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Sex and Scandal with Sword and Sandals:

A Study of the Female Characters in HBO's *Rome*

*Maureen Ragalie*

## INTRODUCTION

HBO's series, *Rome*, is full of action, adventure, romance, and of course, history. The screenwriters, directors, artistic designers and historical consultants worked together to create a spectacular version of Rome beginning in the year 52 BCE.<sup>1</sup> The series begins with Caesar's successful completion of the Gallic Wars, progresses into the Civil War against Pompey, and ends with Caesar's assassination. This relatively historically accurate plot is spiced up with the interweaving lives of the main characters.

I am looking at the depiction of elite women and the traditions that inform them in comparison with the innovations of HBO in its representations of lower class women. The sharp disparity between the depiction of elite and non-elite women finds its roots in images of women in Roman literature. These contrasting images were then further developed in later literature and film, both heavily influenced by modern issues and perceptions. In many ways the female characters in HBO's *Rome* are bound by the traditional representations of Roman women. However, there are a few exceptions where the creators are able to break free from these conventions and construct a somewhat novel character. This break with past traditions generally occurs when there is no character prototype. While there is a long history of the portrayal of elite women in literature and film, the interest in representing the lives of lower class women is relatively recent.

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<sup>1</sup> HBO Rome, 2006, <[www.hbo.com/rome/](http://www.hbo.com/rome/)>, last accessed December 10, 2006.

Lacking a model, HBO explores different approaches to developing the characters of non-elite women. Therefore, the characters of Atia, Servilia and Octavia remain bound within a tradition of representing elite women as corrupt and manipulative, while the characters of Niobe and Eirene forge a new path.

### **CHALLENGES IN READING AND DEPICTING ROMAN WOMEN**

Very little is known about the lives of women during the late republic and early empire. The extant historical record has a very biased and limited account of the lives of ordinary Roman women. Men of the elite class, who had definite political programs, wrote the only literary sources. Yet female figures from the classical era, such as Messalina, have captured the imagination of generations of storytellers. In the past it was common to accept without question the views of women presented by ancient authors. Unfortunately this approach to studying figures in antiquity is incomplete and leaves the voices of women unheard.

Sandra R. Joshel argues, in “Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus’s Messalina,”<sup>2</sup> that Tacitus and other ancient writers had distinct political agendas when writing about women. Joshel’s analysis reveals that Tacitus and other writers such as Dio Cassius and Suetonius used the body of Messalina and her disorderly actions to show the weakness of the empire.<sup>3</sup> He did so by employing images of the empire as a female body. In order to prove that the emperor Claudius was less than a man, and therefore a weak emperor, Tacitus focuses on Claudius’ inability to control his wife. Also, the uncontrollable sexuality of Messalina, shown through her multiple sexual

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, “Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus’s Messalina,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 221-54.

<sup>3</sup> Joshel 1997, 227, 232, 242.

partners, represents not only the perceived immorality, but also the penetrability of the empire. In this way, Tacitus also shows the emperor's inability to defend the empire. This technique of using the female body as a metaphor in a political critique may be lost on the average modern reader. Many images of Messalina in modern sources are influenced by authors such as Tacitus, regardless of whether or not his work presents an accurate representation of the historical figure. As a result, the idea of using women's sexuality to represent the corruption of the Roman empire has become a common device in both ancient and modern works.

When studying portrayals of Roman women in film, one must also consider that the Roman republic has been of great ideological importance to America, especially in the formative years of the United States.<sup>4</sup> American depictions are usually respectful and idealized. The Roman empire, however, does not receive the same reverence. This can be traced back to historical and religious circumstances. The British empire, a former oppressor of the United States, strongly associated itself with the Roman empire.<sup>5</sup> From this historical example, American filmmakers and viewers associate empire with the tyranny they correlate with the rule of the British empire. The Roman empire also played a significant role in the condemnation and death of Jesus, with Pontius Pilate acting as a representative of Rome in the narrative. Finally, the Roman empire represents a distinct contradiction to the American puritanical morality. The historian Montesquieu, for example, argues in his work *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, written in 1734, that an excess of military power and luxury

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<sup>4</sup> Martin M. Winkler, "The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945," *The Classical Journal* 93.2 (1997-1998): 167.

