**Troy: A reflection by Tony Keen**

The following is not intended as a review per se of Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy*. Rather, it seeks to examine some of the issues arising out of one of the most-discussed aspects, the changes made from the ‘canon’ of Greek mythology. I expected, from advance information, to spend the entirety of the film in open-mouthed shock at what had been done. I didn’t.

The first reason is that it’s quite obvious within the first ten minutes that this is Wolfgang Petersen doing (for reasons best known to himself) a Cecil B. DeMille movie, and what do you expect from such a film? Historical accuracy?

But there is a more complex reason, one which relates to what we consider important in the retelling of mythology and adaptation of literature. Back in the 1950s, an American television company made a version of Ian Fleming’s *Casino Royale*, in which James Bond was made into an American. Horrifying idea, isn’t it? Yet when I actually saw said programme, what struck me was not how much had been changed, but how much of Fleming survived – even Americanized, Bond remained a nasty piece of work. And that’s how I feel about *Troy*. It’s not the departures from Homer you note – it’s how much of Homer is still there, such as Paris’ feebleness in single combat with Menelaus (even if Paris isn’t here the sort of person to whom even his close relatives and lover say, “Go out and fight like a man, and if you get yourself killed, well, no real harm done”), and Priam’s begging Achilles for his son’s body.

Besides, these myths are not immutable. Homer himself probably altered some of the stories he used. The great Attic tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, certainly did. Three surviving plays by Euripides feature Helen of Troy on stage – all are mutually inconsistent. Virgil too modified the legends to suit his purpose of praising Rome and Augustus.

Some of the changes made by ancient authors are quite substantial, the most momentous being the tradition that Helen never went to Troy at all, the whole war being fought over her simulacrum or likeness. I wonder if the sort of people now complaining that Helen escapes the sack of Troy at the end of Petersen’s film would be up in arms at Euripides’ *Helen*: “A ghost Helen at Troy, and the real one in Egypt? What does this bloody playwright think he’s doing, following Steisichorus?”

It’s silly to be precious about these stories. Petersen and his screenwriter, David Benioff, are only doing what writers from the beginning of time have done. Granted, many of their changes are more drastic than those performed by any writer of antiquity, especially when all done at the same time. But let’s face it, far less violence has been done to the stories in this film than in the average episode of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys or Xena: Warrior Princess*. And I could always forgive Robert Tapert, Sam Raimi and their cohorts, because clearly they knew the material that they were transforming. And that’s true of *Troy’s* creators too – for instance, they know Homer well enough to have everyone call Menelaus ‘Menelaos’, in proper Greek fashion.

We have to remember that when Homer wrote the *Iliad*, everyone knew what happened before and after the small part of the story Homer chooses to tell. Nowadays, most of the demographic for *Troy* would have no knowledge that Agamemnon should go home to be killed by his wife, because of his sacrifice of their daughter, that Menelaus will be charmed again by Helen, and they will live in quite contentment, that Aeneas will lead a ragged band of escaped Trojans to found Rome (or London, depending on which empire the writer is living under). A movie that tried to tell the whole story, including the dispute over the armour of Odysseus and the suicide of Ajax, and that tried to fit in Hecuba and Cassandra and the fate of Astyanax, would be extremely long and very complicated, not to mention the fact that any modern Hollywood production would have great difficulty in dealing with the blatant unfairness of many characters’ fates. Frankly, such a film would never get made. So I don’t mind that the fates of Menelaus and Agamemnon are tidied up before the end of the film. Indeed, since Briseis in the film is an amalgam not just of Homer’s slave-girl Briseis, and Chryseis, daughter of the priest of Apollo, but also of Cassandra, daughter of Priam, it is almost appropriate that she deals the fatal blow – it remains Agamemnon’s lust that
finally undoes him. This is what the film does all the time – remembers its primary audience is not familiar with the Trojan cycle, but includes little bits for people who are.

As for Menelaus and Helen, having established Menelaus as a violent and possessive man, the film could hardly have Helen meekly return to Sparta with him at the end. I think far more people would be offended by a film that suggested battered wives should go back to their husbands than by one which alters the eventual fate of Helen of Troy, and rightly so. Once that is decided, Menelaus plays no further dramatic role in the story beyond providing the excuse for Agamemnon’s war, so it makes sense in terms of the film to get rid of him as soon as possible. But when Menelaus is killed the look of surprise on his face almost says, “I’m not supposed to die yet! What about Book IV of the Odyssey? What about the Andromache?”

Had the film killed Odysseus, then I would have been annoyed. That would have been to misunderstand something crucial about the character of Odysseus. Whether you admire him, as Homer does, or not, as per the tragedians and Latin poets, the whole point of Odysseus is that he is a survivor. Fortunately, as soon as the undiluted Sheffield vowels of Sean Bean (who I still think would have been better cast as Menelaus) are heard in the introductory narration, it is clear Odysseus will survive. The film even gives him an arch final line about “if they ever write my story ...

