



Greek Heroes in Popular Culture Through Time

Achilles

Presenter

Welcome to Greek Heroes - where we look at how the heroes of Greek literature have been represented in popular culture through time.

Tonight's special guest is Achilles.

ACHILLES

Being the star of the Trojan War, meant I was quite a big name in Ancient Greece - but since then my star hasn't always burned so brightly. Because in the Iliad, my whole story hinges on my love for a man.

That's Patroclus and me in the tent - I'm tending his wounds poor luv - oh, if canvas could talk!

You have to remember, in Ancient Greece it was so much more normal for a man to love another man - I mean, I had a wife you know, Briseis, well she was more of a war prize. But, even if Homer only hinted at our relationship in the Iliad, by the time Aeschylus wrote about me in Myrmidones - there was very little doubt about my true feelings for Pat.

But times change. And in every era, my portrayal seems to get loaded with everybody else's baggage about human sexuality.

Old Rubens was a sweetie - he couldn't resist a scene of me dressed in women's clothes.

Those baroque artists really go for a bit of flowing fabric don't they?

I'm not denying the events happened - but he didn't have to play up to the stereotype?

They really weren't that happy about men like me in 50s America, I can tell you that! - I mean look at how they've twisted me in Helen Of Troy - That's me there I'm virtually a pantomime villain!

Achilles (Stanley Baker)

"And I despise you, and you Augumenon"

ACHILLES

What with Rubens making me Widow Twankie. I'm not sure which hurts more.

Things got interesting when Marvel decided to turn me into a proper hero again - Americans weren't ready to go too deeply into my story. What they ended up with was a dull old soldier with a dodgy heel - nothing interesting about me at all - and my sexuality was very much 'don't ask, don't tell'.

Now - by the 1990s things had really changed. Britain's Channel 4 was about as liberated as it gets.

I mean it's wonderful to be out of the closet - but this lot are so far out they've forgotten all their clothes. I can assure you, in the Trojan war, we were dressed at least some of the time. Now Hollywood is always after bigger, better spectacles and 2004 brought two epic tales to the screen.

Even in the time of Alexander The Great, his relationship with Hephaestion was compared with Patroclus and I. In Stones version, the gay love story leads directly to the climax - which is pretty wonderful. Or it would have been if the film hadn't bombed at the box office. Maybe America wasn't ready for gay heroes - this was before Brokeback Mountain of course.

Troy felt like the Marvel experience all over again, I'm afraid. They glossed over everything, went for the old story that Patroclus was my cousin.

Instead of a tragic hero - driven by love and revenge, my entire story seems to be based on vanity. I mean if I have a weakness it's my heel, not my ego.

Thetis (Julie Christie)

"Glory will be yours"

ACHILLES

Still - it's nice to be the leading man.

Thetis (Julie Christie)

"They will write stories about your victories for thousands of years."

ACHILLES

I just wonder if there will ever be a time when people see my brief, glorious story as the Greeks did.

Until then though we'll just have to make do with watching Brad up there, won't we Pat?

Ohhh, Pat. We were buried together you know. Same urn, lovely.