<sup>5</sup> Winkler, 167.

caused the fall of the Roman empire.<sup>6</sup> American storytellers often regard the Roman empire as an exotic mix of megalomaniacal rulers, lurid sex, gladiators, and the abuse of slaves. It is understandable that audiences in America and Europe were entranced by images of ancient Rome.

Another problem with reading women of the classical past is the tendency to project modern interpretations of how women ought to behave onto the ancient figures in modern work. Contemporary ideals of womanhood are projected onto female characters in many of the Roman epic films of the 1950's and later.<sup>7</sup> These characters reflect the 1950's idea of what womanhood should be, rather than the Roman idea. Historical film reflects the time period it was created as much as the past it portrays. For example, Esther, the female slave and love interest of Judah Ben-Hur waits patiently, tending his house while Ben-Hur has his adventures. She also introduces Judah to the teachings of Christ so that he can change his vengeful ways. Although female characters in HBO's *Rome* are based on historical women, creative license allows the screenwriters, directors and actors to project their modern views of womanhood, including feminism, onto their characters.

Some of the most important screen influences on the creation of HBO's *Rome* include the *I, Claudius* series, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Quo Vadis?*, *Spartacus*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, *Ben-Hur*, *Cleopatra*, *Satyricon*, and *Roma*. These films provide excellent examples of the typical representations of elite and non-elite Roman women which I have been discussing. I will lead the reader through these two

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<sup>6</sup> Winkler, 167.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

contrasting portrayals of women in the female characters of HBO's *Rome* and discuss precedents from the films as appropriate to demonstrate their relationship to the tradition.

### **THE CHARACTERS OF ATIA, SERVILIA AND OCTAVIA AS REPRESENTATIVE OF ELITE ROMAN WOMEN**

The characters of Atia, Servilia and, in part, Octavia in HBO's *Rome* are part of a long tradition of using Roman upper class women to illustrate the corruption of Roman society. As mentioned earlier, Tacitus used Messalina's sexual voracity to illuminate the corruption and decay of the Roman empire, rather than to accurately represent the historical person. Likewise, many modern writers and directors use the prototype of a sexually voracious woman to reveal both the corruption of imperial Rome and modern society. In this way, *Rome* is a continuation of a tradition from antiquity.

The historical references to Atia and Servilia provide few details about their actual personalities. However, they are certainly not represented in the historical texts as sexually voracious or manipulative, as they are in *Rome*. Instead, Tacitus and Suetonius depict Atia as a pious and caring mother.<sup>8</sup> She was married to Octavius and is the mother of Octavian and Octavia. After her husband's death, she married Marcus Philippus. There are also some legends in which Apollo fathered Octavian. On the other hand, the historical figure of Servilia is acknowledged by Suetonius, in *The Twelve Caesars*, to be the mistress of Caesar and perhaps even his love. Suetonius also notes that she is the mother of Brutus (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 50). According to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, Servilia had strong political influence after Caesar's death until her own son died. As is evidenced by this overview of the ancient sources, what is known of

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 207.

the historical persons does not support their portrayal as the stock character of the malicious and oversexed bitch.

The director and historical consultant of *Rome*'s production admit that due to the lack of historical evidence regarding Atia, they chose to turn to other ancient sources about Roman women. They opted instead to embrace the tradition of portraying elite Roman women as sexually corrupt and manipulative, and searched for a compatible literary figure. Atia's character is based on the historical figure of Clodia Pulchra Tercia or Clodia Metelli.<sup>9</sup> At one time it was generally accepted that Clodia was the "real life" woman written about by Cicero in *Pro Caelio* and as Catullus' Lesbia.<sup>10</sup> Although Suzanne Dixon, author of *Reading Roman Women*, vigorously argues that the Lesbia of Catullus is not the same as Cicero's Clodia, in many scholarly works they are considered the same woman. In Catullus's poems, he describes his love affair with a promiscuous married woman. His poems regarding Lesbia range from the passions of first love, to the first doubt of her fidelity, and finally heartbreak and disillusionment.<sup>11</sup> Although this was probably done for poetic technique, the poems depict an exploitative, deceiving, and cold-hearted woman. She toys with the poet for a period of time before moving on to another man (or several).

