

BOOK REVIEW

Classical Myth and Film in the New Millenium. By PATRICIA SALZMAN-MITCHELL And JEAN ALVARES. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xviii + 413. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-190-20416-7.

Classical Myth and Film in the New Millenium is a welcome addition for a topic that has been variously discussed since Jon Solomon's seminal work *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (1978/ 2001) treating both myth and history. Oxford University Press's textbook *Classical Mythology*¹ presents an overview of myth and film along with other reception materials, but provides no detailed analysis. *Now Playing: Learning Mythology Through Film*² provides short analyses, looking at films through 2010. *Classical Myth and Film in the New Millenium* fills a niche with detailed analyses for thirteen films from 2000–2014.

A lengthy introduction presents the authors' purpose, target audience, and focus. Their purpose is to "... offer thoughtful interpretations of the myths and myth patterns" (1). The target audience is "... college instructors and students, ... scholars, a broad readership of myth and movie lovers." (1) The focus is on the "... film's (sic) mythic elements and interplay..." without going into depth concerning cinematography (p. 8). Included is an excellent discussion of previous works on myth and cinema (9–12), and an overview of concepts the authors propose to use in analysis (12–28): myth theories, archetype, psychology, gender, and Joseph Campbell's hero career components. A list of References ends the introduction, and is found at the end of each chapter. The book ends with an appendix for further reading, credits and an index.

Five Parts divide the body, each with an introduction and discussion questions to encourage readers "... to explore the field further ..." (2). Each of the twelve chapters presents certain topics about the films including media reception and awards, if any. Guiding the reader is information about directors, and boxes for Plot Summary, Key Terms and Filmography. Copious footnotes correspond to the vast amount of material in each chapter. Each chapter has frequent cross-references to films discussed in other chapters. Each chapter concludes with a

¹ 2015, Mark Morford, Robert J. Lenardon and Michael Sham. Ch. 28 "Classical Mythology in Music, Dance and Film." 732–780.

² Michael Sham 2nd edition. Oxford. 2016.

summation on how the film(s) fit into the new millenium. All films concern some aspect of a hero working through physical or psychological difficulties.

Varying amounts of information supplement film analysis. For *Hercules* (2014)³ and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2002), the authors include longer backgrounds. For *Hercules*, the authors note "... [t]he ... tradition is vaster and more complex than that of all our other heroes put together, and thus a more extensive presentation of background information..." was deemed necessary for reader appreciation (p.104). An entire sub-section on the Spanish Civil War (190–192) for *Pan's Labyrinth* helps readers understand the film's historical setting. Certain films, have information about previous films on the topic, e.g. 'peplum' films for *Hercules* (109–116); versions of the Medea story for *Such is Life* (223–228).

Part I: *Troy* (2004) and *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000) discuss two Homeric-inspired works presenting a form of 'mythologization' of history, as is also found in *Pan's Labyrinth*. *Troy* "... recalls [current] themes of international aggression ..." (62); *O Brother* provides a view of racist ideology and violence in the United States in the film's Depression-era setting, as an allusion to modern times (37).

Part II: *Hercules* (2014), *Clash of the Titans* (2010) / *Wrath of the Titans* (2012) and *Immortals* (2011) show the hero stuggling against oppressive overlords as can be seen in *Troy*, *The Hunger Games* and *Percy Jackson* (45). Hercules' nephew Iolaus (called "cousin" in some places, 100, 103) engages in a form of myth-making by recounting stories of Hercules' previous adventures. The gods are insignificant in *Hercules*, but they are the primary focus in *Clash/ Wrath*, and *Immortals*. While Theseus in *Immortals* seeks to restore the position of the gods in the human world, Perseus in *Clash* and *Wrath* seeks to undermine the gods' power in preference to humans, thus establishing a new world order. A similar struggle to establish a new world order is also seen in *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Harry Potter*, and *Hunger Games* (216).

Part III: *Pan's Labyrinth* (2002); *Such is Life* (2000) illustrate the struggles of women against oppressive men, but in different contexts. The heroine in *Pan's Labyrinth*, Ofelia, is a girl on the brink of puberty, and the authors discuss this in connection with fertility as found in the story of Persephone in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (204–206). Thus, the film is a 'coming of age' story parallel to *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, *Katniss Everdeen* (*Hunger Games*), *Lars* (*Lars and the Real Girl*) and *Calvin* (*Ruby Sparks*). In *Such is Life*, based on Seneca's *Medea*, Julia is a

³ Dwayne Johnson as Hercules. Another film with the same title appeared in 2014.

grown woman suffering like her ancient counterpart, Medea. While *Pan's Labyrinth* is set in 1944 Spain, *Such is Life* is set in contemporary Mexico. While Ofelia dies to save the life of her baby brother against her ruthless step-father, Julia, like Medea, kills her children to revenge herself on the children's father.

Part IV: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002), *The Hunger Games* (2011) and *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: the Lightning Thief* (2010) are based on serialized young-adult novels. The authors refer to other novels in each series or films based on them. The mythological elements in *Percy Jackson* are obvious but not always apparent in *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*; the authors point out those elements and how they fit in with the narratives.

Part V: *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007) and *Ruby Sparks* (2012) are versions of Ovid's Pygmalion because the heroes, Lars and Calvin, eventually end up with the girls of their fantasies. The authors show how Calvin in *Ruby Sparks* also aligns with the myth of Narcissus as the girl he creates in his writing is a reflection of himself (365–370). Both heroes struggle to escape from their self-imposed isolation which is mediated by a 'shamanistic' psychologist.

This book provides useful insights but there are problems; here are a few: first, each chapter has two to four small monochrome film stills. Unfortunately, most are so dark that it is difficult to see what the authors intend. Second: spelling: Perseus' nemesis in *Clash of the Titans* (2010) is at times referred to as Acrisius (see 131, 138) and correctly as Acrisius (138). Third, it is difficult to find the films' dates quickly as they are presented only in the Part titles before the chapters.

Despite these infelicities, the book has much to offer someone willing to plumb the depths. As the book stands now, it is an excellent resource for instructors of myth or myth and film. Despite the authors' intention of a target audience as college students, the density and vast quantity of information do not make the book attractive for the average college student. It might well be used as optional reading in a Reserved section of a university library.

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