

CHAPTER ONE

Gladiator from Screenplay to Screen

Jon Solomon

Everyone interested in tracing the development of *Gladiator* has access to various sources: two preliminary versions of David Franzoni's screenplay; several Internet interviews with Franzoni, director Ridley Scott, and co-producer Douglas Wick; the film itself; extra footage on its DVD issue; numerous comments on the World Wide Web; and, finally, the ancient historical sources for the life of the villainous Commodus – Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Augustan History*.¹ The following essay offers a study of the development of *Gladiator* based on these sources, from its original artistic concept to its release version.

To most of us, this may seem like a common or easy enough task: reading interviews with filmmakers, examining their notes or drafts, and finding additional material on a DVD or on the Web. But nothing could be further from the truth when these methods of research are applied to an ancient story. For example, Homer is not available for interviews, and we have none of Virgil's notes or drafts. On his deathbed, Virgil reportedly requested his friends to burn the one copy of his not quite finished *Aeneid*, Rome's national epic. We are fortunate to have his poem, but we cannot examine his notes or drafts.

1 The two drafts of the screenplay are published electronically at http://www.hundland.com/scripts/Gladiator_FirstDraft.txt (revised and dated April 4, 1998) and http://www.hundland.com/scripts/Gladiator_SecondDraft.txt (revised by John Logan and dated October 22, 1998). My quotations are from these sources.

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In fact, we do not have these kinds of resources for studying the development of any ancient literature, be it epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, satire, or novel. We do know in some cases what previous authors or versions of a story, often a myth, influenced an author, but this is a particular work's literary tradition, not its inception. And by comparison with ours, ancient writing materials were crude, and methods of writing depended, much more than ours, on an author's memory. But even if they had had all the writing tools available to modern authors, ancient writers could never have imagined that someday in the distant future someone would want to study their first drafts, let alone post them on the Web or even purchase them on eBay.

This situation is not unique to ancient authors and is true, to varying degree, for all literature down to at least the nineteenth century. With *Gladiator* we can, perhaps for the first time ever, build a comprehensive understanding of how an author and his subsequent collaborators developed a story set in antiquity.

The original author of the screenplay of *Gladiator* is David Franzoni, whose most significant previous work was Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, a 1997 historical film which helped establish the reputation of DreamWorks SKG, the new production company of Spielberg and others. On the strength of *Amistad*, which deals with the plight of Africans illegally sold as slaves in 1839, Franzoni was given a three-picture deal with DreamWorks as writer and co-producer. Franzoni's next submission was *Gladiator*, another fact-based historical film about slaves, tyranny, and freedom. Franzoni had been inspired by Daniel P. Mannix's novel *Those About to Die* (1958; published again in 2001 as *The Way of the Gladiator*), which Franzoni had read while living along the banks of the Tigris River almost thirty years earlier when he was on a motorcycle trip around the world. Franzoni mentioned the idea for his film to Steven Spielberg, who asked "three basic questions":

My gladiator movie, it was about ancient Roman gladiators – not American, Japanese, whatever else? Yes, I said. Taking place in the ancient Coliseum [*sic*]? Yes. Fighting with swords and animals to the death and such? Yes. Great, let's make the movie.²

Franzoni is not a classical scholar. He is a storyteller capable of finding inspiration in historical sources and adapting them for the screen. In his

2 The quotation is from an interview conducted by John Soriano for the Writers Guild of America. My source here and below is its electronic publication at <http://www.wga.org/craft/interviews/franzoni2001.html>.

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first version of the script, dated April 4, 1998, Franzoni named his protagonist Narcissus, using the *praenomen* (first name) of the wrestler who strangled Emperor Commodus to death on the last day of A.D. 192. Franzoni read what he called “the *Augustan Histories*,” a collection of Roman imperial biographies, as his inspiration for choosing Commodus as his historical focus. But the biography of Commodus by Aelius Lampridius in the *Augustan History* does not offer any name for the athlete responsible for killing Commodus. Narcissus is, however, named by Herodian and Cassius Dio, so we are immediately put on alert that Franzoni may have used a variety of ancient sources in preparing his screenplay.³

In this first draft, Franzoni’s General Narcissus wins the war in Germania. Immediately after the death of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, which is neither shown nor described, Narcissus is shipped as a condemned prisoner to the Colosseum, where he becomes a huge popular success. A superstar gladiator sponsored by the Golden Pompeii Olive Oil Company, Narcissus ultimately strangles Commodus in the Colosseum sands and then sails off into the sunset with his wife and two daughters. Anachronistic and trite, this was the original storyline that was nurtured and developed into the film which won multiple Academy Awards including Best Picture, cost over \$100 million, and grossed over \$200 million.

