in a cave, is suggestive. The hero who journeys to the land of the dead in ancient folktales must frequently trick or defeat a monster that bars the way (e.g., Cerberus).¹⁵ The bones that strew Antaeus's valley create a visual link with the land of the dead, and the next stop on the journey to Thebes provides the entrance. Antaeus, then, would appear to play the mythic role of the monstrous gatekeeper of the Underworld. What is cinematically exploitive turns out to be mythologically sound, even if by chance.

Following their encounter with Antaeus, Hercules, Iole, and Ulysses head toward a cave to escape from a sudden downpour. Outside the cave stands the Argive army led by an evil unnamed general (presumably Adrastus) who threatens to take Iole while Hercules is momentarily out of sight as he parks their covered wagon. Although the hero returns in time, another suitor now emerges. Entering the cave, they discover Oedipus conversing with Polynices. As outlandish as it may seem, Hercules gets Polynices to agree to a truce: if Eteocles will give up the throne, the Argives will not attack. When

14 The pairing calls to mind the bizarre matchup between heavyweight boxer Mohammed Ali and professional wrestler Antonio Inoki in Tokyo (25 June 1976), an event that drew some 32,000 spectators to Shea Stadium for a closed-circuit television viewing.

15 Another feature found in stories involving heroes going to the Underworld is the need for a guide or guides. That role is played here by Ulysses, who assisted Hercules in the dispatching of Antaeus by informing him of Antaeus's ability to draw strength from his mother, the Earth, as long as he was in contact with the ground—for which reason Hercules sent him into the waves. Ulysses' help will also prove to be essential in their return from the "Underworld" to which they are about to go.

Polynices leaves, the sound of thunder echoes through the cave, and Oedipus hears a voice telling him that his time has come to enter the gates of the Underworld; as he does so, the camera focuses on Hercules witnessing the hero's passing into the Underworld.¹⁶ Oedipus's departure provides us with a significant piece of information for a later scene: one enters—and, as we see later, exits—Hades through a gateway. Leaving the cave, Hercules and his entourage continue on to Thebes, and the hero actually succeeds in securing a promise from a mentally unstable Eteocles to abdicate.¹⁷ Leaving Iole in

16 In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, specifically identified as a model for the film, it is Theseus, not Hercules, who observes Oedipus's assumption into the land of the dead. The substitution of Hercules parallels the intertextual narratives of Hellenistic poets and their Roman imitators. Writers of that era (post 323 B.C.E.) and beyond, by the kind of self-conscious allusion and plot manipulation seen here, frequently linked their various scenes with a comparable one or ones from earlier works in such a way that while reading the new passages, we are invited to call to mind the earlier works at the same time. For instance, in the first book of the epic poem *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes (third century B.C.E.), Jason and the Argonauts stop briefly on the island of Lemnos on their way to Colchis to fetch the Golden Fleece. The women of the island had killed all of the male population in the previous year and so needed this visit to provide them with future generations of Lemnians. Jason's sexual encounter with the queen, Hypsipyle, which delayed his mission, was written in such a way as to evoke the episode in the *Odyssey* (eighth century B.C.E.) in which Odysseus spent time making love with Circe, thus delaying his homecoming, the goal of his journey. By calling the Odyssean episode to mind, Apollonius effectively substituted Hypsipyle for Circe, as, indeed, Francisci and De Concini will substitute Omphale for Circe. On this and other instances of what I like to call literary "bait and switch" in the *Argonautica*, see Clauss 1993.129–46 et passim.

Returning to *Hercules Unchained*, we find the same phenomenon at play. The original story involved Theseus, as mentioned above, a figure whose mythic career was modeled by Athenian artists on that of Heracles in an attempt to create for themselves an Attic counterpart to the Doric Heracles. By specifically mentioning Sophocles' play, which featured Theseus's witnessing of Oedipus's *katabasis*, and replacing him with Hercules, Francisci and De Concini have in essence "corrected" the Greek playwright by having a Theban hero, and the model after whom Theseus was based, witness Oedipus's departure to the Underworld. On "correction" as a feature of Hellenistic and Roman literature, see Thomas 1999.14–22, 109–10, 127–32. On the phenomenon of appropriation in general in ancient literature, see, inter alios, Hinds 1998.

