

Sex and Power in HBO's Rome

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of an
MA Ancient History

Nina Kirk 30001192

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

The idea of sex in the ancient world is one which several films and TV shows take a more-than-exaggerated view of, turning a straight forward scene into one where clothes are no longer required. Raucci (2008: 207-208) suggests that the use of sex as spectacle in *Rome* (2005-2007) is what differentiates it from the likes of *Gladiator* (2000) and *I, Claudius* (1976).

Cyrino (2008: 132) suggests that the ultimate reason the character Atia uses her sexual wiles in the show is to gain power, for herself, for her son Octavian, soon to be the Emperor Augustus, and for her family overall. This paper examines the ways the female characters of Atia, Servilia and Octavia cultivate their sexual power, be it through instructing someone else to have sex with someone in order to gain information, or by simply suggesting sexual encounters have taken place to hurt someone, and conclude whether they are successful or not, as Cyrino (2008) suggests.

The purpose of this paper is to; firstly, examine several different types of sex used throughout Season One of *Rome* (2005-2007), and to explore what the impact of the sexual encounter was on the ever-changing balance of power within the story. Secondly, this paper will also examine the literary references of the real historical figures of Atia, Servilia and Octavia, using several ancient authors such as Suetonius, Plutarch and Tacitus, for their opinions and comments on the historical figures and their seemingly immoral behaviour in ancient Roman society, and use this analysis to form an overall judgement as to whether the TV producers of *Rome* (2005-2007) were even slightly accurate in their portrayal of sex in the ancient world, or whether they fully utilised their creative license, and the reasons for this possible inaccuracy.

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To my sister, and her unwavering support.

To my parents, whose belief in me, when I had none, meant the world.

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to examine firstly, the portrayal of ancient Rome within literature and classical reception, looking at the growth of cinema and TV throughout time, with a section focused specifically on Home Box Office Inc.(HBO) and the tropes used in several of HBO's popular TV shows, and secondly, an in-depth look into the portrayal of Rome and elite Roman women in HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007), focusing on several specific relationships between the female characters and what that might show about HBO and their perception of ancient Rome.

The main argument of this thesis being that the portrayals of the elite Roman women within the show, Atia of the Julii, Servilia of the Junii and Atia's daughter Octavia, and the ways they use their sexuality to control power, differ greatly from their ancient literary references, which this thesis will explore in the hopes of revealing some of the possible reasons for this. A secondary argument for this thesis is centred around the evolution of Rome in both literature and classical reception, from *Ben-Hur* (1880) to HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007), the evolution of cinema and the growth of TV and production companies such as HBO, to ascertain whether HBO created the female characters as a way to sell their TV show, and draw in audiences, or because the audience expected a certain portrayal of Rome. Overall, this thesis would like to cement the view of female sexuality being a significant part of modern TV, and not simply included for the sake of it.

Recent scholarship focused specifically on the portrayals of these female characters is limited to several chapters in Cyrino's 2008 book *Rome Season One* (2008), while scholarship on classical reception in general is plentiful, with key authors such as Solomon, Wyke, and

Cyrino, all of whom discuss representations of various characters and places and will be used to examine the evolution of cinema and TV and the portrayals of ancient Rome. Scholarship on the different portrayals of ancient Rome through literature and classical reception also include Solomon's substantial work on *Ben-Hur* (2016) and other works which Solomon has also been involved in, such as Renger and Solomon (2013), which also portrays ancient Rome through classical reception. This thesis will support and expand the few chapters from Cyrino's 2008 book *Rome Season One* (2008) which discuss female sexuality and political power, notably *Women's Politics in the Streets of Rome* (Ch.9) and *Atia and the Erotics of Authority* (Ch. 10) as well as *Vice is Nice: Rome and Deviant Sexuality* (Ch.17), all of which discuss aspects of female characters using their sexuality to manipulate and control the male-dominated sphere of politics.¹ In addition to this, this thesis will also attempt to emphasise the significant differences in the female characters on-screen portrayals and their ancient literary references, as well as the producers having used multiple real historical women to create their on-screen characters, which could explain why the on-screen women are much more confident in their right to manipulate the male-dominated politics, while the ancient literary references suggest they did not appear to have crossed the line into the world of politics. This thesis will create more literature on the power of the female character, which for many years has been an add-on character in film and TV, across all genres, and is now becoming more important and crucial to the storyline in their own right.²

In order to evaluate the significance of the portrayal of Rome within HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007), it is necessary to first examine the evolution of ancient Rome through classical reception, from the publication of the classic novel *Ben-Hur* (1880) to more recent portrayals in Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) and *Spartacus* (2010-2013), focusing on how ancient Rome is

¹ Cyrino 2008: 117-130; Cyrino 2008: 130-141; Cyrino 2008: 219-232

² Greenberg and Collette 1997: 2-3

often portrayed as the centre of vices and chaos, possibly as the producers recognise that by portraying the debauchery on screen it allows them to ‘exploit the audience’s pervasive and prurient fascination with the unbridled and alluring sexualities of the ancient Greeks and Romans.’³ Not only that, but portraying love and sex on screen also enables them to explore themes such as jealousy, revenge and power, which would make the film or TV show more relatable to a modern audience, and could explain the recent successes of TV shows such as *Rome* (2005-2007) and *Spartacus* (2010-2013).⁴ Therefore, the first chapter will be an in-depth look into the various portrayals of ancient Rome in modern media, examining both TV shows and the use of cinema, in order to explore the aspects which audiences throughout the decades have come to expect from cine-antiquity, and which have ultimately led to success for the creators of such productions.⁵ This relates to the overall thesis argument by showing a trend of what the modern audience have come to expect from cine-antiquity, which in turn have an impact on how the female characters are portrayed, as it would seem odd if the portrayal of Rome was debauched, while the female characters were more reserved and modest.

HBO’s *Rome* (2005-2007), winner of seven Primetime Emmy Awards between 2006-2007, and one Golden Globe for actress Polly Walker in the role of the manipulative Atia of the Julii, niece of Gaius Julius Caesar, is one such TV show which provides viewers with several different and extreme sex scenes throughout the first season alone, in order to cater to the more mature modern audience.⁶ The BBC claimed it was ‘about to broadcast the most violent and sexually explicit programme ever to be shown on British television’ before it aired in

³ Cyrino 2013: 2

⁴ Cyrino 2013: 2

⁵ Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 1

⁶ IMDB ‘Rome’

autumn 2005.⁷ It is this TV show, and several specific sexual encounters within it, for three important characters: Atia of the Julii, Servilia of the Junii and Atia's impressionable young daughter Octavia, which will be examined for the second part of this thesis, in an attempt to show that the portrayal of elite Roman women in the TV show *Rome* (2005-2007), were aimed at the modern audience rather than the ancient reality, and how far they differ in those portrayals. This is in an attempt to show that the screenwriters of *Rome* (2005-2007), while they may have used the ancient writings as a way of informing their own storylines on the show, they were more concerned with using this TV show to appeal to a wider, modern audience.

The three sexual encounters which will be examined include the same-sex relationship between Servilia and Octavia, proven to be a staple in the HBO world with other examples being the relationship between the *Game of Thrones* (2011) characters Loras Tyrell and Renly Baratheon, and also the relationship between Samantha and Maria in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004); the incestuous moment between Octavia and her younger brother Octavian, again a common trope used in *Game of Thrones* (2011) between Theon Greyjoy and his sister Yara; and, finally, the many ways Atia of the Julii uses her sexual wiles throughout Season One to further her family's fortunes. These sexual encounters in *Rome* (2005-2007) will be used to explore their portrayals, as well as assess whether the female character had any impact on the male-dominated storylines, in shifting the balance of power between Caesar and Pompey, and the possible consequences of that in showing how power in a man's world can change as a result of women. The sexually deviant behaviour depicted in *Rome* (2005-2007) is a common theme for HBO to use, which showcases its willingness to include scenes other production companies may avoid, but also its understanding that modern audiences

⁷ The Telegraph 2005

want more drama for their viewing pleasure.⁸ Shows like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) highlight HBO's audacious proclivity towards airing the more controversial scenes, such as women masturbating, and it is this daringness which produced the most extreme portrayal of ancient Rome seen in recent years.⁹ It is interesting to note that in both *Rome* (2005-2007) and HBO's current success, *Game of Thrones* (2011), the female characters are shown engaging in these extreme sex scenes, perpetrating to be in positions of power, and yet still the men are shown to have all of the power and control.

