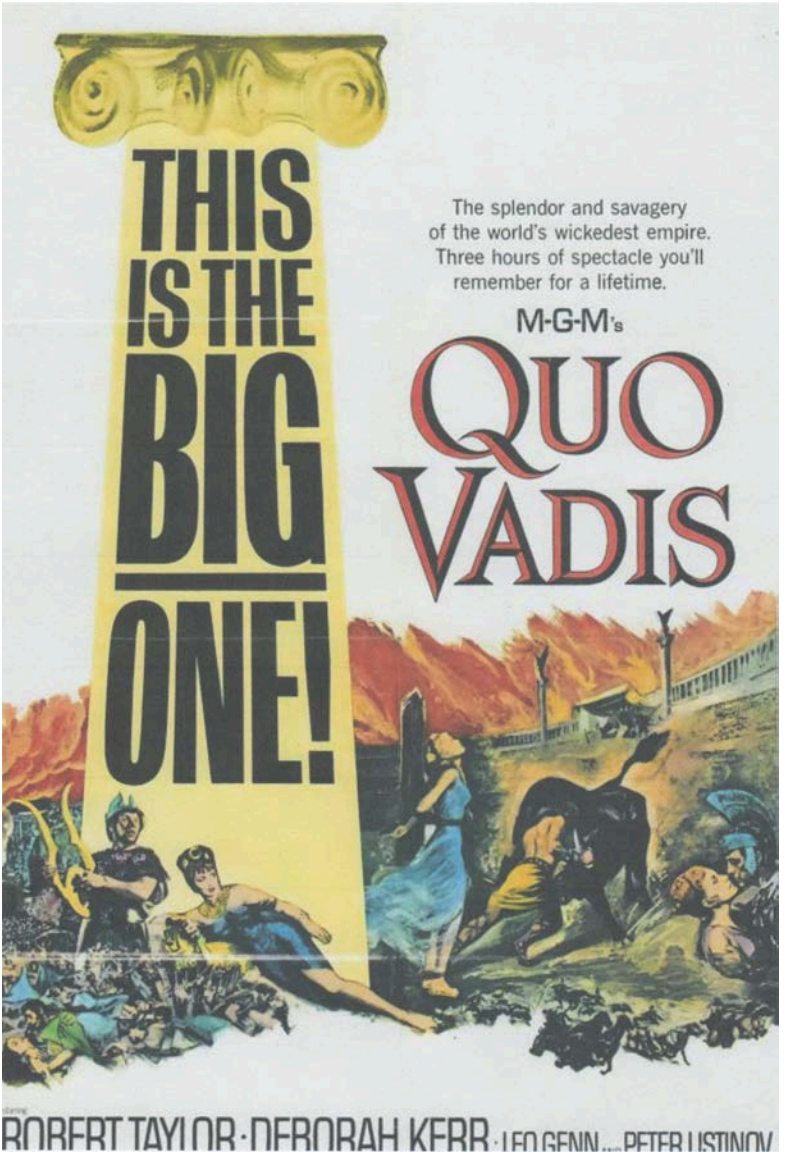


1

"Quo Vadis?" is a question, in Latin meaning "Where are you going?" -- a call that resonates on many levels in this movie.[2]

I was eleven in 1952 when I first saw it.
From then on I loved Deborah Kerr,
though it took Young Bess and puberty
for me to “fall in love”.

After my obsession was in full bloom, one day
in a used magazine store searching for stories
on Deborah, I found an old Holiday magazine
with a review of Quo Vadis. It theorized that
this Roman costume drama with its spectacle
and “cast of thousands” - I believe the phrase
originated with that movie - was the last of its
breed.
I remember it began, “It is doubtful if
the caveman who saw the last dinosaur
knew what he was seeing.”
I laughed even then, knowing that
since then there had been The Robe[3]
and Demetrius and the Gladiators.[4]
...Not too long ago, I read someone’s
reference to “spectaculars” as a movie genre
“going back to The Robe”. *Sic transit gloria*.

Perhaps Quo Vadis was neither the last nor the first, but, by me, it was the best of them.

Deborah Kerr is Lygia, who lives in the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero.  She and her

parents are Christians, which means they are against conquest and slavery, they believe in the power of love.
Christians are persecuted and misunderstood: “a nest of Christians”, even the suave Petronius says;  baptism is believed to be “a nasty bath of black water”; a woman is shocked to realize she’d been “raising my children next to the house of dirty Christians”. In the world I’d grown up in, to be Christian was the accepted and good thing.
In those days of McCarthyist repression, the uppermost message of Quo Vadis was pro-Christian, but it taught a much larger understanding -- of how something that is really good and right can be demonized and persecuted.  How the dominant gods and values may be wrong.  It changed immeasurably how I looked at the world.

Lygia and her family have to be careful people don’t find out their secret.  For instance, the young Roman general, Marcus Vinicius, who

stays there overnight on his way home from victories in the North.

