BEYOND THE PROTAGONIST:
SUPPORTING CHARACTERS IN BIG SCREEN GREECE AND ROME

Virtual Conference – April 24-25, 2026

Under the Aegis of the Research Network EuGeStA

Organized by Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos (Saint Joseph's University, USA)

Brief Conference Description

The protagonists of films set in ancient Greece and Rome have traditionally garnered the lion's share of academic interest. Yet costume dramas anchored in the classical past are also populated by a legion of supporting characters – secondary and tertiary figures – whose roles, though often small in terms of screen time, are far-reaching in significance. These characters enrich narratives through subplots, contribute to the films' claims of authenticity by depicting gender and social hierarchies, and illuminate core themes by providing a contrasting backdrop to the protagonist's external struggles and internal conflicts. Although their depiction is characterized by paucity in details and they often exit the screen with no diegetic closure, supporting roles offer a valuable lens through which to reassess the hero/heroine and the broader cultural issues the film seeks to explore. This two-day conference brings together thirteen papers devoted to close readings of such figures across individual films and wider cinematic traditions, with gender as the central focus in line with EuGeStA's interests, alongside attention to other key aspects of filmmaking, such as scripting, cinematography, editing, production design, stardom, and marketing.

FRIDAY, APRIL 24

Session 1

11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. (EDT); 10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. (CDT); 6:00 – 7:30 p.m. (Athens)

The Woman behind (the) Caesar: Wives, Mothers, and the Limits of Female Power

Chair: Sophia Papaioannou (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece)

Paper 1: "How Foolish Do Your Fears Seem Now, Calpurnia!": Depicting and Dismissing Caesar's Wife on Screen – Christopher McDonough (The University of the South, USA)

This paper examines how film adaptations of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* dramatize the gendered power dynamics surrounding Calpurnia's prophetic dream and its dismissal by Caesar and Decius Brutus. In Shakespeare's text, Calpurnia's private, emotional warning is overwritten by Decius' public, politicized rhetoric – a moment that encapsulates the broader marginalization of feminine insight in favor of masculine persuasion.

Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953) features Greer Garson as Calpurnia and John Hoyt as Decius, depicting a refined yet potent performance of masculine rhetorical authority. Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's *Cesare Deve Morire* (2012), by contrast, reimagines the

scene within Rome's all-male Rebibbia Prison, where Decius Brutus (Juan Dario Bonetti) fails to persuade a resistant Caesar (Giovanni Arcuri), disrupting the Shakespearean balance of power. The performance collapses into confrontation, revealing the limits of rhetorical masculinity in a setting where authority is rooted in survival, not eloquence.

The paper also considers portrayals of Caesar's wife by Gwen Watford in *Cleopatra* (1963) and by Haydn Gwynne in HBO's *Rome* (2005), exploring how the disregarded voice of caution is rendered or reimagined across decades of screen adaptation. These representations become a lens through which to interrogate the politics of gender, persuasion, and performance in Shakespeare's Rome and its cinematic afterlives.

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Tice, T. N. 2010. "Calphurnia's Dream and Communication with the Audience in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*." In *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar* (New Edition), ed. H. Bloom. New York. 5-18.

<u>Paper 2:</u> "Sempre la Mamma": Tacitus' Agrippina And Gloria Swanson's Big Screen Legacy in *Mio Figlio Nerone* (1956) – Christos Argyropoulos (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece)

Agrippina, mother of Nero, has attracted the interest of Italian filmmakers and audiences since the early years of cinema, featuring in silent adaptations of Tacitus' *Annales* by Enrico Guazzoni (*Agrippina*, 1911) and Mario Caserini (*Nerone e Agrippina*, 1913). The first Italian sound film to depict her life and crimes is Steno's comedy *Mio Figlio Nerone* (1956) (Pucci 2007: 165). Centered on a caricatured Nero (Alberto Sordi), the film casts Agrippina (Gloria Swanson) as a supporting character whose arrival at her son's villa initiates the narrative, as she urges him to embrace his imperial and military responsibilities. I argue that Agrippina's role in the Italian production is constructed through a dialogue not only with Tacitus' *Annales* (Books 12–14) but also with Swanson's established screen persona as an American film star.

