The film *The Small Back Room* was written and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, and released in 1949.¹ It is the wartime tale of an injured and embittered back-room scientist, recruited to help combat a new kind of explosive device. Based on Nigel Balchin’s 1943 novel, the film significantly alters the story’s climactic sequence so that the wounded Sammy Rice successfully disarms the mysterious device and, in so doing, is restored to his own self-esteem, while gaining the respect of the military personnel who witness his achievement. In this way, a downbeat source-text is transformed into a mutedly redemptive narrative of loyalty, friendship, and unconventional heroism. Hentzi (2008) identifies Powell and Pressburger’s adaptation of Balchin’s novel as ‘telling a version of the legend of Philoctetes’. This chapter builds upon Hentzi’s argument, together with Moor’s (2005) discussion of ‘magical spaces’ in Powell and Pressburger’s films, to analyse the strategies by which the pair infuse a recurring sense of quasi-mythic male friendship, and miraculous healing, into a film which is most often understood as one of their rare excursions

¹ I am grateful to the conference organisers for a generous bursary which allowed me to attend *Hercules: A Hero for All Ages*. Thanks are also due to my colleague Noel Brown, and to all the students at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance with whom I discussed *Philoctetes* and *The Small Back Room*. 
into filmic realism. In the process, it formulates a new approach to reading The Archers’ classical reception during the later 1940s, focusing on their cultivation of deliberately ambiguous scenes and images whose classical influences could be swiftly disavowed by filmmakers under pressure to conform to the demands of realist cinematography.

Central to this strategy in *The Small Back Room* is Captain Dick Stuart, the officer who (if the film is read as a version of the myth of the wounded bowman) plays Herakles to Sammy Rice’s Philoctetes. Stuart is a young sapper officer, obsessed with understanding and defeating the mystery weapon. His friendship provides the film’s morose hero with a route towards restored self-esteem, before Stuart’s death (while attempting defuse the first of two unexploded bombs) removes him entirely from the drama’s realist action. However, his voice continues to be heard, post-mortem, in a sequence which recalls ancient tragic stagecraft, and particularly the *deus ex machina* ending of Sophocles’ play *Philoctetes*, in which Herakles appears to ordain the rehabilitation of the play’s intransigent protagonist. In *The Small Back Room*, this moment formally bridges the gap between an idealised, mobilised England and the mythic heroes of classical antiquity. Consequently, as this chapter contends, the figure of Captain Stuart plays a key role in facilitating the film’s understated negotiation between realist and mythic registers.

*The Small Back Room* is little discussed in accounts of Powell and Pressburger’s filmmaking partnership, not least because it sits awkwardly in any chronological account of

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2 The Archers was the name given to Powell and Pressburger’s independent production company, which operated 1943-1957. The company’s trademark arrow thudding into the centre of a target is read by Hentzi as a link to Philoctetes as ‘bow wielding hero’ (2008), though Moor compares the symbol to ‘the concentric circles which form the insignia of the RAF’ (2005, 60), and Powell himself asserted that the icon was borrowed from a visual motif in Alexander Korda’s 1940 extravaganza *The Thief of Bagdad* (Powell 2000, 387).
their achievements during the later 1940s. This black and white drama appeared directly after a spate of glorious, fantastical Technicolor films (e.g. *A Matter of Life and Death*, 1946; *Black Narcissus*, 1947), while its box-office failure was a conspicuous contrast with the popular triumph of *The Red Shoes* (1948).\(^3\) Those critics who praised *The Small Back Room* did so precisely because it was seen as marking a departure from the lush fantasy of earlier films and a return to realism, a genre then being promoted as ‘the right path’ for the British film industry.\(^4\) One such account, appearing in *Monthly Film Bulletin* (March 1949), praised the film (categorised as a ‘Wartime Drama’) for its ‘terrific suspense’, highlighting its ‘extremely efficient’ direction, with only ‘one or two lapses’ into ‘surrealistic’ excess. The reviewer’s preference for a realist register is evident in their admiration for David Farrar, who ‘turns in a convincing performance as Sammy Rice and has one believing in the reality of his game foot’.\(^5\) Such (faint) critical praise for *The Small Back Room* has tended to obscure the work’s muted evocations of the otherworldly. However, Hentzi’s claim that *The Small Back Room* might be read in the light of ancient Greek myth offers a challenge to this critical consensus, potentially aligning *The Small Back Room* with earlier Powell and Pressburger collaborations, the classical influences of which are more readily evident.\(^6\)

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\(^3\) It has become conventional to ascribe the film’s lack of success to a double mistiming, based on Powell’s reflections that while the film’s wartime setting failed to attract a post-war audience (1992, 11), its (for the period) frank depiction of a non-marital relationship ‘made the public uncomfortable’ (1992, 15).

\(^4\) Macdonald 1994, 301.

\(^5\) British Film Institute 1949, 40.