Chapter One: Rome on the Big Screen

Part One: From Novel to Moving Pictures

The focus of this chapter will be on the evolution of ancient Rome within literature and classical reception, and how the portrayal of Rome throughout time influences how cinema and TV production companies portray Rome in their production at any given time, since often the way Rome has been portrayed has changed along with social morals, while being carefully designed to shock audiences.¹⁰ Factors such as drama, spectacle, elaborate costume and set designs, as well as the visual presentations of issues they can still relate to, such as war and sex, despite the centuries between them and the on-screen characters, will also all have an impact on how ancient Rome is portrayed and viewed by the audiences.¹¹ This will highlight how the multiple portrayals of ancient Rome over the decades has informed HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007) in their own production. Ancient Rome has been portrayed as the

⁸ Strong 2008: 220

⁹ Strong 2008: 220

¹⁰ Strong 2008: 220

¹¹ Solomon 2001: 3

depraved capital of the Empire in many films and TV shows, from *Cabiria* (1913), all the way through to *Spartacus* (2010-2013), with scenes showing an excess of vices such as drinking, gambling, prostitution and corruption.¹²

Since the explosion of the moving pictures at the turn of the twentieth century, the number of films released every year in the UK alone has steadily risen, as shown in the British Film Institute's Statistical Yearbook, which shown that in 2013, the number of films released was double the number released in 1913.¹³ This vast amount of films includes a multitude of artistic genres, locations and historical periods.¹⁴ In the US, the number of films released accounted for more than \$10 billion in Box Office Revenue by the year 2011, a number which is surely growing each year.¹⁵ Given such impressive statistics, it is hardly surprising that some four hundred of those films were set in the ancient world, and given that Solomon's works was published in 2001, he has not been able to include the more recent works, such as Stone's *Alexander* (2004) or Snyder's *300* (2006), and it is not likely he included TV shows in this figure, including *Spartacus* (2010-2013) or the focus of this thesis, HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007).¹⁶ However, this figure does highlight the level of interest in films set in the ancient world.

Looking at what makes the ancient world so popular in both cinema and TV, one should consider what came before: the novel. If society is examined as far back as the tenth century, and possibly even earlier, the manuscript of 'Venetus A,' an early copy of Homer's *Iliad*, the study of other Greek and Latin texts for the upper, and increasingly the middle classes, and

¹² Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 3; Strong 2008: 222

¹³ The Independent 2014

¹⁴ Solomon 2001: 1

¹⁵ UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2018

¹⁶ Solomon 2001: 1

the use of the Christian Bible in both education and leisure, are all examples of how the ancient world came to life through the literary world, and highlights the early interest in the fabled stories, soon to be studied as real historical events.¹⁷ Following on from that, during the 1600's the increasing interest in the ancient world was manifesting through the works of William Shakespeare himself, with a number of Roman plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Julius Caesar*, both of which have dramatic themes, and so could be considered as portraying relatable life events for the audience, and thus is responsible for some of the interest in the ancient worlds.¹⁸ Even further down the line, by the end of the nineteenth century classics such as *Ben-Hur*, published in 1880 by American author Wallace, and *Quo Vadis?*, published in 1896 by Polish author Sienkiewicz, were best-selling, and both had deep-seated Christian narratives which reflect on the morals of society at the time in both America and Poland.¹⁹ The fact that these two best-selling books were written by authors from different countries, who were experiencing different governments and different life experiences, but still showed a passion for the same ancient world, apocalyptic genre shows that the ancient world was becoming a crucial part of the literary world at this time.

Sienkiewicz was also awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905, and the book was translated into forty different languages, which highlights its' success even further.²⁰ 'Incorporating the well-known early Christian stories into the equally familiar Roman histories, Sienkiewicz was able to create an engaging narrative, part truth, part fiction, which united people from all walks of life and kept the interest in the ancient world growing.'²¹ He used tropes such as predestined love, star-crossed romance, and the main protagonists' fight against the villain, in the case of *Quo Vadis?*, the villain being Nero, as ways to relate to his

¹⁷ The Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University; Solomon 2001: 3;

¹⁸ Chernaik 2011: 4

¹⁹ Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 39-40

²⁰ Cyrino 2005: 17

²¹ Cyrino 2005: 17

readers.²² Sienkiewicz could also have used his novel to express his feelings against the foreign countries that occupied Poland during the nineteenth century, as the land of 'Lygia' equates to Poland, while imperial Rome represents the Russian and German oppressors.²³ Sienkiewicz also drew on several primary authors to inform his novel, notably Tacitus and Suetonius, who will also be analysed in this thesis for their portrayals of the real historical figures of Atia of the Julii, Servilia of the Junii, and Octavia. Tacitus was his main source for the character of Gaius Petronius, who is used as an adviser of sorts to Nero.²⁴ Suetonius, on the other hand, is used to portray the many vices of Nero, including his violent fights, and the murder of his mother Agrippina among others, which goes a long way to showing how the portrayal of ancient Rome focused largely on its corruption, debauchery and chaos.²⁵

In much the same way, *Ben-Hur's* author Wallace, an American Civil War hero, used his own bleak experiences of keeping law and order in the desert, desolate, territories of New Mexico, which are reflected in his novel's landscapes.²⁶ He also engages the readers by creating a protagonist, Judah, who goes on a self-reflective journey of friendship, revenge and ultimately salvation, and the reader finds himself drawn into a world he recognises from his own life experiences.²⁷ Through this, the book continued to attract millions of fans, including groups of people within society who would generally have avoided such idle activities as the theatre, but who found themselves intrigued by a book, and then a play, about the time of Christ.²⁸ By creating a story that was seen as 'morally acceptable' in more puritanical times, Wallace was able to kick-start the massive interest worldwide in the ancient world, and his

²² Wyke 1997: 115

²³ Cyrino 2005: 18; Wyke 1997: 117-118

²⁴ Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 41

²⁵ Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 42

²⁶ Cyrino 2005: 69

²⁷ Cyrino 2005: 69

²⁸ Solomon 2016: 6-7

own son upon Wallace's death sold the film rights to Erlanger for a massive \$600,000, a mere hint of what was to come.²⁹ One of the more notable of Wallace's life experiences which are reflected in his novel is the absolute commitment towards abolitionism, which Wallace became familiar with, and supported, through his time in Maryland, where, on one occasion, he boasted of rigging an election to ensure an amendment to abolish slavery was passed.³⁰ This virtue is echoed throughout the book, from making his main character Judah become a slave, to Judah himself inheriting slaves and forming loving relationships with them.³¹

Part Two: Spectacle and Sexuality on Screen

The narrative of these two books sets the stage for the ancient world's introduction to the big screen, solidifying the ancient world as a staple among early films, such as an 1899 version of *Cleopatra* by French director Georges Méliès, with issues that the audience can relate to, as well as giving them the spectacle and drama that separates it from their daily mundane lives.³² *Ben-Hur* opened on stage in 1899 to instant success, while Sienkiewicz sold the rights to *Quo Vadis?* to Guazzoni, the 'Italian spectacle-king' in 1913, also with worldwide success.³³ Both Italian and American production companies started getting in on the drama and spectacle that these two hugely popular novels had exploded onto an eager audience. From this point, the portrayal of Rome on the big screen shifted from the portrayal of the early Christian stories, and Christianity fighting the Roman oppressors, as shown in *Ben-Hur*, to the more glamorous and glitzy stories of the 1950's and 1960's.