The film's opening shots explicitly evoke Tacitus' historiography, presenting the narrative as it unfolds directly from the pages of the *Annales*. In keeping with Tacitean characterization, Steno's Agrippina is politically active and manipulative, relying on court intrigue and poison to eliminate her rivals. She is also portrayed as a stereotypical *dux femina*, personally commanding a legion of German soldiers (Ginsburg 2006: 112–15). Both the film and Tacitus emphasize her oppressive maternal authority over Nero, who seeks to escape her control through attempts on her life (Barrett 1996: 214–30).

This paper further situates Agrippina within Swanson's broader career trajectory. The role aligns with Swanson's long-cultivated screen image, shaped since the silent era through portrayals of powerful, aristocratic women who are marked by luxury, independence, and erotic rivalry (Hudson and Lee 1970: 105–259; Basinger 1999: 209–10). Steno's Agrippina conforms to this pattern as an authoritative, magnificently adorned matron who competes with Poppaea (Brigitte Bardot) for Nero's affection. Particular attention is paid to parallels with Swanson's

performance as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Both figures are aging Grandes Dames, characterized by excessive splendor yet facing declining power, clinging to male protagonists and displaced by younger female rivals. By tracing these connections, I demonstrate how Tacitus' Agrippina is filtered through the lens of Hollywood stardom in postwar Italian cinema.

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Barrett, A. A. 1996. *Agrippina: Sister of Caligula, Wife of Claudius, Mother of Nero*. London.
Basinger, J. 1999. *Silent Stars.* New York.
Ginsburg, J. 2006. *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire*. Oxford.
Hudson, G. and Lee, R. 1970. *Gloria Swanson*. Cranbury, NJ and London.
Pucci, G. 2007. "Agrippina sullo schermo." *Annali Online di Ferrara* 2: 164-176.

Session 2

2:00 – 4:00 p.m. (EDT); 3:00 – 5:00 p.m. (Belo Horizonte); 9:00 – 11:00 p.m. (Athens); 6:00 – 8:00 a.m. (Saturday, Auckland)

Gigolos, Cuckolds, Bullies: Supporting Male Characters in Big Screen Adaptations of Greek Tragedy

Chair: Maria Cecília de Miranda N. Coelho (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil)

Paper 3: Absent on Stage, Present on Screen: Reimagining Aegisthus in Cacoyannis' *Electra* – Kaiti Diamantakou (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece)

In a stark departure from the thematically related tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides deliberately omits Aegisthus from the *dramatis personae* of his *Electra* (Bakogianni 2011: 32-64). Rather than appearing on stage, Aegisthus is reduced to a narrative figure verbally reconstructed through mediated, and potentially unreliable, accounts. The Euripidean Aegisthus is killed by Orestes offstage and enters the visual field of the Athenian audience only as a corpse, whether intact or even decapitated (Diamantakou 2025: 203-230).

Two and a half millennia later, this backstage phantom is revived on screen in Michael Cacoyannis' *Electra* (1962), a film that oscillates between "adaptation" and "version" according to Hardwick's typology (2003: 9). Among the many departures from its ancient source text – including major omissions, additions, condensations, transpositions, and the narrativization of the choral parts – the rebirth of Aegisthus stands out as one of the film's most striking diegetic reconfigurations. Through Cacoyannis' lens, Aegisthus emerges as a flesh-and-blood figure, with striking, albeit limited, verbal presence: he is active across multiple scenes and endowed with an arrogant physicality and "brutal vitality," exerting a simultaneously repulsive and magnetic force upon his future avengers, Orestes and Electra (Karalis 2023: 154).

