

Rome in Slavers' Bay: Fighting Pits and Fallen Empires in HBO's *Game of Thrones*

Scholarship on George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* and the HBO series adapted from it (*Game of Thrones*, 2011-2019) has recognized Greco-Roman antiquity as an important source for the ideals, history, and geopolitics that shape the fantastical realms of Westeros and Essos (Lushcov 2017; cf. Weiner 2017). Lushcov (2017) notes Martin's comments on the parallels between the great wall to the North that protects Westeros from the White-walkers and Hadrian's defensive wall, erected as a boundary between the settlements of Britain and the unsettled territories to the north. As such, Rome functions in the series as a figure for the glory of building an empire and the challenges of maintaining one (cf. Cyrino, forthcoming). This paper examines the presence of another icon of Roman civilization evoked in the series, the Flavian Amphitheater. The Great Fighting Pits of Daznak, located in Meereen, one of the cities along Slaver's Bay liberated by Daenerys Targaryen, serve as an analogue for the Coliseum: this paper argues that Daenerys' (or "Dany"'s) evolving attitude toward a monument to cruelty and slavery as well as military prowess and victory allows the series creators to reflect on her fitness as a ruler who must balance the demands of tradition against her desire to "break the wheel" of suppression (Frankel 2014; Schubart 2016). While season five's final test of her fitness is staged in the sands of the Great Pits, its preliminary phases are played out over a five-episode arc unfolding before a backdrop of allusions to both historical Rome and its cinematic incarnations.

While early episodes in the season present Dany as adamantly opposed to opening the Fighting Pits, insurgent movements within Meereen, orchestrated by aristocrats who opposed her efforts to end slavery, prompt her to reconsider the utility of the games. In episode 5.5 she concedes to Hizdarh zo Loraq, a prominent aristocrat and former slave owner, that he has been

“right about tradition” and about “bringing the people together,” suggesting that she will re-open the Pits, but only allow free men to fight in them. The larger context of the episode signals the Roman Empire by setting one segment in Valyria, an ancient site near Meereen now in ruins. As Tyrian Lanister and Ser Jurah Mormont make their way to visit Dany, they pass through Valyria, whose crumbling temples, palaces, and aqueducts evoke Roman topography (Lushcov 2017a: 2); their comments on the ephemeral nature of empire strengthen the identification (“...the Valyrians were the best in the world, and then they weren’t”). Meereen itself also comes under scrutiny as an empire: while some characters emphasize the city’s ancient and glorious status, others view the city as “choking on corruption.” Dany’s leadership in a region that evokes Rome at the height of glory (Meereen) as well as the empire in decline (Valyria) puts her in an analogous relationship with Rome at its peak as well as Rome in ruins, prompting questions about whether, in light of the trajectory of historical Rome, she can correct the inevitable processes of deterioration.

While the analogy between Rome and Valyria/Meereen bodes unwell for Dany’s future, a parallel analogy between cinematic Rome and the cities suggests different prospects for the queen’s leadership. The Pits and their relationship with slavery signal the humiliations of gladiatorial combat under fire in *Spartacus* (1960), while also examining the relationship of spectacle, imperial largess, and tyranny explored in *Gladiator* (2000). The latter film deviated from the historical record in suggesting that Marcus Aurelius banned the games (Cyrino 2005); thus Dany’s initial ban on fighting in the pits aligns her with the last “good” emperor as depicted in Scott’s film. Episode nine’s final moments demonstrate that the games, rather than promoting stability through tradition, offer opportunity for insurrection: Dany is again attacked by rebellious aristocrats and her salvation through a *deus ex machina*, her dragon Drogon,

disentangles her from the negative implications of gladiatorial combat and the Roman empire it celebrated.

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