

The Unpopular Octavian: Octavian as a Villain On-Screen

This paper analyzes the depiction of Octavian as a villain in popular film and televisual media, particularly in three different productions titled *Cleopatra* (1934, 1963, 1999) and *Rome* (2005-2007), and offers a rationale for the persistent portrayal of Octavian as a villainous figure.

Although there has been a good deal of research on the Roman world in film, especially by scholars like Monica Cyrino in her book *Big Screen Rome* and her edited collections on HBO's *Rome* (2008, 2015), and in-depth studies on Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony by scholars such as Lucy Hughes-Hallet (1990), Gregory N. Daugherty (2023), Maria Wyke (2006), and Rachel Kelly (2014), significant research on Octavian's role in popular media remains a desideratum. Due to his historical importance and his recurring presence, this area of classical reception is ready for a study dedicated to Octavian's villainous characterization, a project that will both complement existing work and take the field in new directions.

One reason for Octavian's vilification is an enduring fascination with Cleopatra, who is the cause of this portrayal in three of the four pieces in this study. Since Octavian was involved in a war against Antony and Cleopatra, a preponderance of sympathy for the Egyptian queen naturally reflects poorly on Octavian. However, these three productions often go against the primary sources in order to make Octavian as despicable as possible to the audience. For example, in the 1963 *Cleopatra*, Caesarion is depicted as much younger than he truly was at the time of his death in order to make his death on Octavian's orders more heinous. In reality, Caesarion was an older teenager and serving in the army when he was killed (Cassius Dio, 51.6, 51.15).

Another method utilized for vilifying Octavian is to distance him from Caesar. In a Cleopatra-centric narrative, Caesar is of course a sympathetic figure, her lover and, in two of the three productions, the father of her child. Since Caesar made Octavian his heir and adopted him posthumously, a relatively close relationship between the two may be inferred. However, the works under consideration here either elide Octavian's connection to Caesar or treat it skeptically to further vilify him, suggesting he is stealing Caesar's legacy from Caesarion and Cleopatra. This elision also occurs in relation to Antony, who takes the place of Octavian visually as Caesar's son (Kelly 2014, 137). Here, Antony becomes the primary avenger of Caesar whereas historically, that role was Octavian's (Appian *BC*, 3.2, 3.11).

HBO's *Rome* takes a different approach to Octavian since the series does not revolve around the portrayal of Cleopatra. Although *Rome* also employs the technique of distancing Octavian from Caesar, seen most egregiously in Octavian's focus on the inheritance itself rather than on revenge for Caesar, his vilification here stems from his combined traits of cleverness and ambition. Octavian is established as a genius very early in *Rome*'s first season and yet by the end of the show, is portrayed as twisted and is virtually unrecognizable to his family (2005-2007). This marriage of cleverness and ambition is seldom seen in heroic figures, nearly always featuring in villains, and it is Octavian's possession of these traits that further ensures his vilification in *Rome* (Klapp 1954, 21, 30).

Ultimately, this paper attempts to understand this vilification and the strategies used to show it on screen. I propose that through the focus on Cleopatra, the narrative separation from Caesar, and a negative view on Octavian's traits of cleverness and ambition, he has been cast in the role of villain in these modern adaptations, often in contradiction of the ancient sources.

Works Cited

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