By comparing the screenplay (housed at the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation) to the theatrical release, this paper traces the cinematic creation of this supporting character, a process that both enacts a clear-cut demonization of the murderous couple, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus,

and substantially curtails the ambiguity that characterizes the Euripidean text (MacKinnon 2016: 489). Building on film theory (Dyer 1998: 9-20), the paper further situates the case study within its broader artistic context, examining the conditions of production and reception that shaped Cacoyannis' aesthetic choices. These forces, on the one hand, animate Aegisthus by granting him corporeal and narrative presence and, on the other, foreground the specific performer selected by Cacoyannis in his combined roles as screenwriter, director, and casting director. Phoebus Razis (1928-2006), a cosmopolitan Greek charmer with limited acting experience and no subsequent cinematic career, emerges as a striking example of star construction without longevity (Valverde García 2025: 141-147). This brief "shooting star" nonetheless contributed to the film's international success and assisted Cacoyannis in bringing tragedy to mass audiences through "a hybrid style that was designed to be both mainstream and avant-garde" (Bakogianni 2013: 209).

The invention of this supporting role, together with the discovery of its actor, produced a rare and fleeting convergence – a moment of cinematic permanence, even at the cost of eclipsing Euripides himself.

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Diamantakou, K. 2025. Αρχαίο Ελληνικό Θέατρο: Στιχομυθίες Κειμένων [*Ancient Greek Theater: Stichomythies of Texts*.] Athens.

Dyer, R. 1998. *Stars*. Supplementary Chapter by Paul McDonald. London.

Hardwick, L. 2003. *Reception Studies*. Oxford.

Karalis, V. [2012] 2023. *A History of Greek Cinema.* Trans. A. Dellis. Athens.

MacKinnon, K. 2016. "Filmed Tragedy." In *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama*, ed. B. van Zyl Smit. Hoboken, NJ. 486-505.

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<u>Paper 4:</u> Creon and Toxic Masculinity in Auteur Cinema: Pasolini, von Trier, Ripstein – Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (Montclair State University, USA)

This paper contributes to the conference theme by examining the depiction of Creon as an embodiment of patriarchal authority in auteur adaptations of the Medea myth. Across three different cinematic reimaginings – Pasolini, von Trier, and Ripstein – Creon emerges as a paradigmatic representative of hegemonic masculinity: an overconfident ruler whose power depends upon the regulation of women's mobility, speech, and belonging, and whose efforts to discipline Medea ultimately prove self-destructive.

Pasolini's widely acclaimed *Medea* (1969) intensifies the myth's overtones of otherness by presenting Creon as the autocratic and wealthy king of Corinth, secure in his power yet blind – through ignorance and narcissistic certainty – to Medea's intellectual and strategic superiority. In Lars von Trier's made-for-TV Danish *Medea* (1988), based on Carl Theodor Dreyer's adaptation of Euripides, the story unfolds in a mist-laden, oneiric Iron Age landscape. Here,

Creon is driven by political ambition: seeking alliance with the heroic Jason, he offers his daughter as a dynastic prize, reducing her to an instrument of masculine power-sharing. Though occupying a supporting role, Creon functions as the catalyst that initiates exile, violence, and the tragic chain culminating in his own death through Medea's poisoned gifts. Arturo Ripstein's millennial version, set in an impoverished Mexico City tenement around 2000, introduces "La Marrana" ("the sow," a feminizing name with a double entendre), the building manager and father of Raquel, whom Nico (Julia's disgraced boxer husband) plans to marry. Ruling the *vecindario* as a parody of the ancient *tyrannos*, La Marrana exposes masculine authority as both grotesque and fragile, staged through domestic banality rather than heroic grandeur.

Together, these three Creons reenact the classical king's quasi-Oedipal attachment to his daughter and his obsessive investment in control through expulsion. These films, thus, reveal the paradox of toxic patriarchal power: the more aggressively Creon seeks to exile the foreign woman who threatens masculine order, the more he brings about catastrophe for himself and those around him.

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Ryan, C.M. 1999. "Salvaging the Sacred: Female Subjectivity in Pasolini's Medea." *Italica* 76.2: 193-204.

