

## CLASH OF THE TITANS

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2010 may well go down in the annals of classical reception in film as the Year of Perseus. This perennial mythological hero has made appearances both oblique and specific in two major theatrical releases, "Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief" and "Clash of the Titans," the remake of the 1981 movie of the same name. While the Perseus myth forms but one part of Percy Jackson's tissue of mythological references and creative adaptations, it is center stage in director Louis Leterrier's "Clash of the Titans." In this latest retelling of the myth, Perseus is caught between the worlds of the human and the divine. The movie itself, however, is an uneven work that contains more human error than divine inspiration.

In all fairness, some context is required. The 2010 "Clash" wrestles with a number of issues aside from the question of how to adapt the classical myth to the contemporary screen. Perhaps most importantly, it is no longer a film concerned only with the narrative. As a remake, the 2010 movie cannot escape the long shadow of its well-loved cult predecessor that worked with a humorously campy sense of self and Ray Harryhausen's famous special effects and stop-motion model animation (and, in particular, a fan favorite in the form of the chirping mechanical owl, Bubo). Furthermore, "Clash" toils under the influence of the more recent 3-D blockbuster "Avatar" (2009). "Clash" was released as a 3-D movie even though it was not originally intended to be one; the post-conversion foisted on the film added only the sense that Leterrier and the producers were cynically forcing a fundamentally 2-D film onto the gimmicky post-"Avatar" 3-D bandwagon. (Even more unforgivable is that fact that the 3-D looks ineffective and disappointing.)

These contextual concerns aside, "Clash of the Titans" has its ups and downs as a storytelling project in its own right. I went to see this film with a cheerful crowd of students from the classics club, and, while we had an entertaining evening together, the film was more the excuse than the reason for it. The movie's protagonist is Perseus (played by Sam Worthington of recent "Terminator: Salvation" and "Avatar" fame), but for a heroic demigod, he is a charmless, grim figure who, though he can fight monsters with the best of them, lacks the sparkle, charisma, and humor that would have him an empathetic character to root for. He has been shoehorned into a role that the classical myth did not demand of him and that seems too contrived: he consistently attempts to reject his Olympian heritage as son of Zeus, insisting that he is only a mortal. This brings us to the overall narrative thrust of the movie: Titans are not clashing as much as the gods are, since Hades (played with appropriately Voldemortian evil by Ralph Fiennes) is attempting to engineer a *coup d'état* against Zeus (Liam Neeson). To this end, Hades has a monstrous pet, the Kraken, supposedly the only thing that can threaten the gods, a beast he had previously used to overthrow the Titans (never let it be said that Hades does not recycle and repurpose!). Furthermore, another mostly-inexplicable

clash is in progress as certain mortals have actively revolted against the gods, thus tempting the Olympians to respond. (This then prompts the unintentionally amusing statement that Zeus has not destroyed humanity because he loves mortals.)

Into this muddle comes Perseus, the reluctant hero who wants only to be a fisherman like his adoptive mortal father. The plot begins to bog down, hampered by a lack of narrative focus. The clunky, wooden dialogue does not help, as somehow exposition comes at the cost of clarity. Perseus finds himself adventuring in various dangerous locations with his band of red-shirt ensigns, encountering everything from gigantic CGI scorpions to desert-dwelling oddities composed of driftwood, glowing eyes, long robes, and Jawa-envy. Along the way, the film inadvertently highlights its own worst flaw: its lack of real humor and quirky imaginative fun. At one point, as Perseus and his companions are arming for their quest, they stumble across Bubo in the armory. Perseus is advised to leave it behind, and so he does. In the theater, the brief appearance of the little metal owl elicited an audience response that was never repeated for the rest of the film. Leaving the owl behind came to typify this 2010 "Clash"'s charmlessness. Moreover, Bubo as hero's companion is replaced by the baffling figure of Io (played by recent Bond girl Gemma Arterton). Aside from being woefully misnamed—she has nothing to do with the mythological Io—she is a woman cursed with both immortality and agelessness (a fact that prompts the question of how this combination is actually negative; I am sure Tithonus would gladly take that bargain). In the film, Io almost deserves sympathy for also being cursed with the role of being the glowering Perseus' obligatory love interest. (I here advise Andromeda (Alexa Davalos) to call her agent.)

In terms of visual elements alone, however, this is a movie that does make an effort. It progresses from one setpiece of CGI-enhanced action to another, from one sweeping panoramic landscape to the next, with all the pixelated mayhem that the special effects team could muster. The battle scene in the lair of Medusa is a notable example, as is the Gorgon herself, a fascinatingly horrifying mixture of the beautiful and the repulsive. The figure of Pegasus is gorgeous and, in fact, more viscerally attractive than any actual human character. The trouble, though, is the fact that the movie's joyless personality and the failure of characters to connect on any emotional level with the audience makes all the pretty visuals only so much sound and fury. I realize this review sounds like so much nitpicking curmudgeonry, and I wish it were not so: I love movies and am on the record as a fan of Ridley Scott's 2000 "Gladiator," in which all its historical liberties are forgivable because it worked as a movie, as a story, as characters. "Clash of the Titans," unfortunately, has trouble hanging together as a compelling narrative, and there is no greater sin at the cinema than that.

In terms of classical mythology (and the potential for being used in the classroom in some capacity), "Clash of the Titans" adheres to three fundamental elements of the ancient myth: (1) Perseus is the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, (2) he defeats

Medusa, and (3) he rescues the princess Andromeda from being sacrificed to a sea monster. Everything else is up for grabs. Creative adaptation of myth in pop culture, especially in entertainment, is absolutely to be expected, and as I tell my mythology students, the point of poetic or creative license is the freedom to place one's personal, artistic twist on the source material. The sphere of the imagination is no place for "myth snobbery." Even so, one can only do so much to a myth before that source narrative becomes unrecognizable. "Clash" comes close to that with the absence of the myth of Danaë's golden rain and especially with its ending, which throws in three ultimately unsatisfying "resolutions" that had even my student audience protesting.

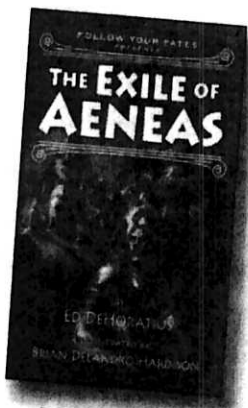
To sum up: as a bit of CGI-filled cinematic eye candy to be seen once, Letterier's "Clash of the Titans" performs that function well enough, if problematically, but it is the sort of movie that does not bear much analysis. As an example of the classical tradition, it is an interesting showcase of how far one may stretch a myth before it no longer is recognizable as that myth. As a possible teaching aid for classical mythology, it is guaranteed both to confuse those who do not already have a grasp of the ancient myth and to amuse those who do. It is not the sort of movie worth paying full price for (forget the 3D), but it is worth a look on DVD, if only to keep up with pop culture and entertainment as it intersects with classics.

"Clash of the Titans" is not unentertaining, but it is not as fun as it could have—should have—been, probably because it takes itself a bit too seriously and in too many instances replaces light colorful entertainment with gloomy grim action. I end with what is perhaps the most astute analysis of the film I have heard yet, and it is how one student of mine cheerfully described Letterier's project: "It's the sort of movie you watch with all your classics friends while wearing togas and throwing popcorn at the screen and laughing." The fun is in the company, not in the movie itself.

"Clash of Titans" runs 106 minutes and is rated PG-13.

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