²⁹ Solomon 2016: 6-7

³⁰ Lossing 1868: 347

³¹ Solomon 2016: 35

³² Theodorakopoulos 2010: 31; Solomon 2001: 3

³³ Cyrino 2005: 18 + 69

From the early versions of *Ben-Hur* (1899) and *Quo Vadis?* (1913) came a whole host of films which, by two common aspects they all shared, came to be known as ‘sword-and-sandal’ films, or ‘peplum’ as they were known in Italy.³⁴ Another common trope for these types of films is the use of a ‘muscleman’, a highly masculine and buff actor, as utilised to maximum effect in Pastrone’s *Cabiria* (1914), which helped to solidify the genre for the next several decades.³⁵ The use of gender and sexuality played an important part of the attraction, in relation to drawing the audience in. For the production companies, the main point of making these films is to make money, to create a profit, so they are willing to utilise as many tropes as they can in a film to attract as wide a selection of society as possible to the cinemas to watch them. For both male and female members of the audience, going to see a film because the main character is attractive is not a new thing, and producers in the 1960’s knew this, and so for the women they hired buff, attractive bodybuilder-type actors to play the protagonist, performing acts of impressive masculinity, while for the men there are the buxom, beautiful women dressed as dancing girls, tending to the male characters every need, making it easy for the male audience member to imagine himself in the male character’s place. It did not matter where the story was taking place, as long as there was a ‘shirtless, muscular hero’.³⁶ It is interesting that in other genres of film, the emphasis is often on the female actress’s body, and intended solely for the enjoyment of the male audience, while in the ‘sword-and-sandal’ genre, the emphasis is strictly on the male actors, with their body constantly on display and performing these feats of strength.³⁷ However, despite the fact that the male body is on display in this way, it could be argued that they were not intended to be overtly sexual, but rather to portray the impressive strength which gives the male protagonist

³⁴ Cornelius 2011: 2-4

³⁵ Cornelius 2011: 4

³⁶ Chapman 2002: 34

³⁷ Günsberg 2005: 107-109

his ability to fulfil his goal and destroy the evil villain.³⁸ Indeed, the popularity of the extremely muscular man playing the morally good character lent itself to a plethora of bodybuilder type stars, including Mr Universe star Reg Park, to become actors in these ‘sword-and-sandals’ films.³⁹

In terms of how the costumes played a part in the debated sexuality, the costumes in the early films were designed to imply sexual deviance, rather than openly displaying it, while the sex scenes were often deemed too graphic to air by the 1930 Hollywood Production Code, under their Vulgarly and Sex sections.⁴⁰ This censorship did not stop production companies from making films and characters who celebrated the image of Rome as a centre for debauchery.⁴¹ Films such as Fellini’s *Satyricon* (1969) are particularly noteworthy as many of the scenes showing ‘sexually transgressive’ behaviour are echoed later in the portrayal of Atia’s sexually deviant behaviour in *Rome* (2005-2007), which shows how the development of attitudes towards sex showing on the big screen have changed to be more accepting in recent years.⁴² Throughout the decades that followed, half-naked dancing girls and bare-chested men have become the norm for films such as *Spartacus* (1960) or *Cleopatra* (1964), while in more recent years the sex has become more overt and deviant, with incest in HBO’s *Rome* (2005-2007) and a male rape scene in *Spartacus* (2010-2013).⁴³

The decade which saw the most action out of this type of film was the 1960’s, with films such as *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), all using

³⁸ Reich 2014: 35-36; Elliott 2011: 60

³⁹ The Independent 2007

⁴⁰ Shurlock 1947:142; Strong 2008:222

⁴¹ Wyke 1997: 93

⁴² Strong 2008: 223

⁴³ Cyrino 2013: 2

the familiar costume design, and drawing the audience in with their portrayals of Rome as a centre for vices, usually by the villains, such as the decadence shown in *Quo Vadis?* (1951) with Nero and Poppaea who encourage adultery, and the death of the wrestler, which feeds in the audience's moral standards when the villain is destroyed at the end of the film.⁴⁴ This genre of film, often with some mention of the hero fighting against an injustice in his life, or fighting against a corrupt or evil government, is highly relatable to the audience, especially when one considers the political climate of the United States of America, where a lot of these films were produced, and that during the 1960's the US were involved in several military conflicts, such as the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and the long-running Cold War (1947-1991), which could have fed into the audience's desire for the hero to defeat the enemy.⁴⁵ Interestingly, the 1940's and 1950's saw a growing trend of McCarthyism being used in films across all genres, such as *A King in New York* (1957), in which a recently-deposed king moves to New York, becomes an accidental celebrity and is later accused of being a Communist. This theme of accusing people of being a Communist, or sympathetic towards the Russians, was a popular way of protesting the actions of Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose policies against the Red Scare including publishing a list of names of people who were employed in the US State Department, but were members of the Communist Party, and in his opinion, could therefore not be loyal to America.⁴⁶ This theme of McCarthyism, as it came to be known, often portrayed a person trying to overcome obstacles such as being accused of espionage, and this resonated with the peplum genre with the hero overcoming obstacles to defeat the enemy of Imperial Rome. Two such films which highlight the McCarthy feeling in the peplum genre are *Sign of the Pagan* (1954) and *Attila* (1954), where the Huns represent

⁴⁴ Cornelius 2011: 5

⁴⁵ Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 47

⁴⁶ Griffith 1970: 49

the fear of Communism threatening to wipe out America, destroy peace, democracy and capitalism, just as the Huns marched on Rome to destroy it.⁴⁷

Despite the appeal and successes of the 'peplum' genre, financial and legal issues plagued the Hollywood studios towards the end of the 1960's, and the failure of the last big Hollywood film set in the ancient world, *Cleopatra* (1963), which suffered a huge loss in profit versus budget, led to a decline in these types of films being produced. Legally, the monopoly the 'Big 5' studios, MGM, Warner Brothers, RKO, Paramount and Fox, held over the cinema system was being diminished by the 1948 Paramount Case, which declared film studios could no longer own or control the cinemas as well, in an attempt to encourage the smaller, independent films being released.⁴⁸ As a result of these issues, one could certainly wonder as to how the genre, and thus the decadent portrayals of Rome, could have survived long enough for a revival, which began with Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), leading the way to commercial success, winning six Academy Awards and earning over \$450 million in profit.⁴⁹ The answer lay in TV, with series' such as *I, Claudius* (1976) and *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) maintaining the audience's interest in the ancient world.⁵⁰ *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), for example, was a miniseries made directly for TV, which cost £18 million to make, but reportedly earned \$30 million in profit, showing that, although the financial losses of *Cleopatra* (1963) had caused some decline in the film industry's interest in the ancient world, there was still audience interest and so the production companies turned to TV to assess the profitability of the genre.⁵¹ The total running time of *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) was eight hours, and it was shown on consecutive Sundays, watched by 80% of the Italian population, and 50% of the

⁴⁷ Harty 2014: 37

⁴⁸ Litman 1998: 13-14

⁴⁹ Renger and Solomon 2013: 17

⁵⁰ Richards 2008: 158

⁵¹ Reinhartz 2012: 151; Grade 1987: 219

American population.⁵² This suggests that showing the series on TV meant people could watch it from the comfort of their own home, rather than having to go out to a cinema and spend money, but that they were still interested in the ancient world setting. The genre continued its revival with films such as Petersen's *Troy* (2004), Stone's *Alexander* (2004) and Snyder's *300* (2007), all of which received moderate to high levels of success and could clearly have paved the way for HBO Inc. to have pondered making a TV series about the spectacle of Rome, as clearly the interest in the genre was still arguably there.⁵³

The other crucial factor which helped HBO's plan to create a big-budget TV series was the rapid growth of the number of people owning a TV. For example, in America, by 1994 94.2 million households in the nation owned at least one TV set, compared to just 70.5 million in 1976.⁵⁴ This rapid growth helped to ensure that their series would reach as many people as possible, with the first episode of *Rome* reaching approximately 3.8 million viewers.⁵⁵ HBO, or Home Box Office Incorporated, founded in 1971, stood out from the crowd in the beginning by using an economic model unlike those used by the other big TV networks, whereby instead of trying to attract sponsors, the focus was attracting and retaining members to their subscription service, by ensuring the programmes they showed were entertaining and pleasing to the members.⁵⁶ Since its inception, HBO has become the channel for people to build their lives around, not wanting to miss an episode of their favourite show, or not wanting to miss a film they missed when it was in the cinemas, otherwise called an 'appointment channel.'⁵⁷ This means a lot of their marketing and strategy is focused on making sure the shows and films they show are catered towards the customers and their

