

CAMWS Southern Section
Asheville, North Carolina
13-15 November 2008
Panel Proposal

Heroes of the Republic: *Rome*, Season Two
Panel Description

This panel will respond to the critical and commercial success of Season Two of the HBO-BBC television series *Rome*, which first aired in the US in the spring of 2007. Since its premiere in 2005, the ground-breaking series *Rome* has invited an ongoing scholarly discussion among classicists and film and media critics, both at conferences (first and most successfully at the CAMWS-Southern Section meeting in Memphis in 2006) and also in a recent collection of essays, edited by M. Cyrino, *Rome Season One: History Makes Television* (Blackwell, March 2008). This panel proposes to continue this dialogue by exploring, for the first time, several aspects of the second season of this intriguing saga that continues from the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March 44 BC to Octavian's triumph in August 29 BC. A primary theme to be examined on this panel will be the further development of the individual characters from Season One and the imagery associated with those characters, their actions and motivations. All four papers will emphasize the interconnectedness between the series and the ancient historical sources, together with the series' reception and its place within modern filmed and other media productions.

AV Requirements: LCD and sound cord hook-up for PowerPoint and clips.
Panelists will provide their own laptops.
Time requested: 120 minutes (optimal); 100 minutes (workable)

Paper #1: A Killer and a Fool: *Rome*'s Tragedy of Brutus.

Paired against the doomed Caesar, great king and/or sinister dictator, is the equally ill-fated Brutus, philosopher and tyrannicide. Indeed, cultural representations of the two tend to feature Brutus as protagonist, empathizing with the idealistic champion of popular liberty, whose struggle against despotism exacted a heavy penalty, loss of life as well as loss of hope. Brutus was famously analyzed by René Girard, who found in Shakespeare's play a man compelled to become that which he despised, caught up in the abusive exercise of power until, like Caesar, he is overcome by it.

In many ways, HBO's *Rome* presents an anti-Shakespearean Brutus, yet elements of mimesis remain, as do traces of the unfolding of fate preserved in the ancient narratives. The televised fall of Brutus is also overlaid with a range of motifs recognizable to a modern audience, which are then tweaked to supply an "authentic" flavor. The series makes use of a particular visual motif, the overhead shot of swirling action around a central, significant focus, to highlight three moments of mimesis and resolution in the tragedy of Brutus.

The visual motif is introduced in the last episode of the first series, as the conspirators circle around the mortally wounded Caesar. The next deployment of the shot comes during Caesar's funeral; soldiers hold back the howling mob from the pyre of the dead dictator, as the crowd struggles to reach him one last time and, failing that, hurls jewelry and personal possessions onto the flames. The scene replaces the familiar rival speeches by Brutus and Antony; the mob action that is only described by Shakespearean characters is here made visible, visceral, emphasizing Brutus' failure to connect with the Roman people even as much as the corpse of Julius Caesar.

Another instance of the visual motif comes in Brutus' act of self-baptism, a turning point in the character's arc. Driven by guilt and failure down a self-destructive path, Brutus finds himself again through ritual renewal: he is "cleansed" and "born again". As the waters of the river swirl around him, Brutus raises his hands toward the heavens in prayer to Divine Janus. The Christian overtones are apparent for a modern audience, as Brutus removes the "sin" of betrayal from his conscience and comes to accept his fate as Caesar's "killer" and "fool." The scene has no real parallel or opposite in Shakespeare (nor in Plutarch for that matter), but serves to externalize Brutus' sense of guilt in much the same way as the confrontation with the "evil genius" known in the tradition.

The relationship between Caesar and Brutus comes full circle in the final instance of the visual motif, as Brutus engineers his own death at Philippi. Where Shakespeare extends the scene to draw out the social pathos of Brutus' searching for a suicide helper among his reluctant friends and underlings, the HBO version of his death deliberately removes Brutus from community, even from social identity. Abandoned by his allies, Brutus removes all outward signs of status and power, to storm unarmed into the midst of the enemy line. Here he recreates the assassination scenario on the battlefield, as soldiers are shown from above, raining blows upon the sacrificial Brutus as they circle tightly around him. Far from "the noblest Roman of them all", the HBO Brutus becomes an anonymous statistic on the battlefield, unrecognized and unhonored.

Paper #2: A Necessary Fiction: Octavian on Screen.

Though the reign of Augustus is one of the best-attested periods of Roman history, Western literature and art depicting the important figures and events of the first century BCE have largely been determined not by Cassius Dio or Suetonius but by William Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw. These authors centered on Julius Caesar and as such, his young nephew, Octavian, remains on the fringe of the action. There is no significant dramatic representation of Octavian or Augustus in Western literature comparable to these portrayals of his adoptive father.

Whatever its other dramatic virtues or historical vices, the two seasons of the HBO series *Rome* deserve a place in film history for giving by far the most nuanced and penetrating portrayal of the youthful Octavian yet on film. Our sources for Octavian as a youth are so sketchy that even Anthony Everitt in his new biography of Augustus openly admits to supposition and fabrication in order to make sense of the young man's life. Thus in most representations, Octavian dwells on the fringe of the action, as in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (filmed in 1951, 1953, and 1969), or as the angel of death for Cleopatra (*Marcantonio e Cleopatra* in 1913 to *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1969). Roddy McDowall as Octavian in the 1963 *Cleopatra* appears most memorably as the seasick young general at Actium, economically portraying intellectual ability, violent ambition and physical frailty. Brian Blessed's more mature Augustus in the BBC's *I, Claudius* (1976) is a brusque paterfamilias trying helplessly to control his family and who drifts off to sleep while Horace is reading his *Carmen Saeculare*.