About the same time as the writing of the Lesbia poems, in 56 BCE, Cicero defended a man named Caelius in court against Clodia Metelli and her brother. They claimed that Caelius owed her money.<sup>12</sup> Cicero's defense strategy involved discrediting Clodia as a disreputable widow. He refers to her as a high-class prostitute and the

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<sup>9</sup> *Rome*, TV-Series, DVD Special Features, "When In Rome." (New York: HBO, 2005-2007).

<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women* (London: Duckworth, 2003), 134.

<sup>11</sup> Dixon, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Dixon, 140-145.

Palatine Medea. He also insinuates that Clodia played a role in her husband's death, probably by poisoning, as well as accusing her of incest with her brother. Cicero ends by painting a picture of a woman who is vengeful after being dumped by Caelius himself. Thus, in choosing an historical figure for the basis of the character of Atia, HBO consciously follows the tradition of portraying elite women as corrupt and sexually uncontrollable.

The writer and director were probably inspired in their creation of the characters of Atia and Servilia by other representations of elite imperial women in modern literature and film. Such influence can be seen from the novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, published in 1934 and written by Robert Graves. The emperor Claudius narrates these novels.<sup>13</sup> Through this narrator, Graves leads the audience through the reigns of the first four emperors. Graves depicts Rome as “a stagnant pool sexually and politically.”<sup>14</sup> The behavior and unchastity of the women of the imperial house, such as Messalina, Agrippina, Livilla and Julia, are presented as symptomatic of the larger corruption of imperial Roman society. Although Graves mentions the corruption of these women he does not elaborate on these scenes in his novels.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the Masterpiece Theater version of *I, Claudius* for television brings the theme of corrupt and voracious women to the forefront of its plot. For example, several episodes are based on Livia eliminating all rivals for her son Tiberius. Others focus on Calligula's incest with his sister Drusilla, Messalina's adulteries, and Claudius' marriage to his niece, Agrippina.<sup>16</sup> In this twentieth century British miniseries, some malicious, controlling women vie for dominance in the historical plot, while others' uncontrollable sexuality leads them astray.

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<sup>13</sup> Joshel 2001, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Joshel 2001, 123.

<sup>15</sup> Joshel 2001, 123.

<sup>16</sup> Joshel 2001, 127.



Other films that show the characteristically evil, sexually voracious female include *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Quo Vadis?*, and *Spartacus*.<sup>17</sup> In these films, the sexualized elite women again represent the corruption of the Roman empire, and stand in opposition to the virtuous leading Christian woman. *The Last Days of Pompeii* is based on the 1834 novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton,<sup>18</sup> while *Quo Vadis?* is based on Henryk Sienkiewicz's 1894-1896 serialized novel of the same name.<sup>19</sup> Both of these authors were greatly interested in showing the triumph of Christianity (the chaste Christian maiden) over the corruption of pagan society (the evil aristocratic seductress).

Several of Federico Fellini's films also involve stereotypical sexually corrupt Roman women. In the film *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969), Encolpio's quest to regain his sexual potency leads him to find some sexually voracious women.<sup>20</sup> In *Roma* (1972), there is a scene in which a film within a film shows a "narration of romantic love fatally destroyed by the opposition of a lustful empress."<sup>21</sup> This has a great impact on the Italian child watching, and he begins to assimilate the Roman past into the Italian present. He guides the audience's attention to the dentist's wife, who he believes is worse than Messalina. He pictures her dancing on a car in Roman attire with men waiting to be sexually serviced.