⁵² Richards 2008: 164

⁵³ Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 219

⁵⁴ Edgerton and Jones 2008: 3

⁵⁵ Variety 2005

⁵⁶ Edgerton and Jones 2008: 1

⁵⁷ Edgerton and Jones 2008: 11

happiness. HBO's own slogan, 'It's Not TV, It's HBO,' epitomises the vision they have been trying to achieve by suggesting that their channel is a significant cut above the rest of the other TV networks.⁵⁸

Even with the ongoing interest in the ancient world, the growth of TV and the success and unique consumer-facing strategy of HBO, the success of HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007) is still particularly noteworthy for several reasons. Using two of HBO's other successful shows, comedy *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), based on the collection of essays by Candace Bushnell, first published in 1997, and fantasy drama *Game of Thrones* (2011-Present), based on the best-selling fantasy novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin, first published in 1996, to compare, this section will attempt to uncover some of *Rome*'s (2005-2007) more unique selling points. It is important to note at this stage that although *Game of Thrones* (2011-) is based on a book written by a third party, HBO directors have changed and added details, and even whole scenes which do not appear in the book, which is important as it shows how HBO do not mind tweaking their source material in order to sell the production to their audiences, especially as the showrunners have now gone past the published books.⁵⁹ The specific sexual relationships shown throughout HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007) also appear as variations of the same relationship, in several of HBO's other big-budget TV shows, suggesting that once HBO have landed on a successful and popular selling point, they then use that selling point frequently in different scenarios and with different effects, as they realise their audience like it. The use of gender, sex and sexuality within the storylines of these TV shows are instrumental in showing how women use their sexuality to gain power and control over men, and often over other women as well. Within *Rome* (2005-2007) it is almost certainly used by the female characters to manipulate the men and control events to

⁵⁸ Edgerton and Jones 2008: 9

⁵⁹ Sheffield 2017

their own preferred outcomes. Interestingly, despite the huge amounts of gratuitous sex and the treatment of women in *Game of Thrones* (2011-), women account for approximately two million of the show's 4.8 million viewers, which suggests that the levels of sex and violence against women, despite being a hugely controversial topic in today's reality, are an accepted part of a fantasy TV series.⁶⁰ One reason for this could be that the show is not set in modern times, and so the women watching it do not expect modern attitudes to be represented, but instead are watching the show as though it were set in medieval times.⁶¹ This could also account for the acceptance of *Rome* (2005-2007), as again the viewers watching would accept that ancient Rome held different values, especially towards the treatment of women and the amount of power women could hold, although there is no data pertaining specifically to women viewership for *Rome* (2005-2007). However, there has been a huge backlash of the levels of violence and sex in the media towards both *Rome* (2005-2007) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-), which also indicates that not all women, or even people, are happy with the levels of sex and violence towards women.⁶² HBO has come under fire for the levels of sex and violence against women in all of its shows, with speculation that they are relying on it to promote their shows.⁶³ In *Westworld* (2016-) the very first image of the first episode, *The Original* (S1. Ep. 1), is the image of a naked, bloodied body of a female android.⁶⁴ In *Deadwood* (2004-2006), in the episode *True Colors* (S3. Ep. 3), the character Hearst implies he would be able to rape the widow Alma, who has arrived without an escort, just to prove how low he thinks of her.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Frankel 2014: 1

⁶¹ Frankel 2014: 1

⁶² The Daily Beast 2016

⁶³ The Daily Beast 2016

⁶⁴ *Westworld*, Season One, *Pilot*, 2016-Present: 0:01:56-0:02:10

⁶⁵ *Deadwood*, Season Three, *True Colours*, 2004-2006: 37:52-38:33

The first relationship from *Rome* (2005-2007) which has also been used as a plot device is the incestuous affair. In *Rome* (2005-2007) the incestuous affair is between Octavia and her brother Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus, who is known for being morally upstanding due to Suetonius' *Life of Augustus*, where he discusses the emperor's reform programme, which was aimed at raising Rome's morals.⁶⁶ Their incestuous affair is a one-time event in Episode 9, *Utica* (S1 Ep. 9), used by the screenwriters to likely add some drama to the show, and based on fiction. It is orchestrated by a vengeful Servilia who is using Octavia's naivety to gain information on Caesar in order to humiliate and ruin him as he did to her when he ended their affair.⁶⁷ In *Game of Thrones* (2011-) the incestuous affair is used as a main plotline throughout the series, with the King's wife Queen Cersei of House Lannister, having an affair with her twin brother Ser Jaime of the Kingsguard. Their affair is a long-running one, and from the beginning it is shown that Cersei uses her brother's love for herself in order to gain more power, or keep her power. For example, in the very first episode *Winter is Coming* (S1. Ep1.) Jaime and Cersei are caught having sex in a tower at Winterfell by Brandon Stark, son of the Lord of Winterfell, and Cersei encourages Jaime to push Brandon out of the window, intending to kill him so he would not tell anyone what he saw.⁶⁸ This event sets in motion a chain of events which, by the end of Season 7, sees Cersei established as Queen in her own right, with her husband and all three of her children killed. This shows how HBO used the incestuous relationship, albeit changed slightly from the books, to suggest that Cersei was not really in love with her brother, but was manipulating him in order to gain more power, as he was in a good position to spy and kill for her. This is a plot from the books, but HBO changed several scenes and moments between the siblings in order to make it more dramatic, with one scene in particular which went a different direction to the books.

⁶⁶ Suet. *Aug* 34

⁶⁷ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 24:00-24:06

⁶⁸ *Game of Thrones*, Season One, *Winter is Coming*, 2011-Present: 1:00:00-1:00:04

While the incestuous affair in *Rome* (2005-2007) is a failure, as Servilia does not get what she wants from it, and Octavia is disgusted with herself, the incestuous affair in *Game of Thrones* (2011-) is successful for the two people involved, as they enhance their family's power and control over the throne of Westeros. However, their relationship starts to change over time, and in Episode 3 of Season 4, *Breaker of Chains* (S4. Ep. 3) HBO included a very controversial rape scene between the brother and sister duo, which was decidedly different to the way the scene plays out in the book, and it ultimately changes the power struggle between the brother and sister. In it, they are standing next to their son Joffrey's dead body, and Cersei is trying to convince Jaime that it was their other brother, Tyrion, who killed their son Joffrey.⁶⁹ They start to kiss, until Cersei recoils from Jaime's gold hand, a result of his real hand being severed by an enemy, and Jaime gets upset, asking 'Why have the gods made me love such a hateful woman?'.⁷⁰ He then pushes Cersei up against the altar holding their dead son, and rips her dress, before having what appears to be forced sex with her.⁷¹ This is a notable scene as it raises the question, did Cersei try to manipulate Jaime by offering him sex, as there is a look shared between them which many viewers will recognise from previous episodes, where she appears to be offering him sex in return for him killing Tyrion, which would class as consent and would play into their relationship of Cersei manipulating Jaime with her sexuality in order to get what she wants, whereas other viewers may argue that as she protests, he is just taking the sex on the basis that they have done it before, which would indicate that Cersei is losing her power over him, and over her future. Indeed, it would appear to be the latter as in Season 7, *The Dragon and the Wolf* (S7. Ep. 7), Jaime leaves Cersei and King's Landing to go and help her enemies, as he has come to the realisation that she does not care about him, and would have her bodyguard kill him if she needed to. This particular

⁶⁹ *Game of Thrones*, Season Four, *Breaker of Chains*, 2011-Present: 12:45-13:19

⁷⁰ *Game of Thrones*, Season Four, *Breaker of Chains*, 2011-Present:14:17-14:46

⁷¹ *Game of Thrones*, Season Four, *Breaker of Chains*, 2011-Present: 14:46-15:17

scene has more impact being visually portrayed, as the audience can physically see Cersei give Jaime the look that potentially gives him permission, whereas in the book they only have their imagination. Indeed, the author of the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, George R.R. Martin, has spoken about how this particular scene was ‘never discussed with the show’s producers’ and ‘his dialogue (in which Cersei expresses her affections for Jaime) was absent in the TV version, and “if the show had retained some of Cersei’s dialogue from the books, it might have left a somewhat different impression’.⁷² This interview with the author Martin highlights how HBO changed the scene in order to create more drama, with one of the show’s directors Alex Graves declaring it ‘the best scene I’ve ever done.’⁷³ The link between *Rome* (2005-2007) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-) regarding this incestuous relationship trope highlights how HBO use certain relationships between characters regularly, but in different ways. The potential that this particular relationship has to manipulate power between characters is clear in both of the TV shows, with Cersei retaining her power for several more seasons, and the consequences of Octavia and Octavian’s brief affair being that Atia and Servilia’s rivalry escalates to new heights.