\(^6\) Hentzi (2008) primarily makes use of this insight to draw parallels between Philoctetes (read in André Gide’s terms as emblematic of the independent artist) and Powell and
accordingly highlights the film’s links to The Archers’ repeated explorations of interactions between this and other worlds. In so doing, it begins to articulate a new approach to reading Powell and Pressburger’s classical references, focusing on the pair’s development of a playful, often ironised, and always disavowable series of allusions to ancient mythic narratives and landscapes during the late 1940s.

At first glance, *The Small Back Room*, which makes no overt reference to Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, seems an improbable site for the re-staging of an ancient tragic narrative. Hutcheon defines adaptation as ‘a creative and interpretive transposition of a recognizable other work,’ defining a critical model in which the open acknowledgement of a new work’s relationship with ‘particular other texts’ functions as a hallmark of adaptive practice (2013, 33 and 16). Michalakis observes the continuing impact of comparable terms of engagement in classical reception scholarship.⁷

The relation between Greek tragedy and its cinematic adaptations is often shaped by metaphors of authenticity and fidelity. Questions such as ‘is it Greek tragedy’ or ‘is it Sophocles?’ are very persistent in critical discourses around such films […]

However, Cyrino and Meredith offer a more wide-ranging account of the ways in which ancient mythic narratives might influence later cinematic works. They argue that although ‘narrative authority’ is often considered to reside in ‘literary and visual texts that have been fixed in a transmittable form’, the widespread and multiform influence of mythic narratives Pressburger themselves, and no other exploration of the links between *The Small Back Room* and Greek myth has followed.

⁷ Michalakis 2013, 57.
may significantly transcend ‘the texts that variously embody this protean cultural form’. On this basis, they propose that any film drama which displays sufficient ‘core of character and causation for its narrative to be recognizable’ may profitably be read in relation to ancient mythic antecedent(s). As Sanders outlines, myth ‘depends upon, incites even, perpetual acts of reinterpretation in new contexts’ which may be explicitly signalled, but which may equally operate ‘in a subterranean mode’. So The Small Back Room’s lack of obvious classical referents need not exclude the possibility of such ‘subterranean’ engagement with an ancient mythic source.

If Powell and Pressburger never directly or explicitly adapted a classical text, their shared fluency in mythic tales and tropes is regularly in evidence throughout their partnership. Both artists studied Latin and Greek as schoolboys, and in his autobiography Powell recalls the impact of earlier encounters with classical tales: ‘When my mother read us stories, my brother liked G.A. Henty. I was reported to have said, “I befer Greek Smiffs”’. Ancient myth was certainly a component of the pair’s creative lexicon, and tragedy may not have been beyond their scope. Christie (while acknowledging that the film has ‘no single mythic source’) observes that A Matter of Life and Death (1946) echoes the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, while also speculating that the tragedy Alcestis may have influenced The

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8 Cyrino and Meredith 2015, 1-2.
9 Cyrino and Meredith 2015, 2. According to this formula, films as apparently un-classical as Papillon (1973) and Cast Away (2000) may be read as responding to the Philoctetes myth, see Barnard 2015.
10 Sanders 2016, 80 and 104. See, for example, Bullen 2015.
11 Macdonald 1994, 16-7; Powell 2000, 69, 81 and 92.
12 Powell 2000, 40-1.
Archers’ handling of the film’s central love affair.\textsuperscript{13} Earlier in the 1940s, they had fleetingly re-staged a fragment of the \textit{Odyssey} (borrowing from Stephen Phillips’ musical play \textit{Ulysses}) to provide an epic counterpoint to the adventures of Clive Candy in \textit{The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp} (1943), in a sequence which simultaneously raises and deflates the notion that viewers might read the film’s protagonist as a classically heroic figure.\textsuperscript{14} In fact, from the mid-1940s, when The Archers abandoned the (broadly) realist canvas of wartime propaganda for new, more experimental filmic registers, Powell and Pressburger appear to have cultivated a teasingly ambivalent relationship with a variety of Greek and Roman sources.

A typically playful instance occurs early in \textit{A Matter of Life and Death}. The film’s hero, Peter Carter (David Niven) is a young English pilot who bails out of his burning plane over the Channel, confident that his leap will prove fatal. When he wakes, washed ashore on a deserted beach bathed in opalescent light, he is initially uncertain whether he’s woken in this world or the next, an uncertainty compounded by his encounter with a nude, pipe-playing boy, surrounded by goats. Is this Pan? Has the airman wandered into some paradisiacal, classically-inflected afterlife? For a moment, neither character nor audience is certain. And then the boy speaks, revealing himself as an ordinary, unromantic English child, on an ordinary beach. (The boy’s nudity, pipes, and goats are never explained.) Powell, describing the result as a ‘classical scene’, and even ‘a Theocritan idyll’,\textsuperscript{15} takes evident pleasure in subverting realist expectations, metamorphosing a liminal sea-shore into a quasi-classical

\textsuperscript{13} Christie 2000, 18.

\textsuperscript{14} See Moor 2005, 63.