The original screenplay opens with Commodus, his sister Lucilla, and their family physician, the historically appropriate Galen, in two enclosed wagons. Commodus is eager to catch up with his father on the German frontier. There we meet Juba, leader of the Numidian archers, and Narcissus Meridas, the general of the Spanish Gemina Felix VII Army. Merida is the modern name of Colonia Augusta Emerita in Spain, a colony founded by Emperor Augustus in 25 B.C. as a reward to the *emeriti* (veterans) of two Roman legions. Later, it became the capital of the province of Lusitania and the most important city in Roman Spain. The placement of Numidian and Spanish troops and auxiliaries in Germania did not evolve into the Spanish and North African settings we see in the final version until the second draft of the script, but it did create both the character of the African Juba, played ultimately by Djimon Hounsou (from *Amistad*), and Narcissus’ *cognomen* (second name) Meridas, later to become Meridius.

Visitors to Merida can today see the remains of a Roman theater, amphitheater, and circus and monumental statues of Romulus, Remus, and the she-wolf, the latter a reference to the foundation legend of Rome: Romulus and Remus were abandoned as infants and rescued by a

3 Herodian 1.17.11; Dio 73.22.5.

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she-wolf who became their wet nurse. In the scene mentioned above, we now also meet the Roman general's mascot. Most viewers of the film think that Maximus has a pet dog, who runs alongside him into battle, but it is really a wolf. In the original screenplay it is called the "Wolf of Rome."

In the first draft, Marcus Aurelius addresses his troops in a cinematically impossible speech about two pages long. Here are its opening paragraphs:

Today may be the last day in the life of Rome . . . For nine hundred years Rome has lived! For nine hundred years architects, mathematicians, poets, and philosophers have fled within her arms sheltered from superstition, prejudice, hate, and every form of cruelty. We Romans have become a light in the barbarian night!

For nine hundred years this one heart of humankind has been defended by the likes of Pompeii [*sic*], Mark Anthony [*sic*], Julius Caesar, The Divine Augustus, Claudius, Trajan, Hadrian, and my own father Antoninus Pius. Now, it has come down to us! It has come down to this one day . . .

This history lesson would hardly inspire any soldiers about to be sent into battle. The author is instead sending us, the viewers, the message that Rome, like the USA, is the "land of the free." As Franzoni has said:

the movie is about our culture, our society: promoter Proximo (Oliver Reed) is sort of a Mike Ovitz, and Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) is sort of a Ted Turner. And Maximus (Russell Crowe) is the hero we all wish ourselves to be: the guy who can rise above the mess that is modern society.

Twenty-two pages later, Narcissus is visited in Germany by his wife, two daughters, and their pedagogue Lindo, who is teaching them a more populist attitude. Here is the dialogue:

Manto [daughter]: Father, is it true the Germans are just fighting to protect their land?

Narcissus and Selene [his wife] swap a fast look.

Selene: Well, you wanted the girls to have the best teachers.

Narcissus: Greeks?

Selene: Athenians . . .

That sounds even worse.

Manto: Teacher says that the divine Julius used the Germans as a pretext to dissolve the Republic.

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Narcissus: Did he now . . . ?

Manto: And that the Germans are only struggling to keep their honor and the ways of their people. And that throughout history Rome has always been the aggressor.

Narcissus: Well, remind teacher: once upon a time it was the Hebrews over the Philistines; the Babylonians over the Hebrews; Egypt over Babylon; the Greeks over the Trojans; Persians over the Greeks; Etruscans over the Latins; Sabines over the Latins and Etruscans. Now it's Rome over everyone and I don't know when the world has known such peace.

Manto: I can't wait to tell my teachers [*sic*] all that.

Can see Narcissus feels better about this already.