<u>Paper 5:</u> Caught between Ambition and Vulnerability: Menelaus in Cacoyannis' *The Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia* – Anastasia Bakogianni (Massey University, New Zealand)

Menelaus features in cinematic adaptations of two of Euripides' tragedies by Michael Cacoyannis: *The Trojan Women* (1971) and *Iphigenia* (1977). As in the ancient source texts, the King of Sparta is a supporting character for a more famous cast that includes his wife Helen, Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, and his older brother Agamemnon. But in both films Menelaus plays a pivotal role that rewards juxtaposition. In *The Trojan Women*, chronologically the later of the two films, he is an older man who has fought for ten years at Troy. This is supposed to be his moment of triumph, but he is easily outmaneuvered by two women, Hecuba

and Helen. And while he might agree with Hecuba that Helen should be punished, his actions testify to how easily he falls under his wife's spell again. In *Iphigenia*, the last film of the trilogy to be released but set before the war begins, Menelaus is a young, ambitious king who holds sway over his vacillating brother. He and Odysseus help push Agamemnon into agreeing to sacrifice his daughter.

Menelaus might be a supporting character, but in both of Cacoyannis' cinematic receptions his decisions impact the other characters' fates. In *The Trojan Women*, it is his weakness for Helen that causes him to act unjustly, while in *Iphigenia* his political savvy and ability to persuade his brother to kill his own daughter ultimately doom his niece and later on, his brother, too (Bakogianni 2013: 225-49). Cacoyannis' two portrayals of Menelaus offer audiences two contrasting but complementary takes on what we today commonly refer to as toxic masculinity (Racette-Campbell and McMaster 2023). The weak and easily manipulated old Menelaus has the power to decide the women's fates and his arrogant assertion of his claim as victor forces both Hecuba and Helen to perform for him. In *Iphigenia*, the younger version of the character is more forceful and manipulative, using his brother for his own gain. But in both films, as this paper will illustrate, the character testifies to the destructive nature of small men with petty pretensions of power and the damage they cause.

Select Bibliography

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Session 3

5:00 – 6: 30 p.m. (EDT); 10:00 – 11:30 p.m. (Lisbon); 7:00 – 8:30 a.m. (Saturday, Melbourne)

The Hero's Brother-in-Arms: Male Bonding in Cinematic Retellings of Greek Epic

Chair: Walter D. Penrose, Jr. (San Diego State University, USA)

Paper 6: Screening Patroclus – Nuno Simões Rodrigues (University of Lisbon, Portugal)

Patroclus – crucial to the narrative structure of the *Iliad* – has typically been portrayed as a secondary figure in cinematic and televisual adaptations of the myth of the Trojan War. This topic has been partially addressed by Krass (2013), Blume (2015), and Sinha (2017), although their approaches tend to focus either on individual films or on broader considerations encompassing multiple forms of popular culture. The cinematic representations of Patroclus, whose character has been subjected to a wide range of philological interpretations, ranging from his depiction as a mere military *hetairos* of Achilles to that of an erotically charged lover, reflect corresponding literary interpretations, which likewise vary according to the period in which the

respective films were produced. Thus, on screen, Patroclus appears variously as a simple comrade-in-arms to Achilles (e.g., M. Noa's *Helena*, Germany, 1924), as a close friend through whom the concept of homophilia is conveyed (e.g., W. Petersen's *Troy*, USA, 2004), or as an openly acknowledged lover (e.g., B. Purves' *Achilles*, UK, 2005). To these gender-oriented perspectives must be added the dimension of race, which gained particular prominence in a recent Netflix production (O. Harris and M. Brozel's *Troy: Fall of a City*, USA/UK, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to examine the ways in which Patroclus has been represented on screen. For that purpose, the paper will first provide a synthesis of the predominant historical-philological readings of the character within the field of literary studies, before proceeding to an analysis of selected scenes from the examples listed above, while also considering other film and television productions in which Patroclus is featured. These analyses will take into account the historical contexts in which the screen adaptations were produced. Finally, by way of conclusion, the paper will offer conjectural explanations for the interpretative choices made. Among these, particular attention will be given to issues of gender and race, through which the figure of Patroclus – like that of Achilles – appears to have been reappropriated as an icon in the service of socio-political causes that are distinctly modern rather than ancient.

Select Bibliography

Blume, H.-D. 2015. "Achilles and Patroclus in *Troy.*" In *Return to Troy: New Essays on the Hollywood Epic*, ed. M. M. Winkler. Leiden. 165-179.