Against these oblique portrayals, the young Octavian of *Rome*'s second season, having as a boy (played by Max Pirkis) always been the smartest person in the room, at the death of Caesar is allowed to live only to be manipulated by Cicero and Antony. In the second season, the teenaged Octavian (played by Simon Woods) emerges as a complex, intelligent, and skilled manipulator of others, particularly members of his immediate family. A close comparison of the portrayal of Octavian in *Rome* with Everitt's portrayal attests the accuracy of the characterization and the depth of research that went into the depiction of this character who, by the end of the series, has become *Rome*'s hero.

Paper #3: “I’ the posture of a whore”: Cleopatra in *Rome* Season Two.

Cleopatra only appeared in one episode of Season One of HBO’s *Rome*, but it was a stunning addition to the Titus Pullo/Forrest Gump story arc. While drawing on film and stage conventions about the Egyptian queen, it also managed to screen an innovative portrayal of Cleopatra and her liaison with Julius Caesar. This paper will demonstrate how the second season of the series builds its Cleopatra from that depiction, while also drawing on several film versions as well as Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. The result is a subtly new reception of Cleopatra for the twenty-first century.

The series has maintained continuity with the first season in several ways. The same actress, Lyndsey Marshal, plays an unaged Cleopatra with similar costuming and make-up when in Alexandria. Charmian, who had appeared anachronistically in the first season, is her sole attendant. Her relationship with Pullo and Vorenus remains an essential plot point.

The influence of previous films is quite apparent. Most prominent are the versions which starred Claudette Colbert, Elizabeth Taylor and Leonor Varela, but some of the lesser known efforts also had an impact. There are indications of the influence of some of the more pornographic films as well. Even more striking are the iconic film scenes which have been either eliminated or brilliantly economized.

By far the greatest sources for *Rome*’s version included a surprisingly close reading of Plutarch paralleled by an intimate appreciation of Shakespeare’s vision. The latter is to be found less in the language of the script than in the scenery, costuming and brilliant acting. Most notably this is one of the few modern versions which tells the story of not just the tragic queen but of both Antony and Cleopatra.

In addition to these derivative elements, there are several innovations in this version which add or restore dimensions to the Cleopatra story: her intelligence and leadership; her children; and the destructive elements of her nature. The result is a nuanced, provocative and frightening portrait of not only Cleopatra, but of a tragic couple.

Paper #4: “Far better women than you”: Atia’s Triumph in *Rome* Season Two.

The series *Rome* is famously obsessed with historical authenticity, in both narrative detail and visual presentation. Thus, when the production tinkers with the historical record, or even defies history outright, it is important to ask what purpose such a creative choice might serve: since it is clearly not ignorance of history, is it merely artistic freedom, or for entertainment’s sake? Nowhere is such an “error” against history more glaring than in the continuation of the character of Atia, mother of Octavian, into the series’ second season. Although the historical Atia died in 43 BC during her son’s first consulship, the character of Atia is a robust presence throughout the ten-episode arc of Season Two, from the funeral of her uncle, Julius Caesar, in the first episode until the very end of the last episode, where she takes a place of privilege next to her son at his triumph in 29 BC.

This paper will explore how the series’ presentation of the character of Atia was influenced by the historical Fulvia (ca. 77-40 BC), who was one of the best known of the politically-active elite women of the late Roman Republic. Fulvia was intimately caught up in the stormy politics of the end of the Republic through her marriages to three of the most influential men of the period, including Mark Antony (her third husband) whose policies she zealously promoted. If the historical Fulvia does supply a narrative model for Atia, this sets up the unlikely extension of her character into Season Two, and explains many of the motivations, actions and relationships of her character that continue from the first season into the second. Under the analogy of Fulvia, Atia would be allowed to live a few more years, as she tries to escape Servilia’s threats by seeking protection from her lover, Antony, and his army. Just as Fulvia was active in this period, we see that Atia is still involved in Roman politics after Caesar’s death, most notably in Episode 17 where she negotiates the uneasy reconciliation between Antony and Octavian after the battle of Mutina. Also, as did the historical Fulvia, Atia in the series greatly enriches herself through the proscriptions imposed by Antony, Octavian and Lepidus in the years 43-42 BC: in Episode 18, Atia is shown adding the name of the wealthy father of Jocasta to the list of the doomed. Even with this outward show of temporary unity between her lover and her son, we know in the end Atia will have to decide between familial devotion and erotic love: she will be forced choose a side in the coming Alexandrian smack-down.

This paper will also examine why the vibrant and powerful character of Atia from the series’ first season seems somewhat diminished in Season Two. Among many factors, this is due to the heightened focus on the wide-ranging political and military career of Antony, his conflict with Octavian, and the necessity to tell the romantic tale of his affair with Cleopatra. Yet, as she did in the first season of *Rome*, Atia in Season Two continues to express her personal authority and self-determination through her most intimate relationships. Atia continues to direct her every action, whether extortion, assault, torture or murder, to secure the political fortunes of her family and, most importantly, to establish a position of power for her son, Octavian. This paper will conclude with a consideration of the success of Atia’s dynastic ambitions, and the costs inherent in her ultimate triumph.