17 The character of Eteocles is modeled after the mad Roman emperor (e.g., Caligula as played by Jay Robinson in *The Robe* [1953] and *Demetrius and the Gladiator* [1954]). In addition to his inappropriate laughter, cruelty, and tyrannical rule, Eteocles spends his time at an indoor arena complete with tigers and prisoners who resemble early Christian martyrs. On the presence of Christian themes in sword-and-sandal films, Lucanio 1994.3 observes: "The ancient world . . . serves only as a backdrop for a story in which an active and violent plot is emphasized to the exclusion of ordinary experience; moreover the characters are rigidly drawn representations of virtue and evil. In this regard, both plot and character are rooted in archetypal notions of the Christian myth itself; i.e., symbolically,

Thebes, Hercules and Ulysses attempt to return to Polynices with Eteocles' signed agreement, but they end up by accident on a long and perilous detour that will cost them the opportunity to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict. Moreover, the detour evokes several Odyssean scenes and thereby accentuates the cleverly fabricated symbiosis of Hercules and Ulysses that underscores the themes of *nostos* and *katabasis*.

As they make their way back to Polynices, the heroic pair is unexpectedly taken away by a group of armed soldiers to the island of Omphale after Hercules accidentally drinks water from a mysterious fountain and passes out.¹⁸ This water has the same effect as the river Lethe, causing those who drink it to forget who they are.¹⁹ Ulysses, who did not drink the water, is allowed to accompany Hercules by pretending that he cannot hear or speak, an allusion to his future as a trickster. Omphale, as we learned in the scene preceding the credits, abducts handsome young men who chance upon this fountain—as we now surmise—and makes them her boy toys. Once she obtains a new playmate, she has her former lover killed and turned into a statue. Omphale thus plays a role similar to that of Circe in the *Odyssey*, who turns visiting diners into swine and unmans her lovers; in this case, it is not drugged food but tainted water that does the hero in. Moreover, whereas Ulysses on Circe's island temporarily forgets about his mission to return home because he is spending all his time sleeping with Circe, Hercules, similarly occupied with Omphale, has not only forgotten about returning to and saving his homeland Thebes, he does not even know who he is and, for the first time in his life, dedicates himself to a life of earthly pleasures. In fact, the name that Omphale gives him, "Love," aptly describes the hero's present obsession—night after night of sex with Omphale.²⁰

the films present the heroic pattern of Christ slaying the dragon of death and hell, thereby redeeming his bride, the church."

18 Although Lydia was located on the Anatolian mainland, in the movie, Omphale's land is several times described as an island, a change that must have been purposeful. More on this below.

19 This differs from the traditional accounts according to which Heracles had to submit to serving Omphale because he murdered Iphitus, the brother of Iole. In fact, Iphitus was included in *Hercules* as a brother of Iole, and it was his impetuosity and jealousy of Hercules that led to his death at the paws of the Nemean Lion. The change from expiating a murder to drinking the water of forgetfulness, as we shall see, is relevant to our understanding of what the sojourn on Omphale's island signifies.

20 The dichotomy between a life as hero or as debauchee that is raised in this sequence is a not-so-subtle nod to the story of Hercules at the Crossroads, according to which Hercules had to choose either the path of Virtue or that of Pleasure.

The sequence on Omphale's island directs us to other episodes in the *Odyssey* as well. The queen's palace includes an architectural feature that is particularly striking: a cave. Since caves are not integral parts of most regal domestic construction in ancient myth, the choice to feature it—even if a leftover from an earlier film—is again suggestive.²¹ The presence of Ulysses, a cave, impending death, and a focus on eating (Hercules is shown consuming large hunks of meat and platters of fruit) call to mind another famous Odyssean “labor”: the cave of Polyphemus. In fact, it was there that Ulysses assumed a false name, “Nobody.” Like Ulysses, then, a hungry Heracles on a dangerous island inside a cave assumes, albeit unwittingly, a false name. What is more, the very choice of the name Nobody in the *Odyssey* hints at a loss of self, which is precisely what Hercules is experiencing at this time.²² It is this very identity crisis that the presence of Oedipus, also in a cave, prefigured.²³