Although her work is not yet in film, Colleen McCullough also provides an interesting view of women such as Atia and Servilia. Her female characters in *The First Man in Rome*, *Caesar's Women* (1990 and 1996, respectively) and others are of the

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<sup>17</sup> Wyke, 38, 170.

<sup>18</sup> Wyke, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Wyke, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Wyke, 189.

<sup>21</sup> Wyke, 3.

stereotypical evil woman genre. In one example of her romance novel style of writing, Servilia attacks her brother Cato:

Servilia moved with the speed of a striking snake, straight for Cato... Between them she went with both hands up, fingers crooked into claws, took Cato's face into their embrace, and dug her nails into his flesh until they sank like grapples. Had he not instinctively screwed his eyes shut, she would have blinded him, but her talons raked him from brow to jawline on right side and on left side... a Servilia whose lips were peeled back from her teeth and whose eyes blazed murder. Then under the distended gaze of her son, her husband, and her half-brother, she lifted her dripping fingers to her mouth and luxuriously sucked Cato's flesh from them.<sup>22</sup>

McCullough's female characters are certainly interesting, extreme examples of the tradition of evil aristocratic females.

Following these prototypes, the characters of Atia and Servilia in *Rome* are developments upon the past interpretations of elite Roman women as representations of the corruption of Roman society. Atia's character in *Rome* is influenced more by the past depictions of the voracious Roman woman than what is historically known about her. On television, she is cruel, heartless and willing to use her sexuality to get whatever she deems is best for herself and her children. Like the historical Clodia, Atia is an unattached widow. We are introduced to her character as she has sex with a lower class man simply to gain a beautiful horse. This same horse is sent with Octavian as a gift to Caesar so that the family may remain in his good graces. She ruthlessly manipulates her own children, sending Octavian to the battlefield to gain favor with Caesar and forcing Octavia to divorce her husband and offer herself in marriage to Pompey. Atia also engages in a prolonged affair with Mark Antony, in which her sexual desire is portrayed as a weakness. Her character is not above listening at doors, sabotaging both Octavia's

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<sup>22</sup>Quoted by Martha Malamud, "Serial Romans," in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 215.

relationship with her husband and Servilia's relationship with Caesar, while she attempts to convince Antony to betray Caesar. Although one could argue that her character is motivated by love for her children, her self-love and vicious character are certainly other viable motivations. Her character is much more the malicious bitch or even a figure from a McCullough novel than the historical figure.

*Rome's* Servilia is equal to Atia in her manipulations; however, she comes across as more genteel than voracious Atia. Her power is undeniable. Although in outward appearance she is a virtuous matron, she controls through family ties and sexuality, conducting her affairs with subtlety. Thus she is able to manipulate Brutus, Caesar and Octavia. In the beginning, Servilia conducts a discrete affair with Caesar that leads to political unrest when sexual graffiti depicting the two of them is discovered. The vengeance felt by Servilia at Caesar's subsequent rejection drives her to set about destroying Caesar and Atia. She begins manipulating Octavia through a lesbian affair. She seduces Octavia in hopes that she will become an unwitting informer on her household. Indeed, she tells Servilia secrets that she obtains from Octavian. Servilia also controls Brutus. The cold greeting she gives him after he surrenders to Caesar's army is enough to express her disappointment and causes Brutus to go to great measures to regain her good esteem. In fact, her character is so manipulative that her anger towards Caesar is portrayed as the driving force behind his assassination. Both Atia and Servilia follow the pattern of sexually voracious and manipulative elite Roman women in literature and film; however, these two do achieve their goals.

HBO's character Octavia is interesting in that she lacks the manipulative aspect present in both Atia and Servilia. However, the two older women easily manipulate Octavia by using her sexuality to achieve their own ends. She can be viewed as perhaps a

younger version of Atia and Servilia, learning the ways to manipulate others through her sexuality. This is again a continuation of the tradition of portraying elite Roman women in a way that refers to the corruption of the empire, rather than utilizing the limited knowledge of the historical person.