Narcissus: What about their philosophy lessons?

Selene: They're studying with Cynics.

Narcissus: Of course . . .

The liberal Greek teachings grate on the father, a career military officer. His response to learning that the children are studying the Cynic philosophers is a sarcastic comment. But Lindo's views nicely parallel the politics of visiting Senators Gaius Cantus, Falco Verus, and, later, Gracchus – the last a name associated since 1960 with republican ideals thanks to the character portrayed by Charles Laughton in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*.

In between such observations on Roman–American freedoms and Greek Marxism there occurs the battle against the Germans. Franzoni has done some homework here, as his descriptions show:

A red 'flag' on a long pole goes up answering the trumpet, and the line of the fresh cohort parts in segments revealing ONAGERS – portable catapults – and SCORPIONS – powerful precision-fire crossbows that launch javelins.

THE ARTILLERY FIRES . . .

cannonball-size shot driven at a hundred miles an hour rip over the heads of Narcissus' troopers and slam against the fort walls.

ONAGER CREWS

reload with incredible speed from wagons filled with hand-picked rocks – some bear SCRAWLED EPITHETS essentially the Latin equivalent of "EAT THIS HANS!" [*sic*] Onagers launch barrage after barrage, their backs leaping off the ground like recoiling 45 millimeter field guns.

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Franzoni here specifies and defines the use of Roman artillery pieces. The German fortification he mentions did not make it into the film, nor did his description of the Romans scrawling mottoes onto hand-picked catapult rocks. (No doubt he meant them to write the equivalent of “Eat this, Huns!”) Elsewhere he wanted to have the Romans use two-sided, quick-release spears.

Apparently one of Franzoni’s messages was that armies with superior technology defeat locals who have only an admirable defiance and love of liberty. Clearly he wanted ancient Roman military power to be vividly realized on film. The battle sequence at the opening of the film, part of which is computer-generated, relies visually on the “barrage after barrage” imagery described in the first draft. Franzoni also called for an authentic Roman *testudo* (“turtle”) formation, in which the soldiers protect themselves on all sides with carefully arranged shields, as depicted on Trajan’s Column and re-created in Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s 1963 version of *Cleopatra*. The *testudo* is used twice in *Gladiator*, once during the German battle and later in the Colosseum. There is no evidence that the Roman army used catapults to hurl exploding clay pots at their enemy, but visually this segment in the forest is spectacular, even if more trees than Germans are hit. And while authenticity and plausibility – cavalry in a forest battle? – are questionable, such free invention makes for thrilling footage.

In the first draft of the script the wolf saved Narcissus’ life in the middle of the battle sequence, and this still occurs in the film. In the second draft, “a cage full of ferocious wolves” appears in the Colosseum, prompting Commodus to rave madly about “the great She-Wolf of Rome,” who “will again suckle us, again ravage our enemies – AND BRING US A WORLD REBORN!” But in the film, these wolves have disappeared, as has Maximus’ wolf after the opening battle. What happened to him? As soon as the wolf appears and helps save Maximus’ life, Hans Zimmer’s music modulates from the rousing “battle waltz” in 3/4 time to an adagio victory hymn. The Wolf of Rome has saved the hero, and this is the turning point of the battle. There are many wounded and exhausted Romans, and the gritty, smoky texture of the images on the screen in the last stages of the sequence reflects a bitter-sweet relief over battle’s end. At this point General Maximus can proclaim triumphantly, and in Latin, “Roma victor!” (“Rome is victorious!”) The battle for Germania is over, and the emperor can return to Rome. The wolf, who made all this possible, now vanishes. In this way it takes on an almost supernatural quality, one entirely appropriate for such a reincarnation of one of the founders of Rome and her empire.

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In the first draft of the screenplay we do not see Commodus murder Marcus Aurelius, although we suspect that he does, as does Narcissus. Galen was probably involved as well. There is a verbose scene in which Commodus, Narcissus, Senator Gaius, and Galen discuss the emperor's health:

Narcissus: Do you expect Marcus to be well enough by morning for an audience?

Commodus: That's difficult to say, general.

Narcissus: Perhaps, Master Galen, you may say.

Galen: It's difficult to name a time . . .