In addition to recalling Ulysses' stay on the islands of Circe and Polyphemus, the sojourn with Omphale also engages what was for a Greek hero the ultimate adventure: the journey to the Underworld or *katabasis*.²⁴ Hercules' passage to and from the island of Omphale parallels such journeys as described in extant Greek and Roman literature with remarkable precision. His trip is preceded by the drinking of water that has the same powers as one of the rivers of the Underworld, Lethe; the hero collapses, as if dead, and is taken on a ship over a body of water, an enactment of the passage

21 As it happens, this same cave appeared in *Hercules*, where it served more appropriately as the salon of the uncivilized Amazons. As an instance of that film's playful “correction” of its ancient model, Amazons, a perennially all-female society, replaced the Lemnian women, who were only temporarily manless; on the role of the Lemnian women in the Argonautic myth, see above, n. 16.

22 On the significance of Ulysses' choice of names in the *Odyssey*, see, inter alios, Austin 1972.13–19. In his discussion of the name Nobody, Austin describes the hero's ultimate decision to acknowledge his identity, particularly after his time wasting away on Calypso's island, as a “self-willed resurrection” (19), a theme to which I now turn.

23 Regarding the symbolism of caves, Mackey-Kallis 2001.26 states: “A cave or womb-like space is often representative of the underworld to which the hero descends. According to Jung (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*), ‘The cave is the place of rebirth, that secret cavity in which one is shut up in order to be incubated and renewed . . . Anyone who gets into that cave, that is to say in the cave which everyone has in himself, or into the darkness that lies behind the consciousness, will find himself involved in an—at first—unconscious process of transformation.’” In the first two chapters of her book, Mackey-Kallis offers an insightful discussion of the psychological dimension of coming home in connection with the hero quest.

24 On the theme of *katabasis* in film, see Holtmark 1991, 2001, and Clauss 1999.

over the river Styx on Charon's ferry; once there, we learn that there are Egyptian embalmers who turn Omphale's former lovers into statues, lifeless images of their former selves, like the dead in Hades.²⁵

Hercules eventually remembers who he is, thanks to the intercession of the wily Ulysses, who had also summoned by way of carrier pigeon Laertes and a few of the Argonauts from the previous movie.²⁶ The hero reconfirms his identity, rejects Omphale, and leaves the island. To make the connection between the island and the Underworld even clearer, the director has the departure of the heroes take place past a gate and through a cave, playing in reverse Oedipus's passage into the Underworld.²⁷ As they depart, Omphale kills herself by leaping into the steamy vat used to embalm her former lovers. Although the director must have had Dido from Vergil's *Aeneid* in mind, particularly as Omphale dies as her lover sails away, perhaps, given the Oedipal connection, we might also think of Jocasta, whose suicide was similarly linked with Oedipus's discovery of his identity.

As Hercules sails back to Greece, he realizes that the time he was given for negotiating the transfer of power has passed and that Thebes is now in danger of being attacked by Polynices and the Argives. With no word from Hercules, Polynices and Eteocles each came to believe that they had been betrayed and so prepared for war. The film now segues to Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*. True to the myth, Polynices and Eteocles face each other in battle, in four-horse chariots at that, and both die as they are supposed to, although that is where the similarity ends. In the meantime, Iole, who had been imprisoned for attempting to leave Thebes in order to find Hercules, escaped, only to be captured in turn by the evil, unnamed, and now even more lecherous, general. Hercules thus must return not only to save Thebes but also to rescue his "Penelope."²⁸ So that we do not miss the

25 Regarding the status of the dead in Hades, see *Odyssey* 11.204–22, 473–76. Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989 ad 217–20 succinctly describe the Homeric conception of "life" in the Underworld: "On death, the ψυχή ("soul") escapes from the body, now merely dead matter; the soul, which made life possible, lives on in Hades as an εἶδωλον ("image") with the outward form of the human body which it had once imbued with life."

26 The theme of a returned veteran in need of help from war buddies is common in films of various genres: e.g., *White Christmas* (musical, 1954), *Ocean's Eleven* (caper, 1960), *Born on the Fourth of July* (war, 1989), and many others. More on *Hercules Unchained* as a "war" movie below.

