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REVIEW

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Pagan Martyrs, Murderous Monks: *Agora* Hits US Shores

The award-winning Spanish film about the 4th-5th century pagan martyr Hypatia, has aroused the ire of some Christians.

By **NATHAN SCHNEIDER**



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It isn't long before one gets the sense that there's something off about *Agora*, something not quite right. Chances are it's when Rachel Weisz, as the beguiling fourth-to-fifth-century **Neoplatonist** philosopher Hypatia, drops a cloth stained with her menstrual blood at the foot of a student who seeks to woo her—a style of abstinence-only education today's advocates might do well to copy. Despite every indication that what you're watching is a standard Hollywood period epic, you begin to doubt that it will ever get to the obligatory love scene. If you happened to read Hypatia's [Wikipedia page](#) on the way to the theater, you might even begin to fear for not seeing her undressed until the end, when she is stripped and torn to pieces by a bestial Christian mob.

Alejandro Amenábar's \$73 million, English-language movie (which just began a limited US release in New York and, on June 4, Los Angeles) is bursting at its formulaic seams. In two overwrought hours it crams in sex appeal, city-sized sets, gory battle scenes, political intrigue, religious zealotry, and enough of Neoplatonism's greatest hits to give us a sense for what Hypatia is supposed to be standing for. This last part, while being the toughest to reconcile—not least because of Hypatia's inconvenient celibacy—is also *Agora's* best hope. It comes as a welcome contrast, for instance, to HBO's *Rome*, which turns figures like Cicero and Cato into wimps compared to Mark Antony's muscles, with no



Rachel Weisz as the virgin philosopher Hypatia



mention of the intellectual feats by which we now know them best. Ancient world or this one, big ideas don't easily compete on screen with messy power struggles and lustrous bodies. But it's worth a try.

"I believe in philosophy," Hypatia declares, against all odds.

"Philosophy," growls a sensible politician. "Just what we need in times like these."

Amenábar stands with the heroine; he didn't just make this movie for his health. Since Voltaire and Edward Gibbon, the story of Hypatia has been a favorite nugget of the

Enlightenment narrative: her death at the hands of crazed monks marks the end of Greek high culture and the start of a steady descent into the Dark Ages. The story is supposed to stand as a beacon, like the lighthouse that towered over Hypatia's Alexandria, of the danger that religious passions pose to all that is wise and tolerant about the human spirit.

Nathan Schneider

Nathan Schneider is senior editor of the online religion magazine *Killing the Buddha* and a founding editor of the blog *Waging Nonviolence*. Visit his website at *The Row Boat*.