Commodus: May I remind everyone that Master Galen is the finest medical philosopher in the Empire and his detailed assessment of the Emperor is delicate and confidential and is the business of the immediate family alone.

Narcissus: I would venture, with all respect: the Emperor's health is the business of every soul in the empire.

Gaius: Yes! The days of Imperial Prerogative and disdain for the Senate are over – thanks to your father! Now report to the Senate, Master Galen: what is Marcus' state?

Commodus: Report, Master Galen, by all means. The Senate demands it . . .

Galen: We are talking simply about a disturbance of the hues [*read*: "humors"]. Nothing more. In precisely one hour I will analyze the Emperor's bile and then my assistants and I will stand by in an unflinching vigil until his fever breaks. Now with your permission [–] Caesar, Senators? I must return to my patient.

Commodus gestures him out as if he were just amused.

Commodus: One doctor now knows his place in the empire. Congratulations, general, your victory seems to inspire courage everywhere.

The ambiguity intended in these exchanges is eliminated in the film when Commodus smothers Marcus Aurelius in his tent. Often, literary details of a script are eliminated once a more vivid, if less subtle, visual replacement is discovered. That the final choice was to show this murder is not surprising in the case of a director known for preferring the visual to the verbal. A simple but discomfiting scene, it verifies for the viewer beyond any question Commodus' guilt and establishes a motive for Maximus to avenge Marcus Aurelius and fight for his dream of a *res publica restituta*, a restored Roman republic.

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Commodus stands in the way of Marcus Aurelius' ideal vision of Rome. Dio describes Commodus as extremely naïve and full of ignorance.⁴ To combat such innate inability, the historical Marcus attempted to provide Commodus with astute advisors. Franzoni effectively dramatizes the disappointment that Marcus must have had in his son. He describes Commodus' faults as ignorance and arrogance and has Marcus plan to transfer power from the Antonine dynasty to the senate and people of Rome:

It's not because he's young, it's because he's ignorant and arrogant. His sister is a better man. That's why I have undertaken to begin sweeping changes in the relationship between the emperor and the Senate . . . If the Emperor and the Senate can share power then the people will be ready to take their share.

In the film, some engaging dialogue inspired by the real Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* has been added. Marcus wrote: "If mortal life can offer you anything better than justice and truth, self-control and courage . . ."⁵ In *Gladiator*, Commodus says to his father:

You wrote to me once, listing the four chief virtues. Wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance. As I read the list, I knew I had none of them. But I have other virtues, Father. Ambition. That can be a virtue when it drives us to excel. Resourcefulness. Courage. Perhaps not on the battlefield, but there are many forms of courage. Devotion. To my family, to you. But none of my virtues were on your list. Even then, it was as if you didn't want me for your son.⁶

This is an effective piece of writing. Franzoni or one of his later collaborators lists specific virtues from the *Meditations* and has Commodus supplement them with plausible virtues of his own. The scene makes it clear that it was Marcus Aurelius' failure as a father to recognize the most important of Commodus' virtues, devotion to his family and his father. This failure, which both now regret, ultimately results in parricide and leads Rome into tyranny and oppression.

4 Dio 73.1.

5 *Meditations* 3.6.1; quoted from Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, tr. Maxwell Staniforth (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964; several rpts.), 57.

6 Quoted from *Gladiator: The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic*, ed. Diana Landau (New York: Newmarket, 2000), 135. This book contains photos, interviews, and more and should be consulted alongside my essay.

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Herodian tells us that at first Commodus was highly popular in Rome, and so he is for the most part in the film.⁷ Commodus' triumphal entry on his return from Germania, introduced by the now famous "fly-over" of Rome, was enhanced by computer-generated visual effects. Actually, our ancient sources give us mixed and confusing statements about the Roman people's attitude towards Commodus, and the film reflects this during his triumph by contrasting the (computerized) formal arrangement of soldiers with a montage of (real) angry Romans. This contrast is the result of Franzoni's original conception of the Roman populace as a lower-class and even bizarre rabble in the manner of Federico Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969), a film based on a Roman novel from the time of the early empire. Franzoni had the Colosseum surrounded by relic hawkers selling memorabilia of deceased gladiators, merchants selling lion paws and leopard ears as aphrodisiacs, bare-chested and gaudily painted prostitutes, and an albino dwarf with "Jimmy Winters white hair and almost crimson eyes." In fact, at one point Franzoni describes a detail which, in one of only three footnotes in the screenplay, is attributed to Fellini's film:

Some slaves of the upper-class 'fans' smack long WOODEN HANDS together overhead as their MASTERS recline in luxurious padded seats. Others – equally wealthy – leap up cheering and one even grabs the 'souvenir hands' away from his slave and whacks them together himself.