\textsuperscript{15} Powell 2000, 542-3.
otherworld, and then equally dexterously unravelling the whole artifice before the audience’s eyes.

This scene’s studied ambivalence might be taken as exemplifying Powell and Pressburger’s relationship with classical sources during the later 1940s. Location and visual iconography, as well as mischievous double-meanings and self-conscious pastiche, all play into the pair’s classically-informed filmic vocabulary. A Matter of Life and Death features (aside from its English Pan, and its Orphic overtones) a foppish French psychopomp with a barley-sugar-twist of a cane that may glance at Hermes’ caduceus, and an otherworldly trial in an oversize courtroom which owes a scenic debt to both the Areopagus and the Theatre of Dionysus. In The Red Shoes (1948) music for an opera based on Cupid and Psyche is a recurring aural motif. The deliberate cultivation of suggestive allusions to the ancient past, which nevertheless remain ambiguous enough to allow for rapid disavowal, is a characteristic strategy throughout this period. Powell’s autobiography reveals his acute, exasperated awareness of a critical community only too ready to condemn The Archers for their

16 In Theocritus’ first Idyll the dying lover Daphnis cedes his pipe to Pan; Powell’s offhand allusion perhaps connects this figure with Peter who, before military service, was a poet.

17 The film’s classicising fantasy is doubly disavowed by an opening ‘crawl’ which insists its otherworldly spaces exist ‘only in the mind of a young airman whose life and imagination have been violently shaped by war’.

18 Powell’s claim to have added the scene’s classical trappings on his own initiative (Powell 2000, 542-3) highlights the challenge of untangling artistic intent and responsibility in a filmmaking relationship marked by an unusual degree of collaborative creativity, and mutual trust – but also characterised by periodic outbursts of autonomous decision-making from both partners.

19 As discussed by Moor 2005, 211-13.
(supposed) pretensions, ‘ransacking the classics and *The Oxford Book of Poetry*’ in a ‘dangerously arty’ fashion.\(^{20}\) In response, Powell and Pressburger seem to have relished composing images and scenes which may be read as referring to ancient myth, literature, and iconography, but whose classical undercurrents might equally be disclaimed by a pair of filmmakers recurrently under pressure to curb their anti-realist exuberance. After all, an unclothed child playing a pipe on a beach might always be a North Devon local, innocent of symbolic associations, enjoying a mild summer.

Although the two films may seem deeply dissimilar, *A Matter of Life and Death* shares some key concerns with *The Small Back Room*. Moor argues that the two ‘are drawn together by a shared focus on the after-effects of conflict or damage’, identifying a common commitment to exploring the recovery and social reintegration of a damaged hero: ‘They each set out to repair their man’.\(^{21}\) According to Moor’s perceptive analysis, both films ‘mark out regimes which are “beyond” reality’, locations where their protagonists’ profoundest anxieties can be faced and overcome, before ultimately establishing ‘healthily reintegrated solutions for their very different heroes’.\(^{22}\) Moor reads the ‘noir-Expressionist vein’ of *The Small Back Room* as giving access to Sammy’s tormented psyche,\(^{23}\) most infamously in a sequence in which the protagonist’s physical pain, combined with intense emotional isolation, drives the film beyond scenic realism into a nightmare realm of ticking clocks and monstrously oversized whisky bottles. By contrast, Moor argues, the open-air location of the film’s tense final sequence, during which Sammy successfully defuses the explosive device which has been baffling military experts, represents a return to the ‘documentary style of the

\(^{20}\) Powell 1992, 142.

\(^{21}\) Moor 2005, 135.

\(^{22}\) Moor 2005, 139.

\(^{23}\) Moor 2005, 139.
war film’, formally signifying masculine health and heroic achievement. For Moor, the ‘magic spaces’ of *A Matter of Life and Death* and *The Small Back Room* are always symptomatic of their protagonists’ dangerously ‘disintegrated’ states. However, the present chapter’s reading of *The Small Back Room* re-focuses this aspect of Moor’s analysis, interpreting the open-air landscape of Chesil Bank as another of Powell and Pressburger’s ‘magical spaces’, a zone within which mythically-inflected models of friendship and heroism are evoked in order to facilitate Sammy’s healing.

The film’s positive outcome is The Archers’ innovation. On paper, Sammy manages to defuse the device only with the aid of the (aptly named) Lieutenant-Colonel Strang, whose muscular prowess leaves the novel’s self-sabotaging protagonist despairing at his own inadequacy. In Powell and Pressburger’s adaptation, Sammy doggedly completes the task for himself, despite his disability, an achievement which allows him to feel a sense of equality and fellowship with the uniformed soldiers who witness his feat. Basking in this personal victory, which is also a public contribution to the war effort, Sammy triumphantly declares ‘I think I’ll go put my feet up’, a linguistic slip which ‘restores his symbolic two-footedness’ (as noted by Moor). An early draft version of the screenplay (in Powell’s handwriting) contains the direction:

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24 Moor 2005, 139.