27 Another example of literary "bait and switch": instead of meeting his mother in this particular Underworld, as he did in the *Odyssey*, Ulysses meets his father.

28 As Mackey-Kallis 2001.31–32 notes, the returning hero is expected to "restore peace and tranquility to the land."

connection between Penelope and Iole, during the sequence on Omphale's island, the director includes a scene in which the real Penelope expresses her fear for Ulysses' safety during his absence and another that shows Iole weaving a tapestry as she fearfully awaits Hercules' return in Thebes.

The film moves toward the climactic battle when Hercules, accompanied by Ulysses and the Argonauts, enters Thebes by stealth, faces several tigers in Eteocles' private amphitheater,²⁹ leads the charge against the Argive army who attack Thebes with Roman siege engines—one of which falls on the evil unnamed lecherous general and crushes his liver—and in the end, like Ulysses, wins back his bride against superior forces by a clever ruse: toppling the siege engines with rope and grappling hook.³⁰ The conclusion of the film leaves the door open for one or more sequels but, at the same time, slams it shut on the thought that what we experienced was intended to be serious. Hercules approaches Iole and states: "How much you have suffered, Iole. The gods have placed many obstacles against us, and there will be others." And Iole replies: "I hope we shall withstand them. Somehow the gods will be kind if we just love one another."

Hercules Unchained offers up a striking paradox. Because of its vile acting, groan-producing dialogue, obsession with flesh, and sleazy promotional strategy, the film lives on as a cinematic joke. And yet, a close analysis of the narrative exposes thematic similarities that connect three traditionally unrelated mythological figures, an intersection that risks bringing into play the serious issues underlying their ancient narratives. As Rodney Farnsworth aptly and succinctly notes (2002.111): "Archetypes deconstruct authorial intentions and reconstruct atavism."

The linking of Hercules with characters outside of his mythological and chronological spheres anticipated the many far-fetched muscleman movies that followed *Hercules Unchained* and presented our hero on the same screen with the likes of Samson, Babylonian tyrants, Roman legions, Incan warriors, Moon men, and even the Three Stooges.³¹ Different from these

29 Reminiscent of films such as *Demetrius and the Gladiator* (1954).

30 One movie poster calls particular attention to this scene: "See the mammoth war of the chariots!" (Chapman 2002.23). What I find particularly interesting is the fact that in the film *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Luke Skywalker instructs his cohorts to bring down the Imperial Walkers by employing the same strategy as Hercules in toppling the siege engines—a rope and grappling hook. While a topos of siege scenes, the focus on the solitary hero is striking in these instances.

31 *Hercules, Sampson, and Ulysses* (1963), *Hercules, Maciste, Sampson, and Ursus* (1964), *Hercules and the Tyrants of Babylon* (1964), *Hercules Against Rome* (1960), *Hercules*

freakish *epigonoï*, the combination of heroes in this film actually makes sense, as I hope to have shown. In the creation of this unlikely narrative, Francisci and De Concini either knew, intuited, or accidentally chanced upon a point of convergence that, as it happens, signifies something, and something substantial, about the universal theme of homecoming: a *nostos* cannot be complete unless or until the hero, by way of some sort of *katabasis*, comes to terms with the changes that his experiences, particularly those encountered in war, have exerted upon his psyche.³² After traveling far from home for an extended period and/or after seeing and even participating in the slaughter of human beings, a person must surely ask: who am I now, and how will my family, friends, and fellow citizens relate to me when I return?³³ Setting aside, then, the inherent ludicrousness of the film, *Hercules Unchained*, even if unimagined by its creators, engages this universal question, a question that must have still been on the minds of many at the time the film was released.

Against the Sons of the Sun (1963), *Hercules Against the Moon Men* (1964), *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* (1964). Other notable renditions of the Hercules theme can be found in *Ercole al Centro della Terra* (1961), directed by Mario Bava, famous for horror films, and *Hercules in New York* (1970), starring the future “governator” of California. Still other equally ludicrous combinations can be named, many of which are mentioned in Solomon 2001. For an annotated listing of Hercules and other sword-and-sandal films released in the United States, see Lucanio 1994.57–360.