Odysseus is not the only person whose broad characterization the film gets right. Achilles is a petulant baby, Agamemnon a manipulative tyrant, Menelaus a boorish prig. Hector is more noble and heroic than anyone on the Greek side can dream of being, whilst his brother is a pretty-boy who lacks the inner steel to make a true hero. Priam is everything a wise and noble elder statesman should be, except that every important decision he makes is wrong; Helen is tortured by her responsibility for the war, and by the Trojans’ refusal to condemn her for it. Many of these characterizations can be found in Homer – almost all are in classical literature somewhere. But, of course, classical literature contains many different versions of these figures. I’ve already mentioned different views of Odysseus above; Helen is almost a tabula rasa to be depicted how one likes, from the now-dutiful wife who regrets her past that we find in the Odyssey, to the self-regarding manipulative bitch of Trojan Women.

What I am suggesting here is that, for all the variations in detail, Troy never actually misses the point of the Trojan War stories. Troy still falls. And if you think it’s silly to suggest it might have been otherwise, something very similar has happened to Alexandre Dumas’ The Man in the Iron Mask. That novel concerns a plot to replace Louis XIV of France with his (fictional) identical twin bother Philippe. In Dumas, this plot is thwarted, and Louis remains King. In every single film adaptation, the plot succeeds.

The one change in Troy I didn’t think was acceptable was Paris’ survival, and that’s not because it breaks from the traditional legend, but because it’s dramatically not right within the film. When he leaves Helen at the escape tunnel, and passes on the Sword of Troy to Aeneas (supporting his aged father, which I thought was a nice touch), Paris is having one of those moments where he knows, and so does Helen, that he’s going off to die. Except he then doesn’t die, and the last we see of him is fleeing with Briseis, the implication being that he will get both of them to the escape route and safety. (And no, this can’t be excused by saying, “Oh, but we don’t see that he escapes.” The film gives us no reason to believe that he doesn’t.) Quite what is supposed to happen when he rejoins his fellow escapees isn’t clear – will he ask for the Sword of Troy back?

This mishandling of Paris is a shame, because otherwise, the deaths, at least of major characters, all take place for a good dramatic reason, because there is some flaw in each individual for which they must pay the price. Patroclus dies because he is too eager for the fray, Menelaus because he has not the wit to treat Helen as more than an object to possess, Hector because, for all his honour, he loves his brother more than he loves his city, Priam because he arrogantly assumes that the gods are on his side, Agamemnon because his lust for power blinds him to all else, Achilles because his lust for war leads him to care nothing about those he kills. Though Paris’ discovery of archery skills (no typecasting for Orland Bloom there, then!) compensates for his
earlier cowardice, he still ought to pay the price for carelessly stealing another man’s wife, and for killing the hero.

The change that has excited most comment is the downplaying of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Both Brad Pitt and Benioff have said that they can’t see anything in the Iliad to support a homoerotic subtext (has Brad really read all twenty-four books?), but that’s because it was so obvious in the social context when Homer wrote that he didn’t need to be explicit. In any case, any homoeroticism that Benioff removed in his script is put back in by Petersen. Not only are Achilles and Patroclus clearly doing it, for those who have eyes to see, but the film is packed full of athletic men with their kit off, lingering shots tastefully cut off just above the pubic hair. In fact, not since Batman Forever have I seen a Hollywood blockbuster quite so in love with the male body.

There are plenty of legitimate reasons to criticise Troy (e.g. the embarrassing dialogue, the failure to make the battle scenes as exciting as Lord of the Rings or Gladiator, the varying level of acting), but it should be criticised on its own terms, and the artistic license the film grants itself should be allowed. By focusing on the changes made, and attacking them simply because they are changes, without trying to understand them in context, classicists and other critics risk appearing as silly pedants. Not to mention inconsistent. The license being denied to Petersen’s film is extended without question to Euripides or Virgil, or even to modern playwrights such as John Barton, whose Tantalus cycle is quite prepared to bend the legends when it seems necessary. This raises suspicions of elitism, that what is permitted to ancient authors or on stage cannot be allowed in a populist film. Regular citations of the Iliad as ‘the basis of western literature’, and by implication somehow sacrosanct, do not dispel such worries.

Even in the arena of film people are being inconsistent. One film often mentioned as a better way to do Homer than Troy is the Coen brothers’ O Brother Where Art Thou?, in which the Odyssey is taken as inspiration for a story set in the southern United States in the 1930s. Now, I am not going to promote the notion that Troy is a better movie than O Brother ..., since it clearly isn’t, but I am interested in the idea that the changes the Coens make are more acceptable than those of Peterson’s film. Are we really suggesting that it is intrinsically truer to Homer to shift him into the Depression (or, say, turn of the century Dublin), and make the free adaptation that such a setting requires, than to keep him in the Bronze Age, but then change some of the details?

One wonders whether critics of Troy might benefit from another read of the Iliad themselves. The central theme of the epic is Achilles’ anger at the removal of Briseis by Agamemnon, an anger that blinds him to what’s really important, winning the war. Troy is a blockbuster film, that will raise the profile of Homer and the Classics in general. Classics as a profession should be ready to take advantage of that. Instead, I have the impression we’re sulking in our tents.

Tony Keen