25 Moor 2005, 136. In Moor’s argument, the Sammy Rice who approaches Chesil Bank is already well on his way to being healed (2005, 160-11).


27 Moor 2005, 162.

28 Moor 2005, 162.
He looks just like any happy man with two feet … No longer outside the world, but in it: no longer talking to a man in uniform, but with him, as an equal.

As Hentzi (2008) has noted, this divergence from Balchin’s original conclusion transforms Sammy’s narrative into a modern version of the myth of Philoctetes; injured, isolated, embittered, but restored to health and the company of his peers through his contribution to the successful conclusion of a long-running war, and through the ultimately redemptive friendship of another troubled hero.

As elsewhere in Powell and Pressburger’s works, the interplay between protagonist and location profoundly informs the nature of this transformative experience. Balchin’s denouement takes place on an anonymous sandy beach,29 but The Archers’ cinematic adaptation instead opts for the wide-skied, wave-washed environment of Chesil Bank. Moor observes that a ‘straightforward transfer’ of Balchin’s stated setting to film would have been possible, so this alteration ‘indicates the importance of geography to the film-makers’.30 In fact, this selection of ‘a liminal space, not entirely England’31 as the locale for Sammy’s climactic endeavour allows his struggle to transcend its immediate wartime setting.

Surrounded by sea, and almost an island, Chesil Bank is an apt analogue for Sophocles’ Lemnos. ‘I have always loved islands’ Powell reflects in his autobiography, recalling how in 1950 he shot a home-movie version of scenes from the Odyssey on an island owned by dancer/choreographer Léonide Massine, an island that was reputed to have been the home of

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30 Moor 2005, 158.

31 Moor 2005, 160.
Homer’s sirens.\textsuperscript{32} For both Powell and Pressburger, islands were frequently magical spaces, but the former was particularly prone to interpreting such landscapes in the light of ancient, heroic myth.\textsuperscript{33} With its temporally-fluid backdrop of waves and seabirds, and an anxiously watching chorus of service-men and -women, the cinematic space within which the film’s Sammy undertakes his heroic task is one in which war-drama realism becomes subtly infused with a sense of otherworldly, transformative potential.\textsuperscript{34}

In this sequence, this potential for cinematic slippage between modernity and the mythic is strongly associated with the figure of Captain Dick Stuart, the unlikely Herakles to Sammy Rice’s Philoctetes.\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, throughout \textit{The Small Back Room}, Stuart’s presence (or later, absence) is repeatedly associated with generic or tonal ambiguity. At first a shadowy figure with whom watchers share a disorientating taxi ride through rain-swept London, he quickly resolves himself into an undistinguished young officer, clumsily navigating the mysteries of the back offices where Professor Mair’s research section is housed. Noticeably less martial than the sergeant-major who greets him, with a tendency to be distracted by a pretty girl, this diffident officer (‘Well, sir, it’s a bit top secret, sir’) literally tumbles into

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Powell 1992, 116-7. Powell later prefaced \textit{Ill Met By Moonlight} (1957) with a quotation from the same epic.
\item \textsuperscript{33} For Pressburger islands more often figure as romanticised landscapes of desire, which may or may not be attained, as in \textit{I Know Where I’m Going!} (1945) which concerns a young woman’s failure to reach a Scottish island (and her intended husband), an instance of ‘the fate that shapes individual lives’ (Christie 1994, 52).
\item \textsuperscript{34} Throughout this discussion, all references are to the DVD version of the \textit{The Small Back Room} distributed by Optimum Classic in 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{35} On Herakles’ adventures in post-war cinema see Winkler 2007, 463-9 and Stafford 2012, 232-9.
\end{itemize}
Sammy’s shadowy world. This version of Stuart initially acts as the audience’s surrogate, blundering through an unfamiliar landscape. A young Michael Gough brings an edge of gauche, embarrassed comedy to these early scenes, gallantly failing to escort Susan home from Sammy’s flat (as Kathleen Byron drily points out, she already is home).

Yet there’s another quality to this figure, too, a taut energy that emerges as soon as he’s engaged in talking about his professional obsession; a new enemy weapon that’s killing civilians, primarily children, leaving no trace of its disguise or workings. This Captain Stuart is stiller, more assured and authoritative (he stands while Farrar sits in a low chair). He calculatingly tests Sammy’s credentials, throwing what appears to be a bomb across the sitting room. The men’s shared competence in distinguishing between real and fake explosives, their common skill in handling lethal weapons, and the clear pleasure they draw from this dangerous fooling, all recall the role played by the totemic bow (iconic of the wounded protagonist’s friendship with Herakles, and their shared heroic status) in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes.* In knowledge and nerve, this scene makes clear, Stuart and Sammy are equals. And Stuart’s discomfiture in London (‘I’d sooner get out of town’ he responds to Farrar’s offer of a night on the sofa) prepares the ground for future encounters beyond the sophisticated tensions of the blacked-out city.