32 What Stanford 1968.3 states about the many variations of the Ulysses theme over time may well describe the making of this film: “Accident, ignorance, misunderstanding, or carelessness—fatal faults in a work of scholarship—may lead a creative author to valid new conceptions of the traditional myths.”

33 In his chapter on the Odyssean journey to the Underworld, Shay 2002.85 recounts the story of a returning soldier that poignantly illustrates this point: “This grip of the dead on the living was related to me . . . by Emma, the mother of a Vietnam combat veteran. She told me of talking with her son soon after his return from Vietnam, where he had once been the sole survivor of his ambushed platoon. As he recounted one horrific incident after another, sometimes confessing his own brutalities, Emma thought to herself, ‘This isn’t my son.’ As he continued his confessions, she began to look for birthmarks and childhood scars, to prove to herself that the man sitting before her was an imposter. Quickly her son sensed what she was doing and, like many another veteran, ‘went off’ as he realized that his own mother did not believe or trust in him.”

The 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives* tells the story of three servicemen coming home from WW II. Each of the returning soldiers encounters problems in making the transition, especially with their respective “Penelopes.” Al, who complains: “Everyone is going to try to rehabilitate me,” does not recognize his children and avoids intimacy with his wife by going from bar to bar. Fred, whose post-traumatic stress syndrome manifests itself in nightmares, ultimately splits up with his wife. Homer (!), whose both hands were replaced with mechanical hooks, exclaims: “I want to be treated like anyone else” and cannot commit to marriage with his fiancée until she sees his arms as they are, an experience that allows him to accept himself.

The film was made at the end of the 50s when soldiers were still coming home, in some cases physically and in others emotionally, from the second World War and, more recently, Korea. In fact, Hollywood had not yet relinquished its infatuation with war, especially World War II, not only in the production of full-length films but even in prime-time television shows that flourished into the 60s and beyond.³⁴ In *Hercules Unchained*, the hero returns to his native Thebes, like those who fought in Europe and Asia, after a foreign expedition.³⁵ Whether you kill Nazis, Japanese imperialists, Communists, or ape men and the supporters of an evil usurper (as Hercules did in the previous film), the taking of life, even when socially and morally sanctioned, seriously challenges one's sense of self. Unlike other films of this period, *Hercules Unchained* explores the theme of coming home from war through the mediation of ancient myth. As part of his *nostos*, Hercules needs to die and be reborn—that is, to rediscover and confirm his identity, both for himself and within his community—before he can feel he is finally home, an experience that must have been very much alive at this time when soldiers worldwide were still negotiating the transition from the arena of licit murder to postbellum life where different rules applied, and where memories of traumatic experiences presented selves at odds with who they were before the war and who they had to be afterwards.³⁶

Hercules Unchained, in its striking fusion of sophisticated *contaminatio* and juvenile production, seriousness and inanity, might even be said to parallel, *grossissimo modo*, the works of Dada and Surrealism that responded to the brutality of war and tyranny of reason through artistic and

34 The number of films about WW II is too large and well known to list, but cinematic narratives of this conflict continue to fascinate, as the relatively recent success of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) demonstrates. For a list of over 600 WW II movies, see <http://www.airmuseum.ca/w2movies.html>. Television series on WW II from the end of the war up to and into the 60s (they continued to be made thereafter) include *Crusade in Europe* (1949), *Victory at Sea* (1952–53), *Combat Sergeant* (1956), *The Gallant Men* (1962–63), *Combat* (1962–67), *Twelve O'Clock High* (1964–67), *Hogan's Heroes* (1965–71), *The Rat Patrol* (1966–68), and *Garrison's Gorillas* (1967–68).

35 Chapman 2002.12 offers another connection with the film's contemporary audience, one not excluded by the reading offered here: "Clearly, Levine was trying to tap into the male market in a big way. The pudgy producer realized at once that other out-of-shape, postwar males all across North America would respond in a big way to the handsome, muscular, prize-winning athlete who starred in this extravaganza."