But I'm telling the story backwards from how the movie does, for it is at this point, at sunset, that we first meet Lygia, when Marcus does, fresh from his bath.
She enters the villa's inner garden, raises her arms, lighting the oil lamps that hang from a trellis. Her pink gown wraps her body in soft folds, her hair winds round her head, falls down her shoulder, a "soft golden crown with stars in it." Her movements are strong and graceful, like the ballerina Deborah once was. The composer, Miklos Rozsa has given Lygia a haunting musical theme, tranquil and profound. For a moment there is no dialogue except that between the vision of Lygia, lighting lamps. and Rozsa's hymn to her.

Then Marcus finds his voice, though at first it seems he is quoting:
"Behold she stands with her gown hung loose.
Framed is her face in golden tresses,

reflecting the milk-white beauty of her
shoulders.  So it was that Venus
stood before Mars, welcoming her lover.
-- Nothing do I see that is not perfection!
...I take it you're in service to this household."
"Very much so, " she answers.
"And your name?"
"Lygia."
"Lygia, you're a windfall.  I shall sacrifice
a dozen white doves to Venus to
commemorate our meeting!"
"Your sacrifice will be in vain, commander."
"By the gods! The old general must know a
good slave market!  Not only beauty, but spirit,
as well!"
"There are no slaves in this household,"
she says with unexplained fervor.
"As for the old general, as you call him,
well, I have the honor and the joy to be
his daughter."

Marcus apologizes, and from then on speaks
more respectfully, but remains, as Lygia will
put it later, "most predatory", pouring on

compliments that give excuse to his touching her hair, catching her hand.
Lygia is - well - she's interested: it's certainly not the usual evening at home.  She parries

his advances with lively argument, defending the women of Britain and Gaul with whom he's comparing her, then excuses herself with a small, ironic joke.
At dinner Marcus describes his bloody battles, to a less than enthusiastic audience, as he finds, and, probing for the reason, learns that Lygia is his hosts' adopted daughter; in fact, she is legally a hostage, taken captive in the old general's last campaign, the child of the defeated king.
"We've tried to erase the wrong done her by the love we have shown her," explains her mother, Pomponia.
"You should envy me such love, commander," Deborah tells him.
"Lygia," he returns, "I envy the roof that covers you, this one, or any future."

With what  a pang I heard that line, the second time Quo Vadis came to town.
How it spoke my feelings!  I envied anyone who knew her, who had any contact with her.
I even envied her dogs.  I hadn't gotten so far

as “the roof”, but this raised a tantalizing question:  Would it be worth it to be an inanimate object, but to get to be near Deborah Kerr?
Luckily, I didn’t have to decide.

Dinner ends with the arrival of a family friend, a rabbi, Paul, of Tarsus.  He is cautiously introduced to Marcus as “a philosopher”.
Paul grins to Lygia, “Did you know that all this time I’ve been teaching you philosophy?”

Marcus interjects, “Well, I don’t know a great deal about philosophy; and lovely women shouldn’t have the time to think that deeply.”

Soon afterwards, Marcus and his fellow soldier-guest leave to make the evening tour of the camp, and the friends can speak openly of the great and dangerous work in which they are engaged.
Paul sighs,  “ I assure you I would have been cautious in the presence of your guests. Though at times I admit the desire to cry

the message aloud.  But I suppose tactics must be applied, even in the spreading of love, and faith.

...Those two vital young men, for instance. They are Rome! If only we could teach them, we could teach the world!"
"Marcus Vinicius?" Lygia echoes. "You're asking for miracles."
"I am," says Paul with an amiable smile, agreeing it's impossible, and yet with the twinkle of one who has known a miracle or two. "I am indeed."

Thus are events set in play.

I won't tell the whole of the story, which involves Nero's burning of Rome, Christians being fed to the lions, and much else of a stirring nature. But here, in the first third of the movie, so often the best third in her movies of the time, there are two other scenes where I want to linger:

That night Lygia sits up late by herself in the garden, pondering the possibility of bringing Marcus to understand, absently drawing

the Christians' secret symbol, a stylized fish, in the sand at her feet.

Marcus returns, finds her there. The dialogue is worth quoting at some length.

Marcus: "There is still nothing I see that is not perfection. But if you were thinking of me, as you undoubtedly were, do I look that much like a fish?"