Krass, A. 2013. "Over His Dead Body: Male Friendship in Homer's *Iliad* and Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004)." In *Ancient Worlds in Film and Television*, eds. A.-B. Renger and J. Solomon. Leiden. 153-173.

Sinha, A. 2017. "The Loves of Achilles: From Epic to Popular Fiction." In *Rewriting the Ancient World. Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians in Modern Popular Fiction*, ed. L. Maurice. Leiden. 151-173.

<u>Paper 7:</u> Homosocial Pathos: Hercules and Hylas in the Late Post-War Hollywood Epic *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) – Djoymi Baker (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia)

Writing in 1963, *Motion Picture Herald* proclaimed Columbia Pictures' *Jason and the Argonauts* "a triumph of 'cinemagic'" thanks to Ray Harryhausen's special effects, exemplifying what would become the enduring legacy of the film. Upon release, *The New York Times* noted that Todd Armstrong as Jason "seems spindly compared to some 'beefcake' predecessors" (Thompson 1963). While Armstrong is no Steve Reeves—the bodybuilding star of *Hercules* (Pietro Francisci 1958)—neither is Nigel Green, who plays Hercules in a supporting role. Not only is Hercules no longer the lead character, but, as Allen Eyles stated in 1963, he is also "presented as something of a liability." Despite this seeming demotion, in which he occupies only half an hour of the running time, I argue that Hercules' grief for his friend Hylas (John Cairney) provides a memorable emotional core of the film that stresses the move from homosocial bonds to heterosexual union while simultaneously mourning it.

In Book 1 of *Argonautica* (1.1187–1357) by Apollonius of Rhodes, Heracles' frenzied reaction to the loss of Hylas is expressed through his body: he is compelled to run mindlessly, sweat dripping from his temples (1.1261–1264) (Ojennus 2025: 190). By contrast, in the 1963

film, the disappearance of Hylas renders Hercules uncharacteristically quiet, physically contained, and reflective: "Why kill a boy for my grave fault?"

In this paper, I examine Hercules' homosocial friendship with Hylas in the 1963 film and his subsequent grief, in the context both of Heracles as a polyvalent figure within myth and Hercules in the post-war sword and sandal film. I suggest we need to nuance Daniel O'Brien's argument that Hercules' outdated masculinity has been replaced by Jason within the film (2014: 88, 92; compare Jackson 1992: 157). In particular, it is worth noting that the embodiments of *both* "brains as well as brawn" – Hylas and Hercules – depart the film at this halfway point, and thus complicate such a reading. Jason is himself guilty of defying the gods soon after, seemingly forgetful of the lesson of Hercules, and blurring the difference between them.

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Eyles, A. 1963. "Jason and the Argonauts." *Films and Filming*. October: 26.

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O'Brien, D. 2014. *Classical Masculinity and the Spectacular Body in Film: The Mighty Sons of Hercules*. Basingstoke and New York.

Ojennus, P. 2025. "Apollonius Rhodius and the Stoic Doctrine of the Emotions." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 65: 188-218.

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SATURDAY, APRIL 25

Session 4

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (EDT); 9:00 – 11:00 a.m. (CDT)

Figures in Between: Mediating Power and Identity in Cinematic Antiquity

Chair: Georgia Tsouvala (Illinois State University)

Paper 8: The Queen's Insolent Maid: From Mute Servant in the *Odyssey* to Embodiment of 1920s Flapper Femininity in *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* – Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos (Saint Joseph's University, USA)

The paper examines *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, the last silent cinematic revival of classical antiquity produced by First National Pictures in 1927, as Hollywood began its transition to the sound era. In stark contrast to John Erskine's 1925 best-selling novel of the same title, whose rights the studio acquired in hopes of capitalizing on its popularity, the film shifts focus away from Helen's postwar life back in Sparta toward a parodic retelling of the events leading to and during the Trojan War. Because the film survives only in two incomplete fragments preserved at the British Film Institute, scholarly engagement has been limited and largely centered on Helen herself and the actress cast in the role of the protagonist (Malamud 2013;

Blondell 2023: 38-82). This paper redirects attention to a supporting character, Helen's handmaid Adraste, played by the rising star Alice White. Drawing on archival research, including the only surviving copy of the script (Duffy et al. 1927), housed at the Margaret Herrick Library, as well as on production and publicity stills, the paper seeks to reconstruct Adraste's diegetic functions, while acknowledging the fragmentary nature of the evidence and the gap between screenplay and final cut.

