

**Kenneth Mayer**  
**Ritual Antagonism in *Contempt***

Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963) is both a reworking of the *Odyssey* and a film about filmmaking. Ritual antagonism offers a valuable means for understanding both the relation between *Contempt* and the *Odyssey* and the self-reflective project of the film.

"Ritual antagonism" describes a relationship in which a god and a hero are hostile to one another in myth, but closely connected in cult. (See Nagy *Best of the Achaeans* 8.12) The *Odyssey* features the hostility between Poseidon and Odysseus, but the confrontation ultimately glorifies both. Until he lands in Ithaca, Odysseus is subject to Poseidon's wrath, but his final mission is to go inland to found a shrine to Poseidon, thereby spreading his fame and worship.

*Contempt's* protagonist, Paul, is a screenwriter for a production of the *Odyssey*, directed by Fritz Lang. *Contempt* traces Paul's journey through the harsh realm of filmmaking, represented by a crass American producer. Finally, Paul leaves the project and the cinema to return to writing for the theater, just as Lang films Odysseus' return to Ithaca and escape from Poseidon's realm. *Contempt* savages filmmaking and film consumption, yet the viewer nonetheless feels that film and filmmakers such as Lang are glorified. Ritual antagonism explains this seeming contradiction.

The viewer is invited to equate the producer, played by Jack Palance, with Poseidon. As they watch Lang's film clips of gods, Palance intones, "I like the gods. I like them very much. I know exactly how they feel. Exactly." When Palance runs off with Paul's wife Camille, the film cuts to a sculpture of Poseidon. Palance, and his obsession with money, is a savage interloper in the cultured world of Lang and Paul.

Lang, the producer, and Paul offer interpretation of marital relations in the *Odyssey*, and it is clear that Paul connects Camille with Penelope. Most critics follow Paul's lead, but in no way can Camille represent Penelope. The first scene in Capri begins with Camille bobbing in a boat, as voiceovers from the film crew announce "The Episode of the Cyclops." Cut to two men in sunglasses operating a camera with 2 bulbous, eye-like lights. Jump-cuts between slow, stately shots of Camille and the cyclopean camera link them together. The film's structure further undercuts any identification with Penelope. At the beginning of the film, Camille and Paul are tender lovers; at the end, she and the producer die in a car accident, after she and Paul have separated. For most critics, this twist shows how Godard has revised the role of Penelope, but structurally, Camille better compares to the feminine forces that obstruct Odysseus' journey: Calypso, Scylla, Circe, or the Sirens.

By interpreting Camille as Penelope, critics maintain that Godard undermines both epic conventions and Hollywood romance, decrying the lack of home, homecoming, and success in modern life. But a ritual antagonism reading of *Contempt* reveals the theater as Paul's true Penelope and Ithaca. His perilous journey on a crass movie set nonetheless honors Paul's ritual antagonist, the art, and indeed the business, of filmmaking itself.