

HBO's *Dux Femina*: Agrippina the Younger and Cersei Lannister in *Game of Thrones*

Fans and scholars alike have noted numerous historical parallels and models, especially from British history, for the numerous characters fighting, killing, and scheming to gain power and the Iron Throne in HBO's highly acclaimed and successful fantasy series *Games of Thrones*, based on George R.R. Martin's book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Mention of Roman models, however, is minimal; most common is the association between Hadrian's wall and *Game of Thrones*' wall in the north that separates the Seven Kingdoms from the dangers beyond it. But Roman influence on the books and TV series, whether intentional or not, should come as no surprise. Martin's website (<http://www.georgemartin.com/rome>; thankfully out of date!) notes his dislike of the TV series *Empire* and his enjoyment of HBO's *Rome*. He further attributes why he even bothered to watch *Empire* to his "morbid fascination with ancient Rome, especially the late Republic and early Empire" (and his cats supposedly are named Augustus and Caligula).

This paper explores Agrippina the Younger, namely her relationships with her husband Claudius, son Nero, and Nero's mistresses Acte and Poppaea, as the possible inspiration for the character of Cersei Lannister, the wife of one king, mother of another, and only daughter of one of the most powerful and wealthy men in the Seven Kingdoms. Due to length considerations and the immense popularity of the TV series (more people are familiar with it than Martin's books), I focus on the HBO series. I examine some of the parallels and differences between Agrippina and Cersei as well as the effects of these on reading Cersei, those associated with her, and their capacity to rule. Contrasts between the two women especially articulate the dangers inherent in Westeros' political system, condemn Cersei as wife, mother, and ruler, and place Agrippina in a better light.

The ambitious and manipulative Cersei attempts (Season 1) to hold sway over her husband King Robert (Claudius), whom she has cuckolded by committing incest with her brother. She works endlessly to ensure her son Joffrey (Nero) succeeds to the throne, despite the fact that he is the product of incest and not the rightful heir. Cersei schemes to preserve this secret, eliminating anyone who knows or may know, including, it is suggested, Robert himself.

As mother of the heir, Cersei displays a superior political and military knowledge to her 16 year old son (the series has aged Joffrey from the books, making him more akin to Nero). She fiercely meets any opposition to his succession and rules as regent (Season 2), while the inexperienced king instead delights in tormenting his future wife, playing with his crossbow, and watching one prostitute physically beat another. Although Cersei's influence over Joffrey seems ineffectual, his occasional resort to "my mother said" or agreement to her proposals (although ways of saving face) indicate a degree of maternal control over the increasingly sadistic teenage ruler.

Yet feminine jealousy and rivalry initiate Cersei's downfall (Season 3). As a rival with Margaery Tyrell (Acte, Poppaea) for the female influence in Joffrey's life, Cersei fears she is being usurped by her future daughter-in-law. Margaery's growing sway over Joffrey, Joffrey's interest in acting like a king, and Cersei's father's rising power correspond to the decline of Cersei's political effectiveness, her loss of control over son and kingdom, and further descent into paranoia.

Parallels with and deviations from Agrippina emphasize faults of these characters and their unfitness to rule: Robert is oblivious, weak, and can't control his wife; Joffrey is spoiled, cowardly, cruel, a monster created and unleashed by his mother. Cersei's inability to effectively challenge either Margaery or her father relegates her to a supporting role. Unlike Agrippina,

Cersei proves politically naïve and ineffectual. She so desires power that she is blind to her own and Joffrey's faults, incompetence, and their effects on the kingdom. Yet Cersei's failures (as a mother and as a ruler) may ultimately save her life and doom her son to a premature death.