From a silent, utilitarian royal servant in Homer's *Odyssey* (4.123-127), Adraste is transformed into a dynamic cinematic presence, in line with her novelistic counterpart who – like Erskine's Helen (Rubin 1992: 179-81) – is situated in an ancient setting yet speaks and acts like a modern woman (Erskine [1925] 2024: 58-64). The paper argues that her characterization is bifurcated: loyal and deferential toward her mistress, she is nevertheless insolent, assertive, and at times defiant toward male authority figures. Through dialogue, costume, and physical comedy, Adraste embodies the Jazz Age flapper transplanted into Homeric antiquity and functions simultaneously as maid, stylist, comic foil, and internal spectator, guiding the audience's gaze and reinforcing Helen's desirability through exaggerated reactions that mirror the film's publicity rhetoric. The paper closes by connecting this representation to the public image of Alice White, Hollywood's "favorite jazz baby" (Waterbury 1929: 39), aiming to illustrate how star-making practices in the media of the 1920s inform the construction, and containment, of ancient female identities on the silver screen.

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<u>Paper 9:</u> Social Space and Seeking Redemption in William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) – Jennifer Rea (University of Florida, USA)

William Wyler's religious epic *Ben-Hur* (1959) tells the story of Judah Ben-Hur, a Jewish aristocrat who must confront the end of his childhood friendship with a Roman named Messala during the Roman Empire's occupation of Jerusalem. Judah also experiences a reversal of his status along with this loss of Messala's friendship, from the upper strata of society as a prince to an enslaved person. Messala's harsh dismissal of his friend's differing political outlook highlights the inability of the two friends to find a resolution to their differences. While previous studies of the film by Hezser (2009: 121-23) and Solomon (2013: 18-20) have explored the themes of identity, religion, and the defeat of empire, this study will build on the previous scholarship by examining how the actions of supporting characters are set against the film's architecture and landscapes.

First, the paper will examine Judah's rejection of Messala's friendship. Judah refuses to become an informant or spy and ends up enslaved. Erdoğan (2024: 6) points out that "the master-slave relationship is always in full force throughout the movie." When Judah rows as an enslaved person, or refuses to row, the setting of the ship highlights the tension of his choice between "rowing for survival" and "rowing for freedom" (Erdoğan 2024: 7). Once released from captivity aboard the ship, he is thrust into the world of the Roman arena, which establishes his rejection of accepting the Romans' desire to control the masses with emperor worship, enslavement, and entertainment.

This paper's second half will compare Judah's relationships with Arrius and Ester. I argue that the figure of the male-soldier-fighter, Arrius, like Messala, represents Judah's past and a strict adherence to Roman imperialistic ideals, whereas the female former enslaved-figure, Ester, represents his future and a new religious freedom. I will conclude the paper with a look at Ben-Hur's conversion of faith and Prock's argument that when Judah reaches a point where emotion and patriarchy can "co-exist" (2017: 378), he can embrace an understanding of how the path to freedom means letting go of the past and Rome.

Select Bibliography

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Prock, S. 2017. "Music and Masculine Relations in *Ben-Hur* (1925 and 1959)." In *A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen*, ed. A. J. Pomeroy. Hoboken, NJ. 349-384.

Solomon, J. 2013. "*Ben-Hur* and *Gladiator*: Manifest Destiny and the Contradictions of the American Empire." In *Ancient Worlds in Film and Television*, eds. R. A.-B. and J. Solomon. Leiden. 17-39.

<u>Paper 10:</u> Modeling Middle Management in Hollywood Sword-and-Sandal Films of 1950s and 1960s – Lee L. Brice (Western Illinois University, USA)

In this paper, I will examine an aspect of contemporary gender roles and masculinity, the corporate middle manager, expressed and modeled in several Hollywood films from the 1950s and 1960s set in the ancient Roman world.