The young officer’s unease within modern, urban spaces is a creation of the film. In Balchin’s novel, readers observe him pursuing his work interviewing possible witnesses to

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36 If *The Small Back Room* is read in relation to the myths of Herakles, this detail displaces his child-slaughter onto the wartime enemy (‘Jerry has a lovely mind’ Gough bitterly comments), while allowing Stuart to retain the tragic hero’s kindly concern for the young. On Herakles as maddened child-killer in Euripides’ *Herakles,* see Stafford 2012, 90-91.

37 For a symbolic reading of Philoctetes’ bow in connection with the recovery processes of modern-day veterans, see Sherman (2014).
explosions in a ‘slummy’ provincial house and a smart new hospital.\textsuperscript{38} However, the next time Stuart appears onscreen it is in neither of these locations.\textsuperscript{39} Instead, an urgent phone call summons Sammy to Bala, a small town in Gwynneth (North Wales) which shares its name with a large and beautiful lake. The choice of a waterside location for this sequence makes little logical sense: Balchin’s newly-built hospital offers a more likely refuge for a dying field-gunner (the mystery weapon’s most recent victim) than a lonely military tent pitched on a mountainside. Here, as elsewhere in Powell’s cinematography, the symbolic resonance of a given landscape outweighs realism or plausibility. In this instance, the wild Welsh setting means that in order to reach Stuart Sammy has to cross a noisy, fast-flowing stream, rough enough to require the assistance of a rope handrail. In preceding location shots, Farrar (Wellington boots added to his usual civilian wardrobe) pointedly limps, reminding watchers of Sammy’s amputated foot, and yet he makes the risky-looking crossing as easily as his soldier guide. Wild water seems to be exercising a positive influence on an injury which, in urban settings, has been a source of physical and psychic torment.

Against this backdrop, bulked out by a military overcoat,\textsuperscript{40} Stuart too seems drastically unlike the callow figure he cut in the film’s opening moments. Powell and Pressburger’s adaptation reduces the age of the dying boy, which intensifies the effect. Gough (in his early thirties at the time the film was made) suddenly appears aeons older than the nineteen-year-old he exhaustedly watches over. The choices he faces are desperately adult, too, agonising over the possible benefit of interrogating a half-dead boy in the hope of extracting useful information about the mystery device. Making his decision, Gough’s light vocal tones deepen, his face transformed into a rictus of tight-lipped determination – almost,\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{itemize}
\item Balchin 2000, 45 and 96.
\item A version of the former was filmed, but didn’t survive editing (Powell 1992, 13-5).
\item On Herakles as a strong-man in twentieth-century cinema, see Stafford 2012, 232-6.
\end{itemize}
perhaps, a tragic mask. Much of this scene comes directly from Balchin’s novel, in which Sammy reflects that ‘I was beginning to be worried about Stuart […] it struck me that the job had to be settled soon, or it was going to do him no good at all’. Following the boy’s death, Sammy also observes how ‘Stuart’s face broke in a queer way’, his personal sympathy in acute tension with the professional military rigour demanded by his wartime role.

Both the novel and the film share a sense of Stuart being damaged, perhaps irreparably, by the inhuman demands of his military responsibility; another point of contact between the twentieth-century soldier and the ancient Herakles. The myths associated with the latter are many, and frequently self-contradictory; an uneasy admixture of muscular monster-slaying, military adventure, madness, and family-slaughter. Several ancient narratives, most famously Euripides’ tragedy *Herakles*, depict the larger-than-life hero as struggling (and failing) to contain his warrior persona within domestic settings, with the indiscriminate violence of his public feats spilling over into private life, putting at risk his friends and family. In Athenian tragedy, these contradictions are finally resolved in the hero’s self-immolation and subsequent apotheosis. For Balchin’s Captain Stuart no such supernatural resolution is available. However, *The Small Back Room* does create a moment

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41 Balchin 2000, 102.

43 This aspect of the Herakles myth has been explored by a variety of artists and scholars in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, especially in relation to the traumatic impact of military service upon modern soldiers. See, for example, Riley 2004 and 2008, chapters 9 and 10; Cohen and Starks 2013; Konstan 2014, 4-6; Rabinowitz 2014, 195-6; Harrop 2015; Rowland 2017, chapter 6.

44 According to ancient myth, which Sophocles reiterates, Philoctetes inherits Herakles’ bow as a reward for lighting of the still-living hero’s funeral pyre.
its source-novel lacks, as Sammy and Stuart stand side by side in a pre-modern landscape of hills and moorland, watching a sheet of white water tumbling down a cliff-face, and feeding the stream below. Both men are turned away from the camera. They are peers, damaged comrades, bound together in wordless solidarity, their sacrifices and sufferings re-located from a twentieth-century war to a quasi-mythic realm of ageless male stoicism and friendship.