The character of Octavia in *Rome* is hardly based off of the ancient sources. According to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, Octavia was a demure, modest woman.<sup>23</sup> However, her character is carefully constructed in the ancient sources, such as Plutarch and Dio Cassius, to reflect their own agendas. The image of the historical Octavia was manipulated to reflect the vast difference between Octavia as the ideal Roman matron and Cleopatra as the corrupt foreign seductress. They agree that Octavia married Marcellus, but when he died she married Mark Antony to help solidify the relationship between Antony and her brother Octavian. She was by all accounts a faithful wife to Antony and acted as a negotiator between him and Octavian. After Antony divorced her, she continued to raise his children by his former wife Fulvia and Cleopatra, as well as the children that they had together and from her first marriage (Plutarch, *Antony*, 54).

In past film representations, such as the multitude of *Cleopatra* films, Octavia is generally portrayed as the devout wife of Antony. Her character stands in opposition to the corrupting, exotic sexuality of Cleopatra. This follows the historical and literary tradition in which Octavia represents the ideal Roman matron in order to reinforce the strength and legitimacy of Augustus' rule against that of Cleopatra and Antony.

The formation of Octavia's character in *Rome*, on the other hand, was greatly influenced by women in the *I, Claudius* series, especially the character of Julia, who falls for anything wearing pants (or togas as the case may be). Her character is also influenced

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<sup>23</sup> Hornblower, 1059.

by the films used in the creation of the characters of Atia and Servilia, such as *Quo Vadis?*, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *The Satyricon*, and *Roma*. In general, HBO's Octavia comes from the tradition that assumes that Roman women of the upper classes were obviously corrupt, due to the Roman literary tradition in which uncontrolled female sexuality represents the corruption of the empire.

*Rome* presents Octavia differently than what is known about the historical figure; the series portrays her as unable to control her own sexuality, rather than as chaste or demure. In this case, however, she is not the manipulator, but the manipulated. Her mother forces her to end her marriage to the fictional character, Glabius, so that she can offer herself in marriage to Pompey in order to solidify political ties. She is also manipulated by Servilia, who seduces Octavia and convinces her to become an informer on her household. There are explicit scenes of their lesbian relationship in *Rome*. Servilia also convinces Octavia to seduce her brother, Octavian, in order to gain information that could lead to Caesar's downfall. She is a pawn to be seduced and used due to her uncontrolled sexuality as well as her weak and indecisive personality. Her character is often led astray by sensual delights, especially in her desire for Glabius and Servilia. Although she is not yet manipulative, she is learning from Atia and Servilia to use her body to achieve her goals. This is again a way of showing the corruption of the elite Roman classes through the behavior of women. In the depiction of Atia, Servilia and in some ways Octavia, *Rome* does not break away from the traditional depiction of elite Roman women as corrupt, manipulative, and sexually voracious.

### NIOBE AND EIRENE, THE LOWER CLASS WOMEN

In stark contrast to the images of the corrupt elite women, *Rome* presents positive images of lower class women, including a working mother and a slave. The lower classes are generally not depicted in films about ancient Rome, except in religious struggles between corrupt, elite, pagan women and the good, poor, Christian women. Female slaves also appear briefly as part of the erotic entertainment for Roman men and modern audiences. In the portrayal of the characters of Niobe and Eirene, *Rome* takes a somewhat unique approach to depicting Roman women of the lower classes. Both Niobe and Eirene function within a corrupt society and manage to control those around them. Yet their sexuality is somehow less gluttonous than that of Atia, Servilia and Octavia. Although they too have multiple sexual partners, most of Niobe and Eirene's sexual energy is focused on socially acceptable relationships: that between husband and wife and master and female slaves.

Little is known historically about lower class women in Rome. In *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, Sarah Pomeroy discusses the small amount which is known about lower class and working women. Wool working was a typical female occupation and spinning and weaving wool for the household was considered a virtuous activity.<sup>24</sup> Other working women were involved in laundry, milling, money lending, selling luxury goods or mundane merchandise, butchering and fishmongering.<sup>25</sup> And, of course, there were prostitutes.<sup>26</sup> There was a great range in the lives and economic situations of Roman lower class and working women.