The note states: "Borrowed from Fellini but may be an historical artifact." Some of this urban color is preserved in the final version, where we see a juggler, prostitutes, an elephant, caged wildcats, and finally a frenzied sportsbook.

Balancing this socio-economic circus is a wonderfully human touch in the clay figures of his gods that Maximus keeps with him. These are either divine *Penates*, protective divinities of the Roman family, or otherworldly *Lares*, figurines of minor Roman guardian spirits, and that is how Franzoni originally conceived them in his first draft. But in the film they have been turned into figurines of his wife and son. Franzoni's conception would have lent the film another legendary-heroic touch in that the original figures would have been analogous to the statuettes of the gods that Aeneas, the ancestor of the Romans, first brought to Italy centuries before the time of Romulus and Remus. Virgil mentions this detail in the opening sentence of his *Aeneid*. Franzoni's figurines were a kind of

⁷ Herodian 1.7.

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Virgilian *Lares* in their authentic emphasis on worship of one's ancestors. Regrettably, the change made them far less Roman and much more Californian in the worship of one's wife and child.

Throughout the arena sequences, the first draft authentically portrays Commodus as remaining in his imperial box, as Herodian says.⁸ But Franzoni excludes the Buffalo Bill-like marksmanship and skill at slaughtering large numbers of animals for which the historical Commodus was admired by the mob. Commodus is alleged once to have allotted himself just 100 spears to kill 100 lions and did not miss with a single throw! But to modern audiences, killing people is one thing, acceptable and even expected in action films; but killing scores of lions, tigers, and bears, not to mention the ostrich that the albino dwarf rides – that is barbaric. Modern taste would never tolerate it in a film. Instead, Commodus uses his Praetorian Guard in an impressive show of protection to descend into the arena when he confronts Maximus, the gladiator he has not yet recognized. The scene once again reminds us that the visual impact of the cinema almost always outweighs both historical authenticity and the scriptwriter's specifications.

The latter third of the first draft clearly demonstrates how Hollywood works from visual conceptions much more than from historical texts. Here are some examples: Narcissus throws rocks up at Commodus in the imperial box, an act which the mob loves. This is when the owners of the Golden Pompeii Olive Oil Company begin using Narcissus' endorsement on their advertising with the slogan that "Narcissus would kill for a taste of Golden Pompeii Olive Oil." Promoter Proximo munches on live butterfly chips; the Roman senate disintegrates into squabbling; Narcissus is told that his family is dead, but later Lucilla surprises him by informing him they are alive – a dramatic trick used in countless seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French plays set in the ancient world; and a reporter for the *Daily Action*, as Franzoni calls it – the *Acta Diurna* were the Roman equivalent of our daily newspapers – interviews Narcissus after a match and writes an anti-imperial, pro-republican article:

... encased in the armor of a demigod, Narcissus The Good continues his impossible climb in the arena where he was unjustly cast by the emperor of Rome. This writer asks: between a Senate that debates truth until they choke, an Emperor who has the birth sign of a woman, is it possible there is more virtue within the arena than without?

8 Herodian 1.15.7.

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There are also numerous crass comments and bits of bathroom humor in this draft, and Narcissus poses before the crowds as if he were Arnold Schwarzenegger – who had once, billed as “Arnold Strong,” been the hero in a Z-grade epic, Arthur Allan Seidelman’s *Hercules in New York* (1970). Narcissus frequently entertains the mob with his catch line “Surrender or I’ll kill you!” which was replaced in the film by the more somber and heroic “Strength and Honor.” For the climax, Commodus immolates Lucilla and a number of senators in a brass bull – much as the notoriously cruel Greek tyrant Phalaris had actually done centuries before on Sicily – and then replaces these senators with chimpanzees dressed in purple-trimmed togas. Narcissus finally strangles Commodus and sails off into the sunset with his family.

