

Dressed to Kill: Pontius Pilate's On-screen Attire

After Julius and Augustus Caesar, the Roman name moderns are most familiar with is perhaps that of Pontius Pilate and, in like fashion, the prefect may be one of the Romans best known by sight. A principal figure in the Passion story, Pilate has been portrayed, according to the Internet Movie Database, over 200 times. As one of the cinematic tradition's most representative Romans, Pilate's appearance presents an evocative though not uncomplicated instance of classical reception (McDonough 2008). In his discussion of *Julius Caesar* (MGM, 1953), Roland Barthes (1972: 26-28) had ridiculed the "insistent fringes" of hair that the characters wore as a sign of "Roman-ness." As with hairstyles, costuming can be a tricky way to convey ancient authenticity. As Jon Solomon (2001:27) has noted, too much faithfulness to historical detail can result in a "cinematic boredom" leading to ridicule, while too little "leans toward absurdity." Derived from a longer work about Pilate on screen, this paper presents an abbreviated survey of Pilate's dress in film and television and an initial analysis of trends.

The earliest depictions of Pilate—e.g. on the Junius Bassus sarcophagus (359 A.D.), the Maskell Passion Ivory (425 A.D.), or the mosaic in San Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna (550 A.D.) (see Hourihane 2009: 52-83)—represent him in civilian garb. Various films follow suit, though not without a heavy dose of symbolism. In Cecil B. DeMille's silent masterpiece, *King of Kings* (DeMille Productions, 1927), for instance, Victor Varconi plays a powerful Pilate who, despite his physically imposing size, wears an opulent Art Deco chiton, fashioned by the noted designer, Adrian. With gaudy bracelets around his biceps and wrists, Varconi's Pilate is meant to evoke the hedonism of the *Satyricon* as much as the holy Scriptures. In the peplum period of the 1950s, Pilate is seen in clothing that is more overtly ceremonial, as befits an imperial magistrate. Frank

Thring's fleshy Pilate in *Ben Hur* (MGM, 1959), for instance, wears a resplendent purple and gold toga that starkly contrasts with the earth-tones of Charlton Heston's Judah. The relatively unassuming tunic worn by David Bowie's Pilate in Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* (Universal, 1989) likewise points to the prefect's civilian function, although the simplicity of his dress belies this prefect's uncompromising sense of worldly power.

In other instances, directors and costume designers have chosen to stress Pilate's military nature, presenting him in a highly-chiseled cuirass or *lorica segmentata*. In *Hill Number One* (a 1951 television production produced by the Family Rosary Brigade), the story of the Passion is told by a Catholic chaplain to a group of hardened Korean War artillerymen; understandably, Pilate (Leif Erickson) is depicted in soldierly garb as a point-of-view character. A half-century later, Hristo Shopov, the Pilate of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (Icon, 2003) appeared primarily in military dress, meticulously designed by Maurizio Millenotti. Dressed to intimidate, Shopov's Pilate appears to the crowd from the top of the praetorium in a scene recalling Fascist Italy as much as ancient Jerusalem. Since Gibson's *Passion*, Pilate has generally been shown in uniform, though not without touches of dramatic flair: James Nesbitt gives his leather cuirass some Ulster flair with a Tartan scarf in the BBC/HBO *Passion* (2008), for instance, while in the *Ben Hur* remake (Paramount 2015), Pilou Asbaek wears an improbable ermine stole over his armor, apparently a nod to HBO's *Game of Thrones*. For NBC's *A.D. The Bible Continues* (2015), costume designer Luciano Capozzi looked to Titian's *Ecce Homo* (1543) for inspiration and emphasized an oxblood palette for Pilate's costumes so as to suggest cruelty (Capozzi 2016).

In *FilmCraft: Costume Design* (2012), noted designer Nadoolman Landis notes that costuming is a critical part of “articulat[ing] the visual world of the screenplay” and bringing about “a marriage of concept and imagery.” Every cinematic retelling of the Passion story seeks to depict Christ in a new way, and so it is with Pilate. The script the prefect will follow may be a predictable one, but the figure he cuts and the clothing he wears each time will be presented anew for maximum dramatic effect.

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