Heroic male friendship is a recurring trope in Michael Powell’s accounts of his own career. The 1937 film The Edge of the World offers an early example of what would become a personal mythos for the director; a story of male daring and endurance set against the rugged landscape of a remote Shetland island. In a 1938 account of this project (200,000 Feet on Foula, later reissued as The Edge of the World) Powell enthusiastically mythologises both the island of Foula and the almost exclusively male cast and crew who spent a summer struggling amid and against its wild, sea- and storm-lashed landscapes. These collaborators, many of whom would go on to become part of The Archers’ regular rollcall of artists and craftsmen, are celebrated in explicitly mythic terms, with chief of construction Syd Streeter ‘embarking on a set of labours that would make Hercules look like a sissy’ and dismissing

45 The question of whether Sammy Rice was ever a serving soldier, and whether his injury was the result of such service, is never settled by either Balchin, or Powell and Pressburger. Some viewers of the film have assumed that Sammy was wounded in action (e.g. Moor 2005, 157), and The Archers’ adaptation does not rule out this possibility. The novel begins with the assertion that: ‘In 1928 my foot was hurting all the time, so they took it off and gave me an aluminium one that only hurt about three-quarters of the time.’ (Balchin 2000, 5).


47 Powell 1990, 77.
naysayers ‘in the Homeric manner’,\(^{48}\) while John Seabourne (chief production assistant) ‘fought like a hero’ against chronic illness,\(^{49}\) all the while telling tall tales of army life whose protagonists came to achieve equal status with ‘Heroes of antiquity’.\(^{50}\) For Powell, tackling his first solo, full-length film, the rough living and camaraderie of Foula represented an epitome of masculine struggle and excellence, played out against the endless roar of the Atlantic Ocean, and documented by the young director in terms which explicitly recall his infant enthusiasm for ‘Greek Smiffs’, especially the ‘superhuman tasks accomplished by their heroes, and their stoicism’.\(^{51}\) In Powell’s subsequent films, the combination of masculine camaraderie and wild water often signals the director’s imaginative re-entry into a landscape which derives at least some of its contours from ancient myth.\(^{52}\)

If The Small Back Room’s Captain Stuart begins to become mythic on the hills above Bala, stoically struggling to contain a very Heraklean rupture between human sympathy and the demands of his warrior persona, the process reaches its zenith on Chesil Bank. Stuart’s final phone call reaches Sammy abandoned to the depths of despair and rage, so drunk that he struggles to answer the telephone, which has inexplicably become a mysterious, alien device in his fumbling hands. Trying to sober up quickly Sammy puts his head under a kitchen tap, in the process spilling his bottle of scotch down the sink. He staggers back to the telephone,

\(^{48}\) Powell 1990, 202.

\(^{49}\) Powell 1990, 84

\(^{50}\) Powell 1990, 82. The only woman to receive antique comparison was Frankie Reidy, Powell’s then girlfriend (and later wife), who played a small role in the film’s prologue, and who is compared to Thaïs (Powell 1990, 108).

\(^{51}\) Powell 2000, 40-1.

\(^{52}\) It is likely that a personal narrative of childhood hero-worship and loss also informed the emergence of this mythos. See Powell 2000, 77.
dripping wet, while the still-running tap provides an aural echo of the waters of Bala, eventually merging with the wild sounds of wind and ocean which precede a dissolve to a shot of Chesil Bank. The beach we see is empty of human presence, except for a single soldier, silhouetted against the sunlight, cloud, and waves. He is dressed in the military outfit of his period, and the stillness of his pose recalls the Tommy who, in *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), stands guard over a mythic England, as the hawk flown from a medieval pilgrim’s wrist becomes a modern-day fighter plane. This major exterior landscape of *The Small Back Room* is similarly invested with an otherworldly aura, though this time the effect is achieved through formal devices borrowed from Greek tragic dramaturgy.

While struggling with the shape of the script that would eventually become *The Battle of the River Plate* (1956), Emeric Pressburger suggested the use of narrative commentary, supplied by an American reporter, to sustain the film’s tension in its later stages. Powell enthusiastically embraced the idea, later remarking: ‘We now had that very necessary thing for an epic: a commentator, or chorus’. This choice is prefigured by *The Small Back Room*’s Chesil Bank sequence, which deploys contemporary figures in roles equivalent to the messengers and choruses of ancient tragedy. In the novel, Stuart’s terminal attempt to defuse bomb number one is relayed to Sammy via a series of written texts; he is handed research notebooks, a formal report, a scribbled personal letter, and finally an account of his friend’s last moments, verbatim snatches of his speech tangled up with the transcriber’s observations. On paper, the interplay between Stuart’s cheery self-commentary and the unemotive military reportage strikes a tragicomic note. On screen, however, the voicing of this last text signals an important shift in *The Small Back Room*’s strategies of representation.

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53 See Powell 1992, 7-9 and Moor 2005, 94-102 and 159-160.


55 Balchin 2000, 166-172.
In Powell and Pressburger’s adaptation, sections of Balchin’s prose are retained almost word-for-word, read back to a listening Sammy by the ATS corporal (Renée Asherson) who made the notes. Asherton relays the details of the events her character witnessed in an emotionally-charged performance, torn between concentration, repressed grief, and recollected amusement. Notebook in hand, she reads back ‘the things I saw, and things he said’, her un-transcribed shorthand providing the pretext for an extended speech which formally echoes those of ancient tragedy’s messengers.