Overall, the comparison of the incestuous relationships in *Game of Thrones* (2011-) and *Rome* (2005-2007) highlight a key aspect of HBO’s strategy, where they adapted scenes in *Game of Thrones* (2011-) in order to create more drama, and to surprise viewers who had read the books and were expecting one scene, whereas in the show they were given a different outlook, but also how HBO use similar tropes in their shows because they want to explore the areas of life that other production companies might want to avoid, or as Michael Lombardo, HBO’s president for programming said, ‘The similar story lines were the results of working with “writers that are interested in exploring the outer reaches of human

⁷² The Telegraph 2014

⁷³ The Telegraph 2014

experience and how it affects the way we live.’⁷⁴ This shows that HBO producers and screenwriters are encouraged to push boundaries, and explore those areas of life which might cause conflict.

Chapter Two: Sex in the Modern Media

Part One: An analysis of three significant sexual encounters in HBO’s *Rome*, Season One.

In Season One of *Rome* (2005-2007) there is a multitude of sexual encounters, ranging from Marc Antony having a ‘quickie’ behind a tree with a prostitute in front of the 13th Legion⁷⁵ to a couple reuniting, somewhat stiltedly, after time apart.⁷⁶ However, there are three examples of female sexuality being used to access and control power within the show. This highlights the perceived importance, at least on the part of HBO, of using sex to create drama, which as examined in Chapter One, is a regular feature in several HBO shows, although utilised in different ways and to different effects. Exploring how the women are portrayed in the show using their sexuality to influence events and how far those portrayals differed from their portrayals in ancient literature will highlight possible reasons for this, and will attempt to shed some light on the notion of men creating female characters for other men.

The encounters include a same-sex relationship between Servilia of the Junii and Octavia, daughter of Atia, an incestuous encounter between Octavia and her younger brother Octavian,

⁷⁴ New York Times 2011

⁷⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *How Titus Pullo Brought Down the Republic*, 2005 03:13-04:15

⁷⁶ *Rome*, Season One, *How Titus Pullo Brought Down the Republic*, 2005 11:38-12:20

and an in-depth look into the overall power of Atia's erotic authority, and how she uses her sexual wiles to manipulate events to her preferred outcome. Despite the knowledge that the characters of Servilia, Atia and Octavia are used in HBO's *Rome* as stereotypical representations of elite Roman women using manipulative methods and corrupting Roman society, the way they are actually portrayed in the series does not correspond with their portrayals in the scarce literary references that can be found in the ancient texts.⁷⁷ Tacitus and Suetonius both portrayed Atia as a "pious and caring mother"⁷⁸, rather than the sexually manipulative and ruthless woman she is in the show.⁷⁹ The real historical figure of Servilia is mentioned in Cicero, Suetonius and Plutarch, largely to do with how she was Caesar's mistress, with a notable account from Suetonius, discussing how Caesar lowered the price of some property for Servilia, and how Cicero then comments "'It's a better bargain than you think, for there is a third off,' which was taken by Suetonius to mean Servilia was prostituting her daughter to Caesar, as he had begun to tire of her."⁸⁰ This account does not portray Servilia as a pious woman such as Atia, but as a woman who is more willing to do what needed to be done to stay in Caesar's favour, in this case prostituting her daughter, not unlike the character of Servilia on *Rome* (2005-2007), who uses Octavia in much the same way, to get something she wanted. The portrayals of Octavia, meanwhile, in Plutarch and Suetonius, offer a woman who was revered by Rome, and considered to be 'a wonder of a woman,' by Plutarch, and 'besides her great beauty, had intelligence and dignity, when united to Antony and beloved by him, as such a woman naturally must be, would restore harmony and be their complete salvation.'⁸¹ This paints the historical figure of Octavia as a woman who was modest, pious, intelligent and able to draw admiration for her behaviour from the men in Rome. Her portrayal in the ancient literature does not match up with the behaviour of her character on

⁷⁷ Regalio 2007: 5

⁷⁸ Regalio 2007: 5; Tac. *Diag.* 28

⁷⁹ Hornblower and Spawforth 1996: 207

⁸⁰ Suet. *Jul.* 50.2

⁸¹ Plut. *Ant.* 31.

Rome (2005-2007), who commits incest with her brother and embarks on a long same-sex relationship with Servilia.

Not only are the portrayals of these women not entirely based on their real historical selves, they could also be seen as more of a simulation of a corrupt Rome, based on portrayals of the imperial women such as Messalina, Agrippina and Julia, who were all portrayed in various ancient and modern literature as sexually depraved and manipulative.⁸² Messalina was executed by her husband, the Emperor Claudius for her adulteries, while Claudius then planned an incestuous marriage to his niece Agrippina, and Julia was banished by her father, the Emperor Augustus for her sexually depraved behaviours of ‘all vices’.⁸³ These shorts accounts all feature the immoral behaviours of the elite Roman women, but it is important to remember that these accounts of women were written by male authors in accounts of other Roman men, and were not designed to provide detailed insight into the behaviours of the Roman women, but rather to portray the men in a certain light. Both of the representations of Atia and Servilia, and to an extent, Octavia, who is learning the manipulative ways of her mother and lover, could be seen as an amalgamation of several real historical figures, and also of the portrayals through time of the corrupt Roman woman, such as the behaviour of the women in the imperial family, taken from the ancient evidence and portrayed in Graves novels *I, Claudius* (1934) and *Claudius the God* (1935), two novels which portray the figures of Messalina, Livia and Julia as sexually voracious, in a similar way to Atia in HBO’s *Rome* (2005-2007), and ‘symptomatic of the larger corruption of Imperial Roman society.’⁸⁴

⁸² Regalie 2007: 7

⁸³ Suet. *Claud.* 39.1; Suet. *Claud.* 39.2; Suet. *Aug.* 65.1

⁸⁴ Regalie 2007: 7

These three encounters all represent something different in the sphere of love and sex, and so will be used to further analyse the show's overall purpose.

Atia of the Julii

Atia of the Julii is portrayed in *Rome* (2005-2007) by British actress Polly Walker, who brings the historical figure to life with influences of other famous historical women, as well as the established cinematic reputation of corrupt Roman women, who are seen as not above manipulating people to get what they want, such as the diva-esque performance of Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra, who used her sultry make-up and costumes to coax Richard Burton's Mark Antony into a love affair, and to convince Rex Harrison's Caesar that she would not kill herself.⁸⁵ The 'strong and almost masculine *virtus* of Atia' highlights her motivation in all that she does is for the ambition of her family, and more importantly, for her son Octavian, future Emperor Augustus.⁸⁶ The seemingly over-exaggeration of Atia's character from her portrayal in the ancient texts could appear to have sent a clear message from HBO that they wanted to deliver a show that could shock people from their established notion of Ancient Rome, albeit already portrayed as debauched and sexualised, by portraying the matriarch of the Julii family as an increasingly sexually driven, vengeful woman in comparison to the 'typical' pious Roman matron such as Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, who would prize their chastity or their virtue above all, and much more overtly sexual than the Roman women of decades before.⁸⁷ It could be suggested that the portrayal of Atia is not an over-exaggeration, as throughout cinematic history of Roman women; the pious women are rarely shown, evidenced by the lack of films with pious characters in, but rather could be a real portrayal of how Roman women are often portrayed in cinema and film, with examples such as Cleopatra

