

## Upstairs/Downstairs:

### The Comedy of Social Class in *Plebs* (2013-) and *Peplum* (2015)

Until the past two years, representations in the twenty-first century of the Romans on television have been fictionalized versions of specific figures or events in Roman history and have been dramatic representations. This is clearly the case, for instance, with the two seasons of the HBO/BBC production *Rome* (2005-7) and the four seasons of STARZ *Spartacus* (2010-2013). The most recent appearances of the ancient Romans on television, the French series *Peplum* (2015) and the British series *Plebs* (2013-), have veered from this model. Both series are comedic takes on the ancient Romans, and while they do provide temporal points, they are not connected to specific figures or events in Roman history, but use Rome as a general setting. This paper will argue that they utilize comedy and the broad cultural context of ancient Rome to call attention to the modern-day politics of France and the United Kingdom.

The satirizing of the Romans on screen is not new, but rather recalls films and shows from earlier decades, such as the British *Carry On Cleo* (1964) and *Up Pompeii* (1969-1970). Just as is the case with these early comedies, through the viewing of *Peplum* and *Plebs* the audience learns more about itself than about the ancient Romans (on British comedy and the Romans, see Cull 2001; on distancing from and identification with the Romans, see Joshel, Malamud, and Wyke 2001). This paper will discuss in particular how these two recent series bring to the forefront current issues of social class. Both *Peplum* and *Plebs* depict a modern middle-class lifestyle and the struggles involved, inviting their audiences to identify with the main characters. *Peplum* mocks its fictional emperor Maximus and depicts the daily life of a former slave, now advisor, Bravus. The series focuses on the life of Bravus and his seemingly middle-class family, complete with a daughter and son and their adolescent crises. *Plebs*

concentrates on the lives of its working class characters, who go off to their daily jobs and experience life as single men in the city of Rome. The paper will conclude with a discussion of how the series call attention to the broader politics of the French governments of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande and of the British government of David Cameron.

### Bibliography

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