36 When showing *Hercules Unchained* in class recently, I asked what issues students felt were raised by this film. One student, whose fiancé was at that time on his way home from Iraq, responded, without any hesitation or prompting, that this film was about coming home from war.

literary representations of the absurd.³⁷ Though not originating in the halls of the intellectual elite, *Hercules Unchained* serves up a proletarian retreat into a looking-glass landscape where the returning hero's soul, disoriented in war, finally regains memory of self and sense of purpose. I do not mean to suggest that Francisci and De Concini were aware of or influenced by these esoteric post World War I intellectual movements. Rather, for me, Dada and Surrealism are helpful in providing a model for understanding, or at least responding to, the palpable dissonance of an excruciatingly sophomoric film that deals with one of the central traumas of the human experience; an experience that had been playing itself out in America and elsewhere at the time the film was released. In the famous painting of a pipe by René Magritte (*La Trahison des Images*, 1929), the caption proclaims, "This is not a pipe" ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe"). At the beginning of *Hercules Unchained*, the credits assert that the film is based on *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Seven Against Thebes*. Both claims can be read as true and false simultaneously. *Hercules Unchained* presents itself as a mythological spoof and adolescent comedy, but the underlying myths reflect, and the film re-enacts, the universal anxieties concerning death, rebirth, and homecoming. Rather than ignore or dismiss the disconnect between subject and mode of presentation, once we acknowledge the irreconcilable aspects of the film and allow them to emerge simultaneously, we can experience the resulting discord and ask, what can this mean?³⁸

37 In brief, the Dada movement came into being at the end of World War I under the inspiration of Tristan Tzara. Its goal was to attack the society that had created so hideous a war by producing offensive, nihilistic art. On the heels of Dada, Surrealist artists, led by André Breton and influenced by Freud and Jung, added a psychological dimension to their counter-cultural art. In his 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism," Breton defined their goal as "Pure psychic automatism by which we propose to express either verbally, or in writing, or in any other manner the real functioning of thought. Dictation of thought, in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupation." As I hope to have shown, *Hercules Unchained*, lacking all aesthetic preoccupations, expresses a "real functioning of thought" insofar as its contrived mythological intertext underscores the archetypal experience of rebirth and reintegration into society in the aftermath of war. What Breton and other Surrealists would surely resent in the comparison lies in the fact that the conclusion of the film supports a "moral preoccupation" (good triumphs over evil) and leaves us with the understanding that a new regime will follow the previous corrupt one, leaving the masses under the power of a new autocrat. They would also doubtless condemn, if not condemn, Levine's abject capitalism and success within the Hollywood establishment.

38 When describing his work, Magritte is reported to have said: "My painting is visible images which conceal nothing; they evoke mystery and, indeed, when one sees one of

Students who view this movie in my film class typically do not like it because it is cheesy. While Steve Reeves and company set the standard for bad acting, and many of the scenes transcend fatuousness, still I have to wonder if the negative reaction the movie elicits reflects not only an abhorrence of the critically lame but perhaps also a vague discomfort at observing the kitschy representation of myth's greatest hero reduced to idiocy during a critical identity meltdown, an experience that stands as a disquieting debasement of our own search for who we are in response to tumultuous, life-changing experiences. *Hercules Unchained* invites us to emulate Hercules in ultimately choosing heroic identities and goals in life, but, at the same time, alienates us by representing this universal, though also intensely personal, quest as a mythological travesty acted out by a former Mr. Universe, scantily clad bimbos, and a cast of fifth-rate actors, from whom we are further distanced by poor dubbing.³⁹ This conflict between the epic and the cartoon, the mythic and the banal, the heroic and the stupid in *Hercules Unchained* creates a dynamic tension that, like the productions of Dadaist and Surrealist artists, problematizes our perception of what is serious and what nonsensical by inviting us to observe, evaluate, and critique our response to the irreconcilable.⁴⁰

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my paintings, one asks oneself this simple question, 'What does that mean?' It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing either, it is unknowable."

- 39 On the issue of dubbing in Italian sword-and-sandal films, see Lucanio 1994.17–18, who refers to the effect as a kind of "aural expressionism" that moves the experience of the actors' voices beyond communication to the realm of the symbolic, further rupturing any connection with realism.
- 40 I would like to thank Louise Hirasawa for her conversations on *Hercules Unchained* and for the gift of Chapman's book *Retro Stud*. I would also like to thank Robin Held for her emails on Dada and Surrealism and Kirsten Day for reading and commenting on several drafts of this paper.

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