⁸⁵ Cyrino 2008 : 130 ; Ragalie 2007 : 9

⁸⁶ Cyrino 2008: 132; the Roman word '*virtus*' expresses 'courage' or heroism'

⁸⁷ Petrocelli 2001: 35

and Livia in the TV series *I, Claudius* (1976), who is portrayed as a scheming mother. The few literary references to Atia come from Tacitus and Suetonius. Tacitus includes her in a list of Roman women who perform their duties raising good Roman men, claiming with ‘scrupulous piety and modesty she regulated not only the boy’s studies and occupations, but even his recreations and games.’⁸⁸ This shows Tacitus to be highly approving of her, and holds her in high esteem. This reference, however, does not equate with the portrayal of Atia in *Rome* (2005-2007), as, as shall be examined, she does not conduct herself with piety or modesty, as she spends a lot of her time on screen manipulating and controlling people to her satisfaction, if not theirs. For example, the way she instructs Pullo to take Octavian to a brothel in order to lose his virginity, or the way she approves of her mistaken belief that he is having an affair with his great-uncle Caesar, or the way she sends her son off to Gaul on his own in order to curry favour with Caesar.⁸⁹ These are all examples of how Atia does not comport herself with piety or modesty, but rather voraciously goes after what she wants, and what she thinks her family need. In Suetonius, there are mentions of legends surrounding Augustus’ birth, with one such story claiming that Augustus was fathered by Apollo, after a serpent came up to Atia while she was in the Temple of Apollo, and soon after that a mark of a serpent appeared on her body and that ten months later she gave birth to Augustus, and he was seen as the son of Apollo.⁹⁰ This story is interesting as it would suggest that Atia in the ancient literary source would be seen as worthy to bear the son of a god, although caution must be advised as this account is not fact, but rather a myth or folk-tale, and so should not be used in reconciling the portrayals of Atia the historical figure and Atia the TV character.

⁸⁸ Tac. *Diag.* 28

⁸⁹ *Rome*, Season One, *Rome*, Season One, *The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 13:55-14:25

⁹⁰ Suet. *Aug.* 94.4

Her portrayal in *Rome* (2005-2007) is not the portrayal one might expect from her literary portrayal, but given the scarcity of information about her, the producers of *Rome* (2005-2007) would have needed to use information about other Roman women to create a more fleshed out character, and indeed a character audiences would enjoy watching, and the women they chose is that of Clodia Metelli and Fulvia.⁹¹ Clodia Metelli was the mistress of the poet Catullus, whose Lesbia poems are also used in the show, creating a link between the characterisation of Clodia through Atia, and the love poetry of ancient Rome, as it was widely believed that Clodia was the woman portrayed in Catullus' Lesbia poems, although there is now some debate on her identity.⁹² Clodia is also mentioned in one of Cicero's speeches, the *Pro Caelio*, where, as his defence strategy, he claims incest between Clodia and her brother, as well as claiming she played a role in her husband's death.⁹³ In this portrayal, Clodia is seen as corrupt and 'sexually uncontrollable' which fits more with the portrayal of Atia in *Rome* (2005-2007). The link of incest between Clodia, Atia and Atia's children, who commit incest together in the show, also show that Clodia could have influenced the writer's imagination of a debauched Rome, if not with the character of Atia. A final woman who may have played some part in forming the basis of Atia's character is that of Fulvia, Mark Antony's third wife, who is often described as "an ambitious woman of perverse influence."⁹⁴ Her portrayal of gaining power and her influence in politics provide a solid backstory for the character of Atia, especially with the characters of Atia and Mark Antony being erotically involved on the show, which historians believe was actually the case between Fulvia and Mark Antony before she married him.⁹⁵ This belief in their pre-marital affair comes from Cicero, in his collection of speeches against Mark Antony, known as the *Philippics*.⁹⁶ He

⁹¹ Cyrino 2008 : 139 ; *Rome*, Season One, 2005-2007, DVD Special Features, "When In Rome."

⁹² Dixon 2003:134; Regalie 2007: 6

⁹³ Regalie 2007 : 7; Cic. *Cael.*

⁹⁴ Virvoulet 1994: 66

⁹⁵ Babcock 1965: 6; Cyrino 2008: 139

⁹⁶ Cyrino 2008: 140

writes “Also even at the period he was up to something at Clodius’ house – he best knows what I mean.”⁹⁷ This is almost certainly a veiled reference to Fulvia, who was married to Clodius, although there is some debate as to the likelihood of this affair being true.⁹⁸ This link between the real historical figure of Fulvia and the character of Atia both being involved with Mark Antony, shows how the producers of *Rome* (2005-2007) merged together the known literary references of at least three real Roman women to create their sexually deviant version of Atia, capable of creating drama and shocking the modern audiences, whilst still holding true to a mixture of real events.

This need to shock the audience holds especially true for the flamboyant introduction to Atia, as we are introduced to her for the first time whilst she has sex with a local horse-dealer, Timon, while her maid watches, in order to get a particularly beautiful horse.⁹⁹ When he realises this, she soothes him with a sarcastic response; “Don’t look so sullen now, this was not a hardship for me. I’ve always found something perversely erotic about goatly little men.”¹⁰⁰ The audience is half-amazed at her sassy I’m-in-control routine, and half-curious as to why she did not just simply buy the horse. It becomes clearer when she then sends her young son Octavian to Gaul with the horse as a gift for Caesar, her uncle.¹⁰¹ This is clearly an attempt to curry favour with Caesar, as political tensions in the city of Rome are reaching a peak between Caesar and Pompey, the two consuls during this time as a result of their alliance through the First Triumvirate in 59BCE.¹⁰² This is just one example of Atia using her sexuality to manipulate the outcome of events in order to further the ambitions of her family. She may have been outbid if she had chosen to simply try and buy the horse, whereas by

⁹⁷ Cic. *Phil.* 2.48

⁹⁸ Virlouvet 1994: 70

⁹⁹ Cyrino 2008 : 131; Ragalie 2007 : 9 ; *Rome*, Season One, *The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 11:34-12:18

¹⁰⁰ *Rome*, Season One, *The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 12 :16 -12 :24

¹⁰¹ *Rome*, Season One, *The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 13:06-13:19

¹⁰² Encyclopaedia Britannica ‘Triumvirate’

sleeping with the horse-dealer, she placed him in a position of debt, as though he owes her, the elite wealthy Roman matron, for sleeping with a lower class horse-dealer, and so she gets the horse, which could also indicate hopes of a repeated performance on Timon's part. In Episode 3, *An Owl in a Thornbush* (S1. Ep. 3), we see that Timon does indeed try to garner more sexual favours from Atia by asking for sex instead of money when she asks him for more guards, fearing for her family's safety.¹⁰³ Her indiscretion has come back to haunt her, but she is not a woman to be messed with and her swift slap on his cheek soon gives him the answer he needs to hear, although he does not accept it and sees it as a form of foreplay between them.¹⁰⁴ Atia is perfectly happy to use Timon and other lower class men to achieve her goals for her family, but she is also very aware of her social status compared to theirs, and will not lower herself to their standard for no good reason. She knows she has money enough to pay for the guards, and thus does not need to gratify Timon's sexual advances to achieve that particular goal.

The next time we see Atia trying to manipulate the outcome of an event, she is actually using her daughter Octavia's sexuality, rather than her own, which shows clearly how she is willing to do anything, use anyone, even her own children in order to get her preferred outcome. The tensions between Pompey and Caesar are rising, and with Pompey needing a new wife, his previous one having died in childbirth, Caesar orders Atia to find him a suitable candidate.¹⁰⁵ She, understanding the political ramifications of this request, immediately orders Octavia to divorce her much-loved husband Glabius and then offers her to Pompey as a way of cementing an alliance between the two families.¹⁰⁶ Atia is so desperate for her family to be in political favour that she gives Pompey permission to have sex with Octavia before the

¹⁰³ *Rome*, Season One, *An Owl in a Thornbush*, 2005-2007 07:32-08:06

¹⁰⁴ *Rome*, Season One, *An Owl in a Thornbush*, 2005-2007 08:06-08:11

¹⁰⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 33:50-34:09

¹⁰⁶ *Rome*, Season One, *The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 36:05-36:28

wedding night, breaking with tradition.¹⁰⁷ She is willing to make her daughter engage in forced sex with a much older man, although age was not an issue in ancient Roman marriages as it is in contemporary society, without a legal contract in order to further her family's ambitions, and ultimately Octavia is left rejected and humiliated when Pompey turns her down and marries another woman.¹⁰⁸ This is another clear example of how Atia manipulates the people around her, including her own children, in order to get what she wants, even if, in this case she fails. This particular storyline highlights the use of Fulvia as a basis for Atia's character, by making the character politically active, and thus links them together.¹⁰⁹

Another interesting facet of Atia's character and of her sexuality is the attempts she makes to destroy Servilia's romance with Caesar. This could be seen as an attempt to have more control over Caesar, as if he is not seeing another woman he may be more inclined to listen to Atia's advice instead, which would likely further her own political ambitions. It could also be an insecure reaction to Servilia being considered attractive and feminine enough to ensnare Caesar romantically, which could cause Atia to disparage Servilia's looks in an attempt to make herself feel better about her own aging appearance. Although this storyline within the show does not directly involve sex, with the exception of Servilia's sexual relationship with Caesar, it does highlight Atia's focus on her own perception of her sexuality, and the rivalry between the two matriarchs would enable the show to portray that sexuality amongst women is just as effective in starting a war as power struggles in the Senate. The damage caused by Atia, which includes some graphic sexual graffiti drawn around the city¹¹⁰, results in Caesar ending his affair with Servilia from embarrassment as he is married.¹¹¹ This rivalry between the two women, along with the way Atia has used her daughter throughout the season by

¹⁰⁷ *Rome, Season One, The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 38:40-39:20

¹⁰⁸ *Rome, Season One, The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 46:40-48:10

¹⁰⁹ Cyrino 2008:139

¹¹⁰ *Rome, Season One, The Ram Has Touched The Wall*, 2005-2007 24:18-24:23; 24:56-25:35

¹¹¹ *Rome, Season One, The Ram Has Touched The Wall*, 2005-2007 29:53-31:22

forcing her to divorce her husband for Pompey, shows that it is not just men that Atia is happy to use in her quest for more power, but women also. It has also been suggested that the rivalry between the two women was used as ‘a subplot assisting the main theme of civil strife in the late Republic,’ which reinforces the premise that the power struggles between the elite women were just as important to the storyline as the power struggles between the men.¹¹² This scene is also reminiscent of a time in Fulvia’s life where she demanded Lucius Antony start a war which would drive her husband Mark Antony, out of the arms of his Egyptian lover Cleopatra, out of pure jealousy.¹¹³

However, as Episode 5, *The Ram Has Touched the Wall* (S1. Ep. 5), comes to an end it is shown that Servilia has placed a curse on Atia which would bring a disastrous end to her and her family,¹¹⁴ and, later in Season One, she started a same-sex relationship with Atia’s daughter Octavia,¹¹⁵ thus destroying the relationship between mother and daughter, which could be seen as Atia’s comeuppance to her amoral behaviour in a society which prided itself on virtue and justice. To summarise the sexual behaviour of Atia, it is clear to the audience that much of her shocking behaviour is intended for entertainment purposes, and on the whole, does not reflect the character of Atia as portrayed in the ancient texts, pious and caring. However, as a TV character, she is clearly an amalgamation of several real Roman women, Fulvia and Clodia Metelli as examples, designed to create drama and bring in the audience numbers. We can see her character’s ruthless manipulation and her sexual voracity as the driving force behind many of the events during Season One, and which therefore can be aligned with the premise that the power the elite Roman women wielded had a direct

¹¹² Augoustakis 2008: 117

¹¹³ Virilouvet 1994: 77; App. B. Civ 4.19

¹¹⁴ *Rome*, Season One, *The Ram Has Touched The Wall*, 2005-2007 39:37-41:57

¹¹⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 44:27-45:40

effect on much of the male-orientated events, making them much more powerful to the story line than previously thought.

Octavia and Servilia of the Junii

Among the many sexual encounters in *Rome* (2005-2007), the same-sex relationship between Octavia and Servilia is possibly the most exceptional, for several reasons. To start, the different positions the two women hold in Roman society places them at odds. Servilia is an older lady, the matriarch of her wealthy and powerful family, and an ex-lover of Caesar, who is shown to be more serene in her dealings than Atia, although no less manipulative, while Octavia is the young daughter of Atia, who is herself a former friend to Servilia.¹¹⁶ The age difference between them and the fact Servilia has watched Octavia grow up as a close family friend means their relationship almost comes out of the blue, or as Professor Juliette Harrisson puts it ‘Rome’s second most ludicrous sex-for-the-sake-of-it storyline!’.¹¹⁷ By all accounts, Octavia and Servilia were both heterosexual, given their marriages to several men, which would make this particular storyline an invention to create entertaining TV.¹¹⁸ However, the Romans did not classify sexuality in the same way as today, so it would be anachronistic to use the label of ‘homosexuality’.¹¹⁹ It could also be argued that the male authors of that time, Martial being an example, wrote about the sexual preferences of women, in terms of calling those women ‘masculine’ or ‘tribades’, rather than to give details about the relationship.¹²⁰ Therefore it is entirely possible that both Servilia and Octavia did enjoy and experience same-sex relations, perhaps not with each other, but in their own homes and respective spheres of influence, given the lack of evidence to suggest otherwise.

¹¹⁶ Regalie 2007 : 10

¹¹⁷ Harrisson 2010

¹¹⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica 2016, ‘Octavia’

¹¹⁹ Masterson, Rabinowitz and Robson 2018: 1

¹²⁰ Rice 2004 : 5

The second reason their relationship is unique is because it appears to be, at least partially, based on mutual attraction and desire, rather than manipulation as some of the other sexual encounters on the show. However, it soon becomes clear that Servilia is using Octavia to spite Atia, and later to gain information on Caesar. The audience is not aware of when the manipulations begins, or if the entire affair was a ploy on Servilia's part. They enter into their relationship as a by-product of Atia using her daughter to attempt to mend fences with Servilia, after her actions in a previous episode, *The Ram Has Touched the Wall* (S1. Ep. 5), which resulted in Caesar renouncing Servilia as his lover.¹²¹ This is done in a way reminiscent of the rumour that Servilia used her daughter to stay in Caesar's favour, and highlights the lack of embarrassment on Atia's part, who is clearly willing to do anything to keep the situation in her favour.¹²² Atia sends Octavia to Servilia's house with a gift, a slave with a large jewelled penis, meant to grace Servilia with sexual favours, again highlighting the lack of secrecy or shame surrounding sexuality in ancient Rome.¹²³ Octavia is reluctant to go, but unwilling to disobey her mother's orders.¹²⁴ Whilst there, it is clear to the audience that there is some underlying sexual tension between Octavia and Servilia, shown through long glances and a heavy silence.¹²⁵ Octavia then leaves, looking flustered. The seeds of the relationship have been planted in the minds of the audience, leaving them wondering what purpose this relationship could possibly have, given Servilia's previous connection to Caesar, who is also Octavia's great-uncle. It is possible the producers could simply have wanted a controversial storyline for the two female characters, but given the dramatic ending to their relationship it is more likely they were used as a device to bring drama and entertainment into the show.

¹²¹ *Rome*, Season One, *The Ram Has Touched The Wall*, 2005-2007 29:53-31:22

¹²² Suet. *Jul.* 50.2

¹²³ *Rome*, Season One, *Egeria*, 2005-2007 44:27-45:40

¹²⁴ *Rome*, Season One, *Egeria*, 2005-2007 45:40- 46:18

¹²⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *Egeria*, 2005-2007: 47:00-47:44

The next encounter between Octavia and Servilia is again brought about by Atia, who is beginning to fear for her family's safety, given their proximity to Caesar, who looks about to be defeated by Pompey and his armies.¹²⁶ Atia is clearly thinking of ways to ensure her family's survival, by aligning themselves more closely with Servilia, whose son is a supporter of Pompey.¹²⁷ Fearing retaliation by Pompey's supporters, she asks Octavia to go to Servilia and ask for men to guard their door in her name.¹²⁸ Octavia responds to the request rather coldly, asking "Why must I go?" making it clear she feels uncomfortable about seeing Servilia and about being her mother's messenger again.¹²⁹ Later on, we then see Octavia putting make-up on and wearing a pretty dress in order to go to Servilia's house.¹³⁰ It is almost as though she is going on a date, as she seems more excited than she did earlier. She is then shown being carried in a litter wearing a veil over her head like a bride would, giving the impression she is going to be married.¹³¹ This image gives the idea that their relationship starts because of mutual affection rather than manipulation more weight, as she seems to be acting like a bride in love. The wedding imagery then continues with a shot of her and Servilia sitting in front of what looks like an altar, smiling and talking with each other.¹³² The visit starts with polite small talk, but soon ends when Octavia descends into tears, having asked the favour of Servilia, and receiving a most congenial reply, which she professes 'not to deserve'.¹³³ It is interesting to wonder if Servilia only agreed to Atia's request for the sake of her own interest in Octavia, as it was only a few episodes ago we saw her creating curses

¹²⁶ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 04:25-04:56

¹²⁷ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 05:19-05:31

¹²⁸ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 06:19-06:28

¹²⁹ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 06:32-06:47

¹³⁰ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 10:52-11:14

¹³¹ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 11:15-11:27

¹³² *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 11:27-11:40

¹³³ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 11:41-12:40

for both Atia and Caesar; can she really have forgiven them so quickly?¹³⁴ There is then some mild flirting between the two women, when Octavia claims she ‘must look a fright’ and Servilia agrees, laughing.¹³⁵ As Octavia leaves, with Servilia protesting ‘so soon?’, there is another long glance between the two women followed by an intimate hug, which makes it even more obvious to the audience that this storyline is going somewhere, with the tension building with high expectations.¹³⁶

The next time we see Octavia it becomes completely clear about her somewhat ambivalent feelings thus far, as she is lying on a bed masturbating.¹³⁷ The age difference here is highlighted as she is portrayed in a girlish dress, the lighting around her making her look young and innocent.¹³⁸ The very next scene she is praying repeatedly, clearly feeling quite guilty and possibly confused about her feelings for Servilia.¹³⁹ This sharp contrast between the two scenes only serves as a reminder of how quickly things like emotions and power can change in Rome. Atia walks in during her prayers, and for the third time, in a way that makes you wonder whether Atia is aware of the situation, throws the two women together again for a weaving session.¹⁴⁰ This scene also represents a possible link to the real historical figure of Octavia, lauded in ancient Rome as a most pious and modest woman, shown here to be masturbating while struggling with her feelings for another woman.

This third visit is the most symbolic in the relationship thus far, as it highlights the political usefulness of Servilia and how power can shift so quickly. The two women are relaxing on

¹³⁴ *Rome*, Season One, *The Ram Has Touched The Wall*, 2005-2007: 39:37-41:57

¹³⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 12:43-12:50

¹³⁶ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 13:11-13:41

¹³⁷ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 27:17-27:38

¹³⁸ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 27:17-27:38

¹³⁹ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 27:38-27:46

¹⁴⁰ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 27:46-28:15

settees, eating and talking, when Eleni, Servilia's maid, comes in with news from Greece.¹⁴¹ She tells the two women that Caesar has won the battle, meaning Atia and her family will be back in power again while Servilia, whose son was against Caesar, may now be the one in danger potentially.¹⁴² This sudden role reversal, shown in imagery as the two women are sitting on separate settees, is interesting as the audience now wonder what will happen to their budding relationship now that Atia, and by extension, Octavia, no longer need her as an ally.¹⁴³ The music changes as Servilia starts crying over the lack of news about her son, and as Octavia goes to comfort her, they stare at each other for a long time in intense silence, before finally, they kiss.¹⁴⁴ Towards the end of the episode they are shown to be lying in bed together.¹⁴⁵ This is the start of a relationship which lasts for the next two years, until Caesar returns to Rome from Egypt at the start of Episode Nine, *Utica* (S1. Ep.9).

The end of Servilia and Octavia's relationship comes in Episode 9, *Utica* (S1. Ep.9), when Servilia's hatred of Caesar is provoked by his return to Rome after a two-year absence. We, the audience, assume their relationship has continued during Caesar's absence, in part because of a secret smile the two women share at a party.¹⁴⁶ This gives the audience the impression that the two women are, at the very least, very close friends, if not more, and also hints that Atia is still unaware of their relationship. This relationship is confirmed later when the two women are seen weaving together.¹⁴⁷ Octavia asks how Servilia is feeling after seeing Caesar at the party, which shows a clear concern for the older woman.¹⁴⁸ After a brief discussion about Caesar, Octavia lets slip that her younger brother Octavian has knowledge

¹⁴¹ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 32:07-32:21

¹⁴² *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 32:21-32:31

¹⁴³ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 32:38-32:43

¹⁴⁴ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 33:06-34:16

¹⁴⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *Pharsalus*, 2005-2007: 45:32-45:47

¹⁴⁶ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 17:05-17:09

¹⁴⁷ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 22:29-28:15

¹⁴⁸ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 22:30-22:51

of a secret affliction of Caesar's, which prompts Servilia to order Octavia to find out what it is.¹⁴⁹ Her wording, "You must find out which god has cursed him," shows Servilia clearly using her matriarchal age and influence to issue a command to the younger woman, and it is clear she expects to be obeyed, despite Octavia's reluctance.¹⁵⁰ The scene is reminiscent of an earlier scene between Atia and Octavia, when Octavia professed her reluctance to visit Servilia which emphasises her character's overall weakness. Octavia has first been used by her mother, which one might expect given her maternal loyalty, and now by her lover, who could also be seen as a maternal figure, given her age and similar social status to Octavia's own mother. The two matriarchs are effectively training Octavia in the apparent ways of the elite Roman woman, by getting her to use her sexuality to manipulate and control others around her.¹⁵¹

Octavia then attempts to find out the affliction from her brother but fails.¹⁵² Upon telling Servilia, we immediately see just how desperate she has become in her quest for revenge against Caesar and Atia, as she encourages, to the disbelief of the audience and Octavia herself, to seduce her younger brother as "young men tell their lovers everything."¹⁵³ Octavia is horrified and shows a bit of redeeming strength as she refuses to do it, and starts to leave, until Servilia tells her something which stops her. "Your mother killed Glabius," has the desired effect on Octavia, as Glabius was her husband in Episode 1, *The Stolen Eagle* (S1. Ep. 1), whom she loved very much.¹⁵⁴ Servilia telling Octavia this news, despite knowing it would devastate her, shows the audience that Servilia has reached breaking point, and is desperate enough that she would do absolutely anything, hurt anyone, just to further her

¹⁴⁹ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 23:20-23:35

¹⁵⁰ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 23:45-23:53

¹⁵¹ Ragalie 2007: 11

¹⁵² *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 24:53-26:24

¹⁵³ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 30:00-30:47

¹⁵⁴ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 30:47-31:15

revenge plot against Caesar. She is so desperate that she would hurt her own lover. The announcement has the desired effect on Octavia in turning her against her family, as we next see her going into her brother's room, and sending his servant away.¹⁵⁵ This scene again shows us the indecisive and weak mind of Octavia, as she knows what she is about to do is wrong, but she thinks she wants to do it to punish her mother. The audience, and Octavian, know something is up at this point, but there is still a sense of 'will she, won't she?' from the audience, as incest is a controversial issue which was considered wrong then, and is still considered wrong in today's society.¹⁵⁶ Regardless, Octavia perseveres with her plan, and commits incest with her brother, which will be explored more thoroughly in the next section. The impact of this encounter in terms of her relationship with Servilia is that Octavia realises, with the help and lies of her mother Atia, that Servilia had used her to further her own revenge plot against Octavia's own family.

The portrayal of Servilia and Octavia throughout their relationship rely heavily on modern day tropes of lesbian affairs, