HOMOEROTICISM IN TROY AND ALEXANDER*

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Abstract: This article discusses homoeroticism in the movies Troy and Alexander. It argues that Troy is a more homoerotic movie, but that Alexander was attacked more for this, because where Alexander strongly implies homosexual acts on screen and hints at them in dialogue, Troy removes explicit homoeroticism from its diegesis, but sublimates it into its visual language.

In 2004, two epic films were released based on Greek source material. Both have stirred up a degree of controversy over their treatment, or lack of same, of homoerotic themes. In the case of Wolfgang Petersen’s Troy, classicists and others with a knowledge of Greek mythology complained that the homoerotic side of Achilles’ and Patroclus’ relationship had been written out (when the film was recently broadcast on Sky Movies, The Guardian’s listings magazine included in its capsule review ‘the gays are straightened’). For Oliver Stone’s Alexander, it was the inclusion of such elements that caused a problem, with, amongst other things, a group of Greeks threatening to sue Stone for suggesting that Alexander was ‘gay’. A close consideration of how these two films dealt with this issue provides an interesting insight into the attitudes of contemporary Hollywood, and indeed of America as a whole, and reveals a more subtle and multi-layered picture of what is going on in these movies than might at first appear.

Many commentators, for instance Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones in these very pages (CA News 30, June 2004, p. 20), observed that the makers of Troy had eliminated ‘Homer’s casual incorporation of “the Greek shame”.’ For their part, writer David Benioff and star Brad Pitt gave interviews where they pointed out that there is no explicit indication in Homer that Achilles und Patroclus are lovers. This has been reiterated by John Fraser in a letter to CA News (31 December 2004, p. 20), who further notes evidence of Achilles and Patroclus sleeping with girls (e.g. Iliad IX, 633–8).

One must be careful here. Evidence of heterosexual activity only precludes homosexual activities on the part of the same individual if one accepts a binary and exclusive opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. That, it seems to me, is to read Homer through a prism of contemporary sexual morality (and one which does not represent everybody’s sexual experiences). (Eric Shanower’s graphic novel adaptation, Age of Bronze, does something similar, where Achilles loses all sexual interest in his wife Deidamia once he becomes involved with Patroclus.)

Nonetheless, it is true that Homer depicts nothing explicitly sexual about the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. One might argue that this is because Homer had no need to be explicit—in a culture where sexual relations between males were the norm, Homer can leave it to his audience to draw the appropriate conclusion. And indeed, I have argued

precisely this, in a piece written for the Open University’s website. However, I was rightly pulled up on this score by Lynn Fotheringham, who made the point that this is to project back the erastes-eromenos relationship known from Classical Greece. Now, this is what the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries BC were doing, but that does not mean they were right to do so. Viewing Homer through the mores of another time and place can be just as misleading as viewing him through our own.

It seems to me then that Homer provides a skeletal framework for the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus, upon which one can place whatever interpretation one wishes. Homer’s text neither demands that they be lovers, nor excludes the possibility. If one wishes to see a romance, as tradition has read the story since Classical times, Homer allows this. On the other hand, it is not flying in the face of Homer’s text to deny any sexual side to their relationship, as Petersen and Benioff appear to.

Fraser suggests in his letter that the filmmakers deserve praise for depicting an adult, loving but wholly non-sexual relationship between two men. There are two reasons why I disagree. First, Troy would hardly be a pioneer, were this the case. Hollywood was actually quite good at portraying such relationships in the 1960s and 1970s—one thinks of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, where the male leads are the most important person in each other’s life, but the only sexual element is that both are in love with the same woman (though only one sleeps with her). The television series Starsky and Hutch is another example, In the early twenty-first century, however, it seems difficult to portray such a relationship without it being a source for innuendo, such as is to be seen in the recent Starsky and Hutch movie, and on television in the portrayal of the relationship between Joey and Chandler in Friends. In both cases it is also necessary to make clear that each male is heterosexually active.

To avoid this sort of response, and this is my second reason why the film does not warrant the praise Fraser gives it, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in Troy is cloaked in the one form that renders a male’s love for another free of innuendo, that of family. Patroclus becomes Achilles’ cousin, a development unattested in Greek literature.†

However, I wonder if Petersen and Benioff aren’t up to something rather more cunning here. ‘Cousin’ covers many different degrees of consanguinity, in many of which sexual relations are permissible by law and/or socially acceptable. In some US states even first cousins, who share a grandparent, can marry. So by making the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus that of cousins, Petersen and Benioff allow those who might otherwise be alarmed by the strong feelings between the two to assume that affection to be merely familial, whilst leaving the possibility open for those who would like to imagine that there is more to it than that, without raising the issue of incest.