Gender roles were one of multiple themes present in sword-and-sandal epics of the post-WWII period (Nikoloutsos 2017). Some male roles were timeless (father, soldier, commander, and/or politician), while others were exclusively modern and/or new to film (scientists, doctors, and corporate executives). Men who had participated in the recent war faced a new, strong America in which some new masculine roles were emerging. Corporate culture may not seem new to us in the twenty-first century, but post-WWII American economic expansion provided new opportunities for men to enter the ranks of business management as middle managers (Chandler 1977; Jacques and Durepos 2015). The extent to which this cadre of management entered the zeitgeist is clear from contemporary literature (Wilson [1955] 1983; Whyte 1956). It is, therefore, unsurprising that viewers could see men acting in this manner in films of this period.

I will use the supporting male cast of three films set in ancient Rome – *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), and *Cleopatra* (1963) – to examine how films modelled appropriate masculine behavior. In these films, the male leads are the upper management figures; their immediate subordinates act as middle managers of their supervisors' enterprise. That middle manager roles appear in sword-and-sandal films should not be surprising. Military roles figure prominently in many of these post-war films set in the ancient world. Many of the men who entered corporate America as managers had served as officers. Middle managers are a staple of films in this period, but by the end of the 1960s the presentation of these management characters in all films had changed and mostly disappeared.

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Session 5

Time: 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. (EDT); 12:00 – 2:00 p.m. (CDT); 6:00 – 8:00 p.m. (UK)

Depicting the "Other": Outsiders in Celluloid Rome

Chair: Tommaso Gazzarri (Union College, USA)

Paper 11: Cinema's Ur-Black Gladiator: Glycon and His Legacy – Kirsten Day (Augustana College, USA)

In Stanley Kubrick's 1960 *Spartacus*, Woody Strode's Draba is an Ethiopian gladiator who refuses, at the cost of his life, to kill his opponent merely to serve the fancies of his Roman elite audience. Most classicists and cinephiles will be aware of Strode's role, along with its importance as a commentary on the civil rights movement (Wyke 1997: 68; Aldrete and Sumner 2023: 72) and its influence on Djimon Hounsou's Juba, the Black gladiator who befriends the hero Maximus in Ridley Scott's 2000 *Gladiator* (Rose 2004: 163; Theodorakopoulos 2010: 108-109). Less well-known is William Marshall's Glycon, a Nubian gladiator who acts as a mentor for the titular hero in Delmer Daves' 1954 *Demetrius and the Gladiators.* Though largely forgotten, Glycon deserves recognition not only for serving as the model for later Black gladiators, but also for the radical political commentary his character provides: with the film

appearing in the same year the Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in public schools in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the role of Glycon represents, as Jeffrey Richards puts it, "a bold nod to civil rights" (2008: 72).

A quarter century into the new millennium, the relationship of a white hero and a Black "helper" figure in films based on classical antiquity might seem to our modern eyes like an "ancient world variant on the 'magical negro' trope" (Aldrete and Sumner 2023: 49); but in films of the 1950s and 1960s, its inclusion represents a subversive stance for the cause of civil rights. After examining how Glycon's portrayal relates to and departs from earlier depictions of enslaved characters in films set in ancient Rome, this paper looks at the nuances of civil rights messaging embedded in his narrative and in those of his descendants. The goal is to shed light n the process on how we as a nation have grappled with issues of race in the film era, while also highlighting the problematic ways that race in classical antiquity has come to be understood in the popular imagination.

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<u>Paper 12:</u> The Woman and the Gladiator Revisited: Women and/as Gladiators on Screen 2024-2026 – Amanda Potter (The Open University, UK)

Although I have argued that *Spartacus* (1960) and Starz *Spartacus* (2010-2013) offer "a potential for female agency" by looking through the eyes of female characters (Potter 2023: 82), this mostly involves watching against the grain, by putting Varinia, the love interest in *Spartacus*, front and centre. In an earlier project, I (re)watched films and television series featuring gladiators, including *Gladiator* (2000) and *Pompeii* (2014), through the eyes of the female characters. This culminated in an article which concluded that "twenty-first century stories featuring 'the woman and the gladiator' leave the man firmly in control" (Hobden and Potter 2020: 43). In her book on celluloid gladiators, Steenberg (2021, e-book loc. 1-30) finds that gladiatorial violence on screen is "simultaneously empowering and repressive" for men and for women.

