

The Other on Screen in the 21st Century

This paper will explore how modern scholarship and criticism on gender in Classical Antiquity is informed by the representation of Roman and non-Roman women in television, by examining BBC-HBO's *Rome* and Starz' *Spartacus*. Our understanding of women roles in Greek and Roman society has developed in past decades as scholarship in Classics and outside our discipline has paved new ways of understanding gender, love, sexuality, familial relationships, and marriage in the ancient world. Important studies on the role of Roman and especially non-Roman women have shed light to the fluidity of the concept of the other in the ancient world (Augoustakis 2010 and Gruen 2011; cf. also the relevant collection of essays on gender and politics in film and television by Renger and Solomon 2012). But how do cinematographers and producers imagine the role of the female in the ancient world? In reconstructing the past, what are the traits with which they endow women in order to offer a final product aesthetically and commercially pleasing to modern audiences? And finally how could Classicists profit from the representation of women in modern film and television?

In this presentation, we shall look at two of the most successful television mini-series of the new century, *Rome* and *Spartacus*. To be sure, the two series are dominated by the Roman female figures who play a prominent and decisive in moving the plot forward: Atia's and Servilia's feud in *Rome* sets in motion their respective sons' desire to save or destroy the Republic, as Brutus and Octavian vie for power with Antony often becoming a ploy in the women's scheming; likewise, Lucretia and Ilithyia are the dominant forces in the gladiatorial *ludus* of Batiatus, as their thirst for power and social recognition propels them to act according to their own, often whimsical, aspirations, contrary to their husbands' wishes. Juxtaposed to this set of Roman women, there are a number of non-Roman women, female figures from the periphery

of the empire, often slaves or freedwomen, including Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen. Eleni, the faithful servant of Servilia, and Eirene, Pullo's German partner, occupy a fairly prominent role in the second season of *Rome*, which is also dominated by Cleopatra and the events that lead to Actium and beyond. Spartacus' hatred against the Romans is presented in the series as the result of his wife's unjust death; the women of the rebel group, Mira and Naevia, are cast in terms of manly virtue, as they espouse the cause of Spartacus in seeking freedom. The representation of the *other* in these two series will leave modern audiences wonder about the similarities and differences between Roman and non-Roman people in the ancient world. The fluidity between the two can be summarized best from the final scenes of each series: when Atia stares at the effigies of Mark Antony and Cleopatra during Octavian's triumph, her gaze transmits a sense of longing for the past, the glorious days of the Roman Republic; likewise, at the end of *Spartacus*, the Romans have been stripped of any respectability, as the Thracian rebel remains the final winner of the show.

WORKS CITED

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- Renger, A-B and Solomon, J., eds. 2012. *Ancient Worlds in Film and Television: Gender and Politics*. Brill.