“A Touch Too Cerebral for That Audience”:

Eulogizing Caesar in HBO's “Rome” Season Two

The first episode of the second season of HBO’s series “Rome” showcases the aftermath of Caesar’s assassination, including the competing public speeches given by Brutus and Mark Antony at the funeral. While the episode’s narrative of the eulogies can stand alone, a closer look reveals a complex tissue of elements that play with the audience’s expectations of dramatic action and its presumed familiarity with Shakespeare’s culturally iconic treatment of those two speeches in *Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 2. The HBO Antony’s gibe to Brutus—that his speech was “a touch too cerebral for that audience”—becomes a metaliterary comment on history, interpretation, creative presentation, audience expectation and engagement, and reception.

This paper examines four scenes in the “Rome” episode “Passover”: (1) the public announcement of the impending funeral of Caesar; (2) the funeral itself as it is presented without dialogue; (3) the aftermath of the orations as discussed in the house of Servilia by Mark Antony and Brutus themselves; and finally (4) the Brutus and Antony speeches as discussed in a tavern by a group of rowdy lower-class Romans. Taken together, these scenes capitalize on the showrunners’ decision not to depict either Brutus or Mark Antony giving his eulogy and the resultant construction of dramatic tension. In particular, the tavern scene in its affinity with the messenger speech of Greek tragedy emphasizes the power of storytelling by shifting the speaker from Antony to a member of the Roman mob and also highlights the use of re-enactment as interpretation. The episode’s treatment of the funeral orations overall draws heavily from Shakespeare even as it reinvents him and his source, Plutarch.