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"Swinging the Muses": Terpsichore in Hollywood

This paper examines one of only a few films about the Greek Muses. Alexander Hall's Down to Earth (1947) is a star vehicle for "love goddess" Rita Hayworth, who plays Terpsichore. High on Mount Parnassus, Terpsichore hears that "Swinging the Muses," a Broadway musical currently in rehearsal, is going to present audiences with a wrong image of the Muses and of classical Greek civilization. She decides to come down to earth and to set matters right. She manages to change what is originally a jazzy show into one as artsy as it is highbrow but in the process turns it into a flop. So she has to revert to its original version to ensure the show's success.

Most fascinating about its otherwise routine plot is the film's perspective on classical culture and its place in the modern world. As Down to Earth makes clear in its first big production number, the original version of "Swinging the Muses" is witty but highly irreverent and brash. ("That could only come from America," one of the Muses comments, quite correctly.) This show is unconcerned about factual accuracy regarding Greek myth, art, or clothing and about Western culture in general, both high (European) and low (American). When Terpsichore corrects this inauthentic presentation by re-choreographing it, everything becomes gloomy and boring.

The correct attitude toward classical civilization, the film implies at this stage, seems to be one of awe before a great--because entirely serious--culture. Popular appeal is not quite the thing for the traditional view of The Glory That Was Greece. But there is a satiric twist. An accurate perspective, the film goes on to suggest, today reaches only a few and rather stuffy high-society types; it is lost on all others and therefore cannot prevail. If Greek culture is to come alive for the masses, it has to be updated and popularized. In the process it necessarily becomes distorted. (Practically all successful films and television shows set in antiquity prove in abundance that this is so.) To most modern people, the real past--in Ranke's phrase, wie es eigentlich gewesen ("how it actually was")--is too alien and remote to be of compelling interest. But even the wrong stories that are told about antiquity in today's visual media and that reach millions may be better than little or no ancient culture or history at all.

In a second, doubtless unintended twist on the plot, however, Terpsichore's supposedly correct presentation of Greek civilization in Down to Earth turns out to be just as inauthentic as the first version of "Swinging the Muses" had been. Ironically, the film itself exemplifies the unresolved tensions between attested and invented aspects of Greek culture. This is the heart of its interest for classicists today.