Franzoni claims that he envisioned the film as a tragedy, but this is obviously not the case, unless by “tragedy” he meant a story with a dramatic catastrophe. He said elsewhere: “My vision from the beginning was [:] this is not *Ben-Hur*. It’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. This is a grownup movie about war, death, and life in Rome – the life of a gladiator.”⁹ But the preliminary screenplay demonstrates that Franzoni planned the final third of the film to be a grotesque, if still heroic, joy-ride somewhat along the lines of Simon West’s *Con-Air* (1997), Michael Bay’s *Armageddon* (1998), or the contemporary *Mummy* films. He even regrets the elimination of the olive oil endorsement: “I would have liked to have had more fun with this.”

The film version, of course, is much more serious, so let us now turn to the second draft of the screenplay, finished six months later, to see if the heroically tragic ending was conceived there. The revisions in the second draft are attributed to a second writer, John Logan, whose credits include Benjamin Ross’s HBO film *RKO 281* and Oliver Stone’s *Any Given Sunday*, both from 1999 and containing notable allusions to classical antiquity. In this second draft the protagonist’s name is now “Maximus Meridas,” perhaps named after the Sextus Quintilius Maximus who is mentioned in the *Augustan History*.¹⁰ He was one of the consuls in A.D. 172 and a successful military leader. He fell victim to Commodus around A.D. 183.

The first act still takes place in Germania, Maximus’ wife and son are killed on their Spanish farm, Maximus then trains for the arena in North Africa, and the story shifts to the Colosseum. The people of Rome love his independent spirit, and Lucilla and several senators seek him out to

9 Quoted from *Gladiator*, 31.

10 *HA Comm.* 11.14.

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free Rome of the tyrannical Commodus. Commodus threatens the life of Lucilla's son Lucius Verus, forcing her to inform him of the plot against him. In a montage Commodus rounds up the senatorial conspirators as well as a slew of such disrespectful or liberal types as actors, Christians, and scholars. (Arrests of intellectuals occurred several times in Roman history.)

All of this, except for the round-up of those mentioned, is used in the filmed version. (The outtakes in its DVD edition include Maximus' and our brief glimpse of some Christian prisoners in the Colosseum.) But the ending of this second version of the screenplay is very different from the film, yet superior to that in the first draft. Maximus escapes through the labyrinthine Roman sewer system, the Cloaca Maxima, stabs to death the general who betrayed and replaced him, leads the Felix regiment on horseback into the city of Rome, and wins the battle against Commodus' Praetorian Guard. Commodus has already stabbed Lucilla to death and is now going after young Lucius Verus. Maximus arrives with the Roman cavalry in the nick of time, pursues Commodus through the network of dark corridors and air shafts beneath the Colosseum, and kills him. Cutting one of the counterweight ropes, Maximus then lets an elevator platform carry him and the slain tyrant up to the arena floor to the delight of 50,000 screaming Romans. As he had promised Marcus Aurelius and Lucilla, Maximus instructs the senate to establish a new government. He takes the orphaned Lucius back to his farm in Spain with him for a new beginning.

Franzoni's concept for the film – “war, death, and life in Rome” – allows him much flexibility. It leaves him free to make the decision most theatrical writers have had to face, not only ancient ones – whether to provide a tragic or a happy ending. For example, Euripides decided to give happy endings to several of his tragedies, among them *Alcestis* and the lost *Antigone*, and Pierre Corneille battled the Aristotelian purists of his time to make his Roman history dramas end happily. As we have seen, the two versions of Franzoni's screenplay ended quite happily, too. The film, however, is different. It ends with the death of Commodus and the restoration of Roman freedom, but Maximus has to sacrifice his life for Rome, and we mourn his death.

Clearly this semi-tragic and heroic ending was decided upon late in the development of the story, as we know from its absence in the two versions of the screenplay. But the change well accords with Ridley Scott's working method. He usually continues the story-development process in the editing room and throughout post-production. Co-producer Douglas Wick verified this in an interview:

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Last minute tweaking of the script and a new ending helped the production to stay on track. “Literally until the last two or three weeks of shooting, we were making adjustments,” says Wick.¹¹

Franzoni, too, reports that the final editing process changed the story yet again:

Creatively, I was concerned when the family was dropped out of the script. As originally written, that’s a big part of what motivates the hero. And then when I saw the first cut, suddenly, the “family” was back in – Ridley had shot some pickups in Italy while scouting *Hannibal*, and there it was, the emotional element I wanted.

