

Classical Themes in Popular Entertainment.

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“A Pyrrhic Victory.” Volume I, “The Shaping of Destiny.”

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An Occasional Article about the (mis)representation of Classical History and Philosophy in Popular Media.

Quite regularly, one is presented with a treatment of a significant episode from Greco-Roman history in popular entertainment, in the form of a novel or a film.

This period was regularly visited a generation ago in such films as, “The 300 Spartans,” starring Richard Egan as the magnificent Spartan King, Leonidas. The popularity of such historical treatments waned for a number of years, but has had a rebirth in the last fifteen years or so.

This theatrical treatment produces something of a dilemma for the ordinary person who has an interest in the period. The book or film is often, though not always, very well written and produced, and reflects the interest and excitement of such a fascinating time in history.

The nature of the dilemma is, can one rely on the historical accuracy in the material presented? If so, then it can add to the understanding of the period, and lead to a greater degree of historical knowledge. This is not an unreasonable request, as the history is often very well recorded, and presents some of history’s greatest dramas.

Or, is the history manipulated to make it more convenient to the plot?

Naturally, in the mind of the amateur historian, there is the fear that his own understanding of the period is distorted because of the dramatisation of the events.

To illustrate my point, I would like to take an example from the cinema, the film, “Gladiator.” I will also briefly mention later the film, “300,” which deals once more with the heroic defence of the Pass of Thermopylae by the Spartans and Thespians, against the might of Xerxes’ Persian army.

“Gladiator” is an outstanding period piece from the point of view of an action movie with brilliant visual period detail. It is a profound disappointment with regard to its historical treatment.

Naturally, the pivotal person around whom the plot revolves is the Roman Emperor, and widely admired Stoic Philosopher, Marcus Aurelius.

“Gladiator” presents a number of critical errors which profoundly alter the perception of the era by our cinema patron, despite the fact that it is a very well understood piece of history.

A number of issues relate to Marcus himself. I would like to introduce a number of important issues, and then discuss them.

The last days of his life were spent, as portrayed in the film, at Vindobona, where one finds modern Vienna.

In conversation with the character Maximus, Marcus declares both his belief that his son, Commodus, is not fit to rule, and that he intends to restore the Republic and return power to the Senate and the People of Rome.

Also that when he reflects on his 20 years as Emperor, he has spent much of it at war, fighting and spilling blood. He points to a map of the Roman Empire and declares to Maximus, "This is the Empire I created." He asks himself the question, "And for what?" Later in the film, Commodus tells his sister, Lucilla, that their father felt that the victories in Germany achieved nothing.

Regarding the first question, there is no historical hint that Marcus intended to restore the Republic. His reign was the last one in the golden era of Roman Emperors that began after the assassination of Domitian in 96 A.D. Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and himself.

Marcus had twice appointed an Imperial colleague and successor. He associated with Lucius Verus from the beginning of his reign in 161 A.D. until Verus's death in 169 A.D., and he made his son Commodus his co-ruler in 177 A.D.

One of the outstanding and unique qualities of this golden age was that Imperial Rome temporarily solved the problem of succession.

Each of his precedents in this short age had determined to choose a successor who would be the best choice of Emperor, rather than follow a bloodline succession. The chosen successor was adopted as a son, and groomed for the role he was to play as Emperor. The choice made by Hadrian was particularly interesting, as a required condition for his adoption of Antoninus Pius was that he in turn adopted Marcus Aurelius as his son and successor. One of the most brilliantly insightful decisions in history.

It is one of the great ironies of history, that Marcus, an outstanding Emperor and a Stoic Philosopher whose philosophical writings are still essential reading in our own day, was the one to let familial sentimentality lead him to choose a worthless son as his successor.

Having discussed the views of Marcus and his choice of successor, there is also the issue of the nature of Roman politics at this time. Rome at this stage was totally unsuited to the restoration of the Republic.

The role of Roman Emperor was created by Octavian, later known as Augustus Caesar, following the civil wars that raged through the Roman world after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. His reign was from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D.

While giving the Senate its due share of respect, Augustus established the Imperial control of the Senate, and the People of Rome had lost their Republican virtue and vigour over the preceding century as a result of increasing prosperity and increasing use of non-Roman soldiers in the legions.

The tide of centralisation of power in the hands of one man had been developing steadily since the great victory of Scipio Africanus over Carthage in the Second Punic War. The process continued with the careers of such men as Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, Marius, Sulla and Julius Caesar.

In a few more years, the city of Rome would become almost irrelevant to the Roman Empire.

There is one important digression that I would like to make at this point.

In creating the office of Emperor, Augustus masterly retained the forms of government. He gave full honour to the Senate, and, at least superficially, respected brother

Senators as his colleagues and advisors. The Imperial authority was presented as a commission from the Senate.

The greatest of his successors continued this practice. The practice was finally laid to rest by Septimius Severus (193 – 211 A.D.), leading to the great Roman catastrophe – the complete unveiling of the dependence of the Emperor on the army, and in particular the Praetorian Guards. The Praetorians then knew that the power and life of the Emperor were in their hands to do with what they chose.

We come now to the issue of the Roman Empire in the time of Marcus.

The great man did spend many of his years at war, most notably fighting the Parthians, and the Germans on the Rhine and Danube.

The critical point is that he did not conquer these people. He inherited the Empire, and spent his years of war defending it. With the German campaigns in particular, he did not conquer territory. He fought the Germanic tribes and broke their power, so the frontiers were safe for the timebeing.

This was no mean feat. By defending the frontiers, he delayed the future invasions of the Roman provinces, and as Gibbon says, contributed to the 300 years of peace that Gaul enjoyed for the first and only time in it's history.

Having discussed various aspects of treatment of historical events in "Gladiator," the next subject for brief discussion is Stoic Philosophy as presented by the character of Marcus.

In the conversation between Marcus and Commodus, Marcus tells his son that he will not be emperor, and that after a stewardship by Maximus, power will be returned to the Senate and the People of Rome.

As an introduction to his statement of his own virtues, Commodus quotes from a letter that he received from his father. His point was that his own virtues were ignored. The point of interest to our discussion is the list of the four chief virtues presented to Commodus by Marcus.

These virtues were, *Wisdom, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude.*

This leads to a great deal of confusion for our cinema patron.

In his work, originally titled, "To Myself," and currently published with the title, "Meditations," Marcus declares the aim of Philosophy, and also the qualities that a good man aspires to, to guide him in a virtuous life.

Marcus believes *Wisdom* is the aim of Philosophy, and that the most important qualities that an individual must aspire to are, Justice, Temperance, *Prudence* and Fortitude.

One can see that casual confusion of important concepts can lead to a completely distorted view .

The remaining question for us to consider is whether such distortion of historical and philosophical matters is a result of poor research and ignorance, or whether it is simply a matter of making a tale more acceptable to the viewing public.

One last item of interest, as mentioned earlier, is the more recent film, "300."

This film completely abandons any attempt at faithful representation of history and offers nothing of interest, as it fails to achieve any successful bond with such a great moment in history.

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