

HBO *Rome* Series' Conflicted Representation of Octavian
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Augustus stabilized a chaotic Republic and established a system of government that was successful for three centuries, and for those reasons historians generally regard him as a highly capable leader. Yet the means he used to secure and maintain power are conflicting and ethically questionable. The recent treatment the HBO *Rome* series gives to the transition from Republic to Empire reflects the difficulty historians have had in evaluating Octavian's establishment of the principate and also his own character and motives. In the manner of Syme's *Roman Revolution*, the series uses the method of prosopography in depicting Octavian's ascendancy, albeit with fictional characters as well as those based on historical figures. Through this method Octavian, even though he is shown as stabilizing Rome politically and effecting positive change, is yet characterized in various ways as a "monster," to use his sister's descriptor.

HBO *Rome* tells the story of the transition from Republic to Empire through the lens of various individuals' personal lives and the intermesh with their public careers and the events of the late Republic. Viewers are not only shown the offices, honors, and functions that instrumental characters hold or perform, as well as their kinship, friends, and alliances, but are also given the characters' thoughts and feelings in many cases. The result of this collective biography is a sociological analysis that documents the establishment of the principate. Also, as part of the process, the Octavian is highlighted, sometimes in great detail.

Yet, even with such a high level of detail, the character of Octavian in HBO *Rome* is as enigmatic as in the historical sources. Portrayed as clever and politically astute from early on (see Boyd in Cyrino's *Rome*, Season One) and throughout, he is also shown as arrogant, stunted in his affections to the point of brutality, and monstrous in his use of family and friends in achieving his goals. Similarly, on occasion displaying high and seemingly sincerely felt ideals (e.g., on the highly important role of women and family in the state), at other times he is represented as petty and obstinately self-absorbed, and even near to perverted on occasion (e.g., his sadistic/masochistic sexual practices with Livia, his wife).

Given these conflicting views, the real Octavian is hard to find – particularly his ethical stance and motivations. HBO *Rome* is in fact true to the sources in this respect, in that scholars have variously evaluated him as ethically sound or manipulative and disingenuous, or have not even presumed to assess his character and motivations (see esp. Raaflaub and Toher, *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*).