

# Without gods

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [June 15, 2004](#) issue

The summer blockbuster *Troy* is neither as bad as it might be nor as stirring as it should be. As directed by Wolfgang Petersen (*Das Boot*), it is an entertaining display of sword-and-sandal heroism via the medium of modern movie technology. But since this is a story about the Trojans, Achilles and Hector, providing a decent adventure story is simply not enough. Give us an epic or don't bother leaving the ships.

Since Homer's *Iliad* doesn't begin until the final year of the decade-long Trojan War and ends before the fall of Troy, screenwriter David Benioff borrows from other sources, most notably Virgil's *Aeneid*, to complete his story. (Homer doesn't reveal the news of Achilles' death until the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus confronts Achilles' soul in Hades.)

Benioff takes other liberties with the famous tale, such as beginning with Paris's stealing of Helen during a goodwill visit to Sparta. Some of the changes are minor (wise old Patroclus is now young and callow), and some are jarring (two Greek kings who survive in the *Iliad* are killed in the film). The Achilles story is given a bizarre twist: it ends with Achilles hiding in the Trojan horse and then chasing a slave girl through the burning streets of Troy.

But the most radical change is the exclusion of the gods. The filmmakers said they cut the role of the gods to achieve a "level of realism," and because they had no desire to feature *Clash of the Titans*-style battles, with Zeus tossing thunderbolts down from Mt. Olympus. This amounts to laughing off the role of the gods because one lacks the creativity to make them credible.

By jettisoning Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Athena and the rest of the Olympian crew, the film presents the Trojan War as a political tale of free will (Agamemnon as empire-builder) rather than a mythic tale of fate (Agamemnon as doomed monarch). That approach may sound like more fun, and in a human-centered universe it might seem to make more sense. But the tragedy of the Trojan War and the majesty of its heroes lies in the fact that the characters know their actions fit into a masterplan laid out by the gods.

This was especially true of Achilles, who had no beef with the Trojans. His attitude, as with most of the Greek kings, was that if Menelaus, king of Sparta, wasn't man enough to hold onto his young wife, he could go fetch her himself. But Achilles also knew that if he stayed behind, he would be happy and safe but forgotten, whereas if he went to Troy he would live forever because of his heroic exploits (which is the only way a mortal can attain immortality, Homer reminds us).

The catch is that to attain such immortality, he must die before the walls of Troy. Why? Because the gods dictated that this was the proper exchange between heaven and earth.

The scene in which Achilles addresses this "last temptation" with his goddess mother, Thetis, is one of the strongest in the film, and provides a hint of how the presence of the gods might have strengthened the story. Without them, the film is reduced to bloody battle scenes and boatloads of computer-generated special effects.

What if the filmmakers had kept the gods in? Then the duel between an angry Menelaus and a frightened Paris could have ended with Aphrodite spiriting Paris away at the last second, since he needed to survive in order to kill Achilles. And when Achilles comes hurtling across the plains of Troy in search of Hector, he could have been wearing the gleaming armor made for him by Hephestaus, god of the forge, since Hector had overstepped his bounds by stealing Achilles' armor off the dead body of Patroclus.

The exclusion of the gods not only makes the tale less dramatic but strips it of moral power. For the ancient Greeks, the gods intervene not to muck things up but to put things right, to guarantee that the war will turn out the way it is supposed to. To remove them from the equation is to remove the aura of fate that drives the story and provides the heroes their luster. (The gods don't bother to intervene in the lives of the foot soldiers.)

*Troy* has its good moments, including a moving scene in which Hector (Eric Bana) tells his wife, Andromache (Saffron Burrows), to prepare for his death. There is a nicely written exchange between Priam (Peter O'Toole) and Achilles (Brad Pitt), when the old king pleads for the body of his eldest son, whose vision of doom has indeed come to pass.

But even as these scenes and others played out, I couldn't keep from craning my neck and looking for Mt. Olympus, wondering why things were so quiet up there.