Hannibal refers to the modern cannibal Hannibal Lector, the subject of Scott’s next film, not to the ancient Carthaginian general, Rome’s greatest enemy. “Pickups” are brief segments shot before or after principal photography that are inserted during the editing process. So it seems rather likely that it was Scott who turned the film from Franzoni’s socio-political, delightfully bizarre action film into a more somber study of war, death, and life in Rome. Scott’s films tend towards semi-tragic endings, in which he almost always kills off at least one important character. This is the case in some of his best-known films: *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Black Rain* (1989), and most notably *Thelma and Louise* (1991), in which both heroines die. Almost all the protagonists of *Black Hawk Down* (2001) die in action. Although it sometimes seems that Hollywood films as a rule end happily, there had been highly influential recent precedents for killing off the protagonists in semi-tragic endings, most notably James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997), Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and George Lucas’s *Star Wars – Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999). All three were the top grossing films of their respective year; the first two also garnered Best Picture Oscars.

Scott reshaped the story line of *Gladiator* and significantly improved its tone. The film now opens with Maximus’ vision of death as an endless field of wheat, a plant long associated with Proserpina, queen of the land of the dead. (Proserpina’s mother is Ceres, the goddess of agriculture.) Maximus’ hortatory speech to his soldiers before battle is now not about Roman politics, as Franzoni originally wrote it, but about death and eternity:

11 Liane Bonin, “No Roman Holiday,” *Entertainment Weekly* (May 5, 2000); quoted from its electronic publication.

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Fratres, three weeks from now I will be harvesting my crops. Imagine where you will be, and it will be so. Hold the lines, stay with me. If you find yourself alone, riding in green fields with the sun on your face, do not be troubled, for you are in Elysium, and you're already dead! Brothers, what we do in life echoes in eternity.

Every time Maximus prepares for combat, be it military or gladiatorial, he rubs dirt into his hands, a primordial reminder that he is a farmer and a warrior, a kind of Cincinnatus in touch with Mother Earth. This, too, was a late addition to the film, although in the second draft of the screenplay Juba had said:

Among my people we honor the soil of our home. Our ancestors are in that soil. All their dreams live there. I will never see my home again. The soil is dead and no one honors them, so the dreams die.

With these words we may compare the film's final scene in this draft, which expresses the circle of life, death, and rebirth. We are on Maximus' Spanish estate at dawn:

Maximus stands with Lucius at his old vineyard. It is still scorched and dead, weeds overgrowing the vineyards, the house ruined. Maximus puts a hand on the boy's shoulder, this boy so like his own son.

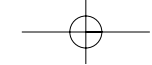
Maximus: It doesn't look it now . . . but soon we'll have it growing again . . . Next year there will be vines, and then there will be grapes . . . It will be alive.

We leave them, dreaming of the future.

FADE OUT.

THE END

This ending shows us that Juba's simple agrarian values have been transferred to Maximus. In the film, they make him fearless of death. Once he learns that his wife and son have been killed, Maximus' eagerness to join them in Elysium is tempered only by his commitment to his creed ("what we do in life echoes in eternity") and his promise to Marcus Aurelius to restore the republic. Death takes Maximus to the gates of Elysium and the joyously expectant shades of his wife and son. Not at all awash in Christian eschatology, as most films set in the Roman Empire used to be, *Gladiator* leaves us with a pagan tranquility in regard to death and the afterlife. Neither the first nor the second draft of the screenplay, neither story boards nor principal photography had contained such a



Gladiator from Screenplay to Screen 15

perspective on life and death. From Franzoni's original conception in Mesopotamia thirty years earlier to Scott's visit to Italy in preparation for his next film, *Gladiator* was always a work in progress – a modern work about antiquity that rewards our study of its narrative development. From its beginnings as a satire of modern life set in antiquity, it became the first heroic tragedy on the cinema screen set in the Greco-Roman world at the turning point of two millennia.