The corporal’s public vocalisation of the fallen Stuart’s deeds and words translates his final moments into an extra-realist register of quasi-theatrical reportage. Her set-piece speech distances the film’s audience from the grisly reality of the young man’s death, while establishing the honour accorded to his self-sacrificial heroism by the little community of service-personnel gathered on the beach. Like the speeches of many of tragedy’s messengers, the corporal’s reading (underscored throughout by the roar of the sea) marks the passage of a living man into myth. In one young woman’s eyes, at least, the captain has been (to borrow a phrase from Balchin) ‘blown to glory’. And, as the corporal’s speech formally elevates the deceased Stuart to heroic status, his own reported words simultaneously take on some of the authority and potential of the ancient deus ex machina. Stuart’s post-mortem utterances prove efficacious, his puzzlement over an unusually long wire alerting Sammy to the deception which makes the mystery bomb so dangerous to handle. Like Dr. Reeves in A Matter of Life and Death, whose medical notes allow life-saving surgery to take place even though he has been killed in a motorcycle accident (oddly anticipatory of Cocteau’s 1949 Orphée), Stuart’s

56 Powell notes that, in his conception of the role, the corporal ‘had been in love with Stuart’ (Powell 1992, 11). This character, created by Powell and Pressburger, also recalls Deborah Kerr’s ‘Johnny’ Cannon in The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (1943).

57 Balchin 2000, 160.
words provide Sammy with the clue he needs to solve the problem of the second bomb, and so to take a place of honour among his male peers. According to Murphy, Dr. Reeves belongs to a group of men in Powell and Pressburger’s films who ‘who act like gods, though they still have fallible human attributes’.\(^{58}\) Dick Stuart is not named in Murphy’s pantheon, but the handling of his posthumous speech in *The Small Back Room*, and his ability to aid Sammy’s efforts from beyond the grave, both suggest that he may be one more of a series of enigmatic, uncannily powerful men who appear in The Archers’ works of the mid- to late-1940s. Like Philoctetes in Sophocles’ play, finally galvanised into effective action by the divine commands of Herakles *ex machina*, Sammy is drawn back into the common cause of the war effort through the intervention of a deceased hero-friend.

The words re-voiced by Asherson’s corporal also highlight the theatricality of the bomb-disposal process. In the novel, Sammy is taken aback by the number of personnel gathered near the beach, and the army’s demand for a detailed running commentary on every action taken, to be delivered to this anxious group of watchers and listeners via a portable telephone. For Stuart, the presence of this captive audience becomes a cue for levity, as (in phrases borrowed almost verbatim by The Archers’ film script) he comically re-frames his own performance as a sporting occasion.\(^{59}\)

Well, here we are at Wembley, it’s a lovely day with sun, and a slight breeze blowing from the pavilion end, the ground looks in beautiful condition, there must be quite 100,000 people here, the King hasn’t come yet.

\(^{58}\) Murphy 2005, 71.

\(^{59}\) Balchin 2000, 170.
Half convinced that he’s managed to make the device safe, he even begins to figure his
dangerous labour as a thrilling stage (or cinema) spectacle, announcing, ‘There will be
special matinees this week on Wednesdays and Fridays’. However, when translated into
filmic terms, this self-deprecating commentary serves to mark out the bomb-site as a space
beyond the everyday world. The presence of figures equivalent to the messenger and chorus
of ancient tragedy further contributes to the transformation of a real-world location into a
heightened, even theatrical space, where individual heroic endeavour is watched and
witnessed, lamented or celebrated, by a gathered community with a stake in the outcome.
Michelakis observes that landscapes in filmic versions of ancient drama ‘occupy the full
spectrum of modes between realism and allegory, actuality and symbolism’. The highly-
formalised mediation and reportage of Stuart’s last moments help to imbue the Small Back
Room’s sea-shore with a heightened sense of ritual performativity, so that a real-world
shooting location takes on some of the qualities of the ancient tragic stage. For the film’s
Sammy, Chesil Bank is both a mythically-resonant zone, surrounded by the wild water which
has earlier held out the promise of entry into a community of male peers, and a highly
theatrical testing-ground of his capacity for heroic achievement.