* No longer available on the OU’s website, but it can be found here: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/436b-ty98.
† Fiona McHardy contacted me after this was initially published, to point out that the cousins relationship is to be found in Greek sources. Eustathius, Hom. 112.44f. states that Hesiod recorded that Achilles’ and Patroclus’ fathers were brothers. Whilst acknowledging my error, I do not think it affects my reading of what Petersen and Benioff are doing through the use of the relationship.
This latter group may find encouragement in the visual subtext of the film, something that is rarely mentioned. When Patroclus first appears he is practising fighting techniques with Achilles. This appears a straightforward masculine and manly activity. Yet their conversational banter and body language in this scene is almost flirtatious. If I was asked to come up with a scene this reminds me of, I would cite the fight between Antonio Banderas and Catherine Zeta Jones in Martin Campbell’s *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), and that scene’s various predecessors. Had such a scene been played out between a male and female, it would be a signal of some sexual undercurrent between the two,

Troy’s handling of male nudity is also interesting. There are five nude scenes, all but one featuring Brad Pitt. Four of these are coital (or pre- or post-coital), and in all of them there is always a woman present, and never another adult male. These scenes are all, then, presented in a securely heterosexual context.

Yet the way these scenes are shot suggests that there is something else going on. Though there is often female nudity in the scenes as well, they are lit to conceal this and draw attention to the naked male. The shots are artfully composed to maximise the amount of male flesh exposed, whilst (just) ensuring that the pubic area and genitals remain concealed, and standards of decency preserved.

And then there is the intercut scene of Achilles and Hector donning their armour before their final confrontation. This has its origin, of course, in the numerous arming scenes found in Homer (e.g. Patroclus arming in *Iliad* XVI, 130–9), But it also echoes similarly fetishistic scenes in *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman and Robin* (1997), both films highly interested in the male body (and the motif is, of course, hardly original to those films).

I would therefore suggest that *Troy* does have a homoerotic subtext. However, the film handles this with subtlety, so that it may be overlooked by cinema audiences unused to a film that does not spell everything out clearly, and is therefore ‘deniable’. So Troy avoided many of the public relations problems that were to beset *Alexander*.

To a degree, the same escape clause exploited by Petersen and Benioff was also available to Oliver Stone. We don’t really know what went on between Alexander and Hephaestion, only later insinuations. As Stone’s historical consultant Robin Lane Fox wrote in his 1973 biography (p. 56), the exact nature of their relationship is ‘irrecoverable’. The balance of probability may point to there having been a sexual side (Paul Cartledge says in his 2004 book that this is ‘almost certain’), but Stone could have denied that, had he wished.

But Stone is too honest a film-maker to do that. Instead, he accepts the homoerotic aspect of Alexander and Hephaestion’s relationship, but does not see this as Alexander’s defining characteristic—it is simply part of what makes up his personality. So the relationship is underplayed. Alexander and Hephaestion are never seen in bed together, though a long scene taking place in Alexander’s bedroom in Babylon implies that they have had sex, and will do so later that night. The two men never even kiss—they just hug each other and declare their love to each other a lot. It might be an exaggeration to say that had Stone made them ‘cousins’ hardly an eyebrow would have been missed, but it is remarkably innocuous most of the time.
The closest *Alexander* gets to a homosexual love scene is a moment between Alexander and the Persian slave boy Bagoas. Yet even this is understated. Nothing is said; there is no more than a look. It certainly lacks the intensity of the sex scene between Alexander and Roxane. Alexander is naked (which he is not in the scene with Roxane, though she is—a contrast to the approach of *Troy*), but there is nothing like the coy sensuality of the nude scenes in *Troy*.

Yet it was *Alexander* that became characterised as a ‘gay film’. Lane Fox has recounted in various fora (I heard it on BBC 6 Music) the tale of constantly being asked on American radio if Alexander was gay, and being unable to get across that the truth was more subtle and complex and depended upon context, and no doubt finding out that ‘middle America’ does not deal well with male bisexuality, It’s hard to believe that the film’s US and UK box office was not harmed by this. *Troy*, on the other hand, has more material that might appear to be of a homoerotic nature, but presents it in a more subtle fashion,

The lesson appears to be that in a Hollywood movie you can show quite a lot, confident that those parts of your audience most likely to get offended are the least likely to see below the surface. The worst thing one can do is be open and honest, especially in prepublicity in advance of a film’s release. It allows people to make up their minds in advance (few of the people who attacked *Alexander* for being a ‘gay movie’ had actually seen it). Homosexuality remains The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name, at least in American multiplexes.