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<sup>24</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 199.

<sup>25</sup> Pomeroy, 200.

<sup>26</sup> Pomeroy, 201.

There is also a paucity of information on the lives of slaves, especially female slaves. They were considered part of the Roman household or *familia*, yet they were property.<sup>27</sup> Women entered slavery through birth, kidnapping or conquest. While many males who entered slavery had training in a career, most female slaves were trained only for household management. In general female slaves were employable as household help, midwives, spinners, weavers, actresses or prostitutes. With specific skills they could become secretaries, ladies maids, hairdressers, masseuses or entertainers.<sup>28</sup>

All slaves were sexually available to the master.<sup>29</sup> Slaves could not legally marry, so they often entered into *contubernium*, an understood marriage where the children were born into slavery in the household of the mother.<sup>30</sup> However, slaves could amass their personal savings to buy their freedom or buy the freedom of other slaves. It was also possible for a master to manumit or free a slave in order to marry her. This would ensure that any children would be legitimate.

Very little has been produced in film or literature about the lower classes of Roman women previously. In general Hollywood epics about Rome focus on the women of the imperial family or patrician class. The other type of female character that is prominent in Roman epic films is the good Christian woman. As mentioned earlier, in *Ben-Hur*, Esther is the hard working freedwoman who patiently waits for Ben-Hur to return.<sup>31</sup> Her role in the movie is to introduce Christ and his teachings into the life of Ben-Hur. Such women also appear in *Quo Vadis?*, *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *The*

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<sup>27</sup> Pomeroy, 191.

<sup>28</sup> Pomeroy, 191-92.

<sup>29</sup> Pomeroy, 192.

<sup>30</sup> Pomeroy, 193.

<sup>31</sup> *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ*, directed by William Wyler (Hollywood: MGM, 1959).

*Sign of the Cross*.<sup>32</sup> They are often placed against the other stock character of the evil, elite pagan seductress. Their job is to provide a Christianizing influence on the male lead. Often these women are depicted as of a lower social class in comparison to the corrupt imperial women.

The other common depiction of female slaves in modern cinema is as entertainers. It is not uncommon for Roman epic films to have at least one scene with scantily clad dancing girls, often of African descent. They dance around to wild ethnic music for a few moments before they exit and are never seen again. This is the case with the opening of the *I, Claudius* series.<sup>33</sup> However, the women of Christianizing influence and the dancing girl prototype are always the slaves of wealthy families. There is little about the slaves of lower class households. The dancing slave girls are generally viewed as sexual objects while the good Christian women are the beautiful, faithful wives.

In contrast to this tradition, HBO presents Niobe as a somewhat realistic working class wife of a soldier, rather than the ideal Christian wife. She runs the household while her husband is away. She rises quickly through the social ranks with her husband as he is promoted to consul and finally senator. Throughout it all, she maintains the home, handles finances, starts a butcher shop with her sister and raises three children. However, this picture of the virtuous wife is unfortunately marred by the less than ideal way she chooses to deal with the illegitimate child she had during her husband's absence. She lies and says that the child belongs to her 13-year-old daughter. Yet the audience sympathizes with Niobe as she is wracked with guilt over her accidental infidelity. Her character flaw is easy to overlook once it becomes clear that she had thought that her husband, Vorenus, was dead. When an angry Vorenus confronts Niobe about her

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<sup>32</sup> Wyke, 163-164, 170.

<sup>33</sup> *I, Claudius*, TV-mini series, directed by Herbert Wise (London: BBC, 1976).



infidelity, she apologizes and asks Vorenius not to blame her child before committing suicide. This solution to her guilt and infidelity was socially accepted in ancient times and is understandable to the modern viewer. Throughout the entire season, Niobe is only trying to do what is best for her family. In this case, she is not the Christian ideal, in that she has cheated on her husband and she is also willing to continue lying to her husband for the sake of her children. Niobe is a balance between the ideal Christian woman of earlier cinematic works and a more realistic or human character. Although she commits sexual infidelity, her sexuality is not seen as voracious or manipulative, as is the sexuality of Atia, Servilia and Octavia.