In this way, Powell and Pressburger’s adaptation of Balchin infuses the predominantly
realist aesthetic of the twentieth-century war film with a persistent sense of otherworldly
potential. His task completed, Sammy sprawls backwards across the pebbles, looking up at
the circling, crying shapes of gulls, in a screen-filling pose which recalls Peter Carter’s

60 Balchin 2000, 172.
61 The soldiers and nurses who gather to witness Peter’s heavenly trial in A Matter of Life and
Death are comparably described by Jannou as taking on ‘some of the functions of the
classical Greek chorus’ (Jannou 2004, 201).
62 Michelakis 2013, 191.
awakening on another mythically resonant sea-shore. Watching his own flight of sea-birds, 
Balchin’s Sammy remembers the superstition that ‘they were supposed to be the souls of 
dead sailors’, so this shot may intimate the momentary, watchful presence of departed 
wARRIORS, in addition to Sammy’s on-screen audience of modern service personnel. For 
Sammy Rice, as for Peter Carter, this is a moment out-of-time, in an earthly landscape 
temporarily lit with mythical light. The hero of *A Matter of Life and Death* walks up the 
beach, scattering bits of his military kit as he goes, cheerfully abandoning his wartime 
persona in expectation of another existence yet to be discovered. The protagonist of *The 
Small Back Room* will also walk away from the sea-shore into a different life, though in his 
case he travels towards an active role within a militarised community. As Sammy’s train 
pulls away from the station, Strang (Anthony Bushell) formally salutes, signifying that 
Sammy has finally achieved the recognition and fellowship he has lacked. Moments later, 
Colonel Holland (Leslie Banks) will confirm Sammy’s reintegration into masculine, wartime 
society, offering him a post heading a new research section for which ‘you’ll have to be in 
uniform’, adding ‘we’ll make you a major or something’. Sammy’s achievement on Chesil 
Bank is the culmination of a transformative process which began among the streams and 
waterfalls of Bala, in which the companionship and post-mortem example of a hero-friend 
allow an isolated, wounded figure to achieve his thwarted potential, playing a vital and 
publicly acknowledged role in a triumphant war-effort.

The question of how far *The Small Back Room* intentionally echoes the ancient myth 
of Philoctetes remains an open, and a complex, one. The film is unusual insofar as its subject-
matter was first suggested by Powell, initially meeting resistance from Pressburger (the 
partnership’s primary writer), who found it ‘a cold, brittle story’. It is probably the latter’s 

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64 Macdonald 1994, 300.
trademark romanticism which transfigures Balchin’s original plot ‘into the story of a damaged psyche that is healed’,65 while it is more likely to be Powell’s long-term enthusiasm for rugged, waterside landscapes, and his tendency to mythologise the struggles of the men who traverse such territories, which lends the completed film its subtext of heroic, masculine solidarity, framed against a series of wild, liminal spaces. The fact that these two sets of preoccupations combine, in *The Small Back Room*, to produce a film drama which bears an uncanny resemblance to the story of Philoctetes may be entirely coincidental. Alternatively, this outcome may have been actively aimed at by one or other of The Archers, perhaps (as with Powell’s independently-realised north-Devon idyll) without the explicit knowledge of their creative partner. As Michelakis remarks, ‘Which films can be related to Greek tragedy and in what ways is neither self-evident nor fixed’,66 and it is entirely possible either Powell or Pressburger (or both) may have had Sophocles’ play, or nursery versions of heroic ancient myths, in their minds as they radically re-shaped the conclusion of Sammy Rice’s story. Certainly, the characters, relationships, and therapeutic outcome of *The Small Back Room* all strongly recall the Philoctetes myth, while the quasi-theatrical framing of the film’s climactic sequence suggests the importance of classical antecedents to the film’s cultivation of a subtly extra-realist aesthetic.

However, as this chapter has demonstrated, even where classical models directly inform The Archers’ cinematic works, a recurring strategy of formal ambivalence, ironic distancing, and playful disavowal makes direct lines of influence difficult to trace. Grafting a heroic, classicising ending onto a downbeat modern novel, Powell and Pressburger make no overt gesture towards Greek myth or Sophoclean tragedy, ensuring that the themes of heroic friendship, supernatural intervention, and miraculous healing evoked in their twentieth-

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65 Macdonald 1994, 300.

66 Michelakis 2013, 41.
century version of the Philoctetes story remain a mutedly resonant undercurrent within the film. Silk interprets ancient theatre’s Herakles as dwelling on ‘the margins between human and divine; he occupies the no-man’s-land that is also no-god’s land; he is a marginal, transitional or, better, _interstitial_ figure’ (1985, 6). It’s fitting, then, that throughout _The Small Back Room_ the film’s improbable Herakles, by turns boyish and ancient, moving unpredictably between comic and heroic registers, appears (or is evoked) at moments of generic instability, when an ostensibly realist wartime thriller subtly invokes mythic or tragic modes. In this sense, The Archers’ Captain Stuart is a deeply Heraklean figure, capable of being soldier, lover, fool, mentor, comrade, and even supernatural helper, as a given narrative demands. Drawing the film’s Philoctetes away from modern, urban despair into landscapes of wild water and potential heroic transformation, then speaking from beyond the grave to facilitate his wounded comrade’s (metaphoric) healing, Stuart is simultaneously an otherworldly figure and an unassuming exemplar of his own generation’s understated heroism. He also, perhaps, epitomises the adept wariness with which Powell and Pressburger’s films of the later 1940s simultaneously evoke and disavow their classical influences.

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67 For a discussion of the tragic Herakles see Stafford 2012 (79-103), and for his appearances in comedy and satyr plays (104–17).
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