Hastily she scratches out her drawing, “It - it wasn’t anything to do with you.”
“You’re too lovely to be a lonely artist, Lygia. But then I did ask you to wait up for me.”
“It was merely that I couldn’t sleep.”
“Nor can I. I’ll tell you what, Lygia, the night’s still young. And this place is unworthy of our first meeting. Let’s go into the city to Petronius’ house. There’ll be gaiety there you’ve never dreamed of, dancers, musicians, singers, the best in Rome! My uncle’s house was built by the Goddess of Love herself.”
“No!” she interrupts. “No, it’s too late. I mean, it’s impossible. “
“Well,” he chuckles, “we could plan it more discretely perhaps. What about tomorrow? You’ll come see my triumph, won’t you? And tomorrow night there’ll be a feast at the palace to tempt all the gods.”
“No!” she cuts in more decisively now. “I don’t wish to watch your triumph. I must go in now. Good night, commander.”
“Tell me,” he detains her. “What is it you see that you don’t like?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t attracted by what I see, Marcus Vinicius.”
“Well, then ....” he takes a step closer.
“It’s what I hear I don’t like.” “You see, a man’s fame always brings him fresh enemies!
Who’s been telling you stories about me?”
“You have. From your own lips. Ugly stories of conquest and bloodshed.”
“Conquest! What’s conquest? It’s the only means of uniting and civilizing the world under one power. Have to spill a little blood to do it.”
“No! There’s a gentler and more powerful way of doing that. Without bloodshed and war, without slaves and captives bound in chains to your triumphal chariots, commander.”
“There’ll always have to be slaves!
Who will do the work?”
“Paul speaks of a world in which there would be no slaves.” Her voice is full of hope.
“That beggar-faced philosopher shouldn’t be stuffing your luscious little head with such nonsense!”
“How could I expect you to understand!” Lygia blazes. She turns to leave, he grabs her.

“I wish you were a slave, as I first thought!  I’d have offered a price for you, a king’s ransom for a king’s daughter!”
“And taken me to your estates in Sicily with all the others?”
“On a special ship.”
Her voice shakes in anger.  “Oh!  What a way for a conqueror to win a woman!
To buy her like an unresisting beast!
What false security you must have in your heart and soul, in your manhood, Marcus Vinicius!  What hidden scorn you must have for yourself!”

I had never heard a woman talk like this!
Calling into question the whole mind set of “masculinity”, going right to its hidden heart of self-scorn, mirrored in the scorn she felt for him, poured, icily eloquent, over him, in her disappointment that he won’t listen to her, won’t take her ideas seriously, can’t see her as a full human being.
“How could I expect you to understand!”

This was true fire!  Regardless of what happened later in this film, I'd had my money's worth by now.

There's one more scene to tell of, or, rather, not so much a scene as a place, the House of Women.  (When I was eleven, "the house of women" meant to me exactly that.)
It appeared shortly twice in the movie, unremarked in the flow of the whole drama, and yet there was something I couldn't have named that called to me wildly whenever this setting, these little scenes, appeared, scenes even I never thought of afterwards.

...I must tell this much more of the plot:  Lygia has made Marcus so mad he acts in accord with his lowest impulses.  She's a hostage; he gets Nero to reassign her to him.
The first Lygia knows of it is the next evening when she's abducted by "ten big Praetorian guards" and brought to the palace to share Marcus' dinner couch at the feast.  There,

there will be scenes of Sybaritic splendor, which Lygia will find no temptation.

But before -- and after -- there is “the house of women”. Deborah is brought into a large room filled with women in various states of dress. The air rocks with their soft, excited talk. She’s led through this room to a private enclosure, curtained off from the rest. There women will bathe her, dress her, adorn her hair. And there she meets Acté, assigned as her dresser.

When they are alone, Acté knocks over powder, draws in it the sign of the fish. When others are near, she speaks with double meanings. At the end of the evening, she arranges Lygia's escape.

Ah, the house of women!
As to what fantasies such a place could lead to later, in adulthood, perhaps it is best to draw a curtain.[5]

But now the first third of the movie is truly over, and Deborah is about done. There's more to her story, of course; but her scenes will be shorter, her lines sparse.
She will be last seen wearing her blue veil, part of a new holy family, with Marcus and an orphaned Christian boy.

...I wonder what happened to Lygia. There were women of power and influence in early Christianity; perhaps she became one. As she grew in age and stature, perhaps even

her teacher, Paul, came to know her sweet-sharp tongue, as she spoke her mind, about, for instance, how women were seen. Perhaps it was Lygia, herself, who later drove the saint to fume that women should be silent in church.


One more thing about Quo Vadis -- the poster. The most common image is from Lygia and Marcus' quarrel in the garden, the moment he grabs her, holds her to him. In the poster, her gown is skimpier than it really was, he wears more armor. The image is suggestive of rape in war; though the innocent could also see it as a woman in embrace with her soldier-lover. With each decade that's passed, I've liked it less.

Then, a couple of years ago, I was leafing through a catalog of films that schools could show to bring their subjects to life. There were lots of historical movies, and there was Quo Vadis. Only this time the poster was a head shot of the two of them, both facing

toward the future, toward the viewer, with lofty and determined expressions, Lygia in front, as if she were leading the way.  Some wrongs do get righted, over time.[6]

[1] Deborah Kerr and stand-in Marcella Gandini, during the filming of *Quo Vadis*

[2] *Quo Vadis?* was a 1951 film by MGM, based on the novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quo_Vadis_(novel)
Though *Quo Vadis?* is a question, it makes the text read funny unless I leave out the question mark; I have done so.

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Robe_(film)

[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demetrius_and_the_Gladiators

[5] Rosalie Crutchley and Deborah Kerr at the house of women. Crutchley later played Catherine Parr in the 1970 TV series *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*.