Since Steenberg's publication and mine, we have seen the release of Ridley Scott's long-awaited *Gladiator II* (2024). Disappointing for many – the film is rated 6.5/10 by reviewers on IMDb – it failed to win any major awards, and critical responses were mixed. For me it is another missed opportunity for female characters. The strong and capable warrior Arishat (Yuval Gonen) is quickly dispatched by an arrow in combat, to pave the way for the vengeful anger of her husband Lucius (Paul Mescal), which mirrors that of his dead father Maximus from the prequel. Lucius' mother, Lucilla (Connie Nielsen), after surviving in *Gladiator*, dies with her man Acacius (Pedro Pascal), rather than fulfilling her promise as a politician in supporting her

son in leading Rome in the aftermath of the movie. On television, the Amazon Prime series *Those About to Die* (2024) and the Starz *Spartacus* spin-off *Spartacus: House of Ashur* (2025-6) introduce gladiatrices as characters, Aura (Kishan Wilson) and Achillia/Neferet (Tenika Davis). Focusing primarily on the female characters in *Gladiator II*, but adding comparisons with the television series, I will argue that the role of the woman in gladiator films has not progressed since 2020 and that she remains constrained within patriarchal power structures, subordinate to "the primary male" (Hobden and Potter 2020: 42). By contrast, on television she is showing signs of transcending previous stereotypes of virtuous love interest or wicked schemer.

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<u>Paper 13:</u> Occidentalism and the She-Wolf: Self, Other, and the Western Turn in *Centurion* (2010) – Jesse Weiner (Hamilton College, USA)

The paper examines dynamics of self and other in a cinematic turn to Roman Britain by focusing on the epic/action film *Centurion* (2010, dir. Neil Marshall), which is loosely inspired by the disappearance of the Ninth Legion in Britannia. I argue that the film's Occidentalism reinforces certain tropes of its opposite, Orientalism, through its westward gaze and portrayal of Romans and Picts. Central to this dynamic is the supporting character Etain, a Pictish warrior and one of the few women in the cast, through whom *Centurion* stages a shift in both empire and values, pointing toward later constructions of Western Civilization and contemporary clashes between East and West.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s several films turned to imperial Roman Britain as a setting. Produced in the wake of 9/11, the War on Terror, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, *The Last Legion* (2007, dir. Doug Lefler), *Centurion*, and *The Eagle* (2013, dir. Kevin Macdonald) use the Western margins of the Roman world to explore imperial dynamics. These films have been grouped together previously by Davies (2019) and Strong (2019). They employ the distance of classical antiquity to comment obliquely on protracted modern conflicts whose ethics and long-term goals have remained murky (Davies 2019; McAuley 2019; Nikoloutsos

2023), continuing a tradition of using Greece and Rome to engage contemporary politics (cf. Strong 2019; Aguado-Cantabrana 2023; Nikoloutsos 2023; Cyrino 2005).

Centurion constructs the Picts as a tribal other while Romans remain culturally centered, especially through language: Romans speak English, while Pictish is subtitled, directing viewer identification accordingly. Etain (Olga Kurylenko) is crucial to these dynamics. I read her as a Philomela figure, as well as a character in dialogue with Romulus and Remus myth – Wintjes (2023) suggests another interesting association with Boudica. Like Philomela and Shakespeare's Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, rape and mutilation fuel Etain's pursuit of vengeance. Yet the film inverts ancient mythic structures: Etain is victimized not by a barbarian outsider but by the "civilized" Romans, complicating audience sympathies. Davies (2019), for example, views the gendered violence done to Etain as a "metaphor for the silencing of native peoples subjected to imperial rule."

Further dehumanized by her nickname "She-wolf," Etain evokes Rome's own foundation myth, but as predator rather than nurturer, signaling imperial decline. In a melancholic Virgilian turn evocative of the *Aeneid*'s close, *Centurion* imagines a future in which "good Romans" must migrate westward to the non-Roman periphery.

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