

DOMINA *Pro Domina*: A Presidential Panel in Honor of Hunter Gardner

The limited 2021 series *DOMINA* on Sky Atlantic (UK)/EPIX (USA), created/written by Simon Burke and directed by Claire McCarthy, is a historical drama that claims to examine the power struggles of ancient Rome from a female perspective and vividly portrays Livia Drusilla (Nadia Parkes, Kasia Smutniak) as the dominating first lady of Rome as she tries to fulfill her ancestral ambitions and her father's wish to restore the fallen republic. The series offers an original narrative angle as it recounts the rise of Livia from her first marriage in around 43 BCE to Tiberius Claudius Nero (Enzo Cilenti), through the early part of her marriage to Gaius Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus (Tom Glynn-Carney, Matthew McNulty), focusing on the decade of the 20s BCE. In this panel, in honor of President Gardner and her research interests in Roman women and Classical Reception, we examine the character of Livia and her various relationships with other women and men in the show, as well as the depiction of race, power, gender, and sexuality.

Paper #1: *Livia and the Others in DOMINA* (2021)

In this paper, I examine the powerful roles played by the other characters in the show, especially the other two women, Octavia, Gaius' sister, and Scribonia, Gaius' ex-wife. As a counterpart to the triumvirate dominating Rome in the 40s and 30s, this trium-feminate also tries to annihilate one another through machinations related to the appointment of a successor for Gaius, since he lacks male offspring. Borrowing from past pairs of female antagonists, Octavia and Scribonia are portrayed as character who evolve as they both realize Livia is unbeatable and her power knows no bounds. In addition to the antagonism among the elite women of the show, there is also competition among the younger members of the family, Iullus and Marcellus,

Tiberius and Drusus, Julia and her cousins, Marcella and Antonia. Through a constant clash among members of the Julio-Claudian family, change in Rome is solidified progressively, as Gaius becomes the only ruler with absolute power, a dictator.

Paper #2: Domina-ted: The Men of *DOMINA* (2021)

As the series refashions – and rehabilitates – the notoriously evil and unscrupulous Livia of the BBC series *I, Claudius* (1976) into a principled Maximus-from-*GLADIATOR*-like character who promises her patrician father Livius Drusus Claudianus (Liam Gallagher) that she will restore the Republic, her newly noble plot arc affects the character's relationships with several (in)famous historical male figures, including her father; her two husbands, called Nero and Gaius in the series; her two teen-aged sons, Tiberius and Drusus; her ally, the general Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (Oliver Huntingdon, Ben Batt); and her doomed step-nephew, Marcellus (Finn Bennett). In this presentation, I explore Livia's complex associations with the male characters in the series, with an emphasis on how this revisionist girl-boss take on her more honorable political motivations both justifies her actions and also reverses her traditional storyline as the most dangerous female relative in television history. This presentation highlights Livia's devoted bond with her husband Gaius, who profits enormously from his wife's political instincts and power moves; and her friendship with Agrippa, who opposes but also promotes the powerful woman's ambitions.

Paper #3: Body Count in *DOMINA* (2021)

Murder foregrounds the Rome of *Domina*. The series prologue memorializes the act sensually: the voiceover notes its fragrance, the tangibility of fatal cause and effect. The act,

Livia's "first kill," is embedded within the horrors of the proscription years, driven by the necessity of survival. Survival, however, is ideologically grounded here as 'the first rule of power'. *DOMINA* moves well beyond the trope of the murderously wicked stepmother that has long dogged the characterization of Livia, presenting a ruthless political operator who amasses an impressive arsenal of agents, techniques, skills, and networkers, in order to recreate an essentialized *Res Publica*, a Rome embodied in the choices of those behind the throne.

Paper #4: *DOMINA*'s Antigone: Remaking the Black Slave Narrative in Roman Films

In this paper, I examine the fictional character Antigone, Livia's black female slave (Melodie Wakivuamina, Colette Dalai Tchantcho). I will argue that Antigone, though not a gladiator herself, is a remaking of black slave narratives and black male characters of earlier Roman films, especially powerful black male gladiators. Blackness works as a signifier of various kinds of enslavement, as well as the desire for freedom and power. And the role of "gladiator" brings to the fore the question of how force, cunning, and skill can facilitate survival and improved status in Roman society or how a slave can have a real friendship with her master. When seen against previous black male characters and slave narratives in Roman films, Antigone adds new dimensions to the interplay of race and gender, freedom and enslavement, and power and survival.