Similarly, the slave girl, Eirene, is a balance between the Christian prototype and a more realistic character. She enters the plot when Titus Pullo seizes her along with the contents of a wagon that he claims. For the next few scenes Eirene is always the shadow in the corner, silently following Pullo everywhere and often getting left behind or forgotten. She is transferred to the household of Vorenius as a slave for Niobe when Pullo leaves for war. Throughout this time she never speaks, truly the silent and unseen slave. When the audience next sees her, she is well incorporated into the household. While she continues to perform her household tasks, she also takes over the care and nurturing of Pullo. Eventually Pullo requests her sexual services as well. During this scene, although Eirene does not protest Pullo's sexual advances, her face is impassive, as though she knows that she has no right to refuse. Thus, as in many previous films, the slave girl becomes the sexual object of lust for her master. However, she breaks free from this mold when Pullo kills her lover. She no longer acts the part of the submissive slave girl, and her anger leads her to attempt to kill Pullo. Although she ultimately does not go through with it, she expresses her anger toward her master in more subtle ways, such as

spitting in his food. By these actions she moves away from the characterization of the sexual object and the submissive slave girl. Instead she becomes a powerful force in Pullo's life. She takes on the role of the moralizing force, as her disapproving glance is all that it takes to make Pullo walk away from a woman he had propositioned. She also teaches Pullo and the audience a lesson in forgiveness as she and Pullo travel to a countryside shrine so that he may ask for forgiveness for all the wrongs he has done in his life, especially in regards to Eirene. The season ends with Eirene extending her hand towards Pullo in a gesture of forgiveness. Thus her character combines the sexualized slave girl with a realistic version of the moralizing force. She stands in complete contrast to the corrupt elite women. Her sexuality is not her own to use to manipulate others. Instead she takes subversive action to gain some sense of control over her life.

## CONCLUSION

The female characters in *Rome*, Atia, Servilia, Octavia, Niobe and Eirene, are not just a creation of HBO, and they are not based entirely on the historical figures that they represent. Instead they are greatly influenced by earlier representations in literature and film and by contemporary gender roles. Each character is developed from an historical model as well as from modern cultural values. The idea of the sexually voracious and corrupt nature of Roman women seems to be a feature of mainly the upper class women, in contrast with the realistic, yet moralizing characteristics of women of the lower classes.

Atia, Servilia and Octavia are part of a tradition in which they play the character of the malicious and oversexed bitch. This comes from the Roman literary tradition in which the female body is a metaphor for the empire. The sexual licentiousness of certain

women represents the corruption of Roman society. Since little is known about the historical female figures on which they are based, HBO embraced this past tradition, as have many previous films. *Rome* presents elite women who are manipulative and sexually insatiable.

These representations of elite women are in stark contrast with *Rome*'s depiction of women of the lower classes. Because lower class women are rarely portrayed in film, HBO was forced to be innovative in their creation of the characters of Niobe and Eirene. They did, however, have the character templates of the ideal Christian maiden and the dancing slave girl from modern cinema. *Rome*'s Niobe and Eirene are sexualized, yet not to the same degree as past portrayals of the erotic slave girl. Instead this sexuality is diverted into legitimate relationships. These characters are also more realistic than the Christian ideal portrayed in past films. Niobe and Eirene both make mistakes, display anger, and attempt to gain agency in a corrupt world.

This sharp contrast between elite and non-elite women in *Rome* creates more drama for the already action packed plot. Each woman plays an important part and influences the narrative in some way. Although all of the actresses are beautiful, the characters they play are more than just sex symbols (although they do play that part very well). Instead each is endowed with a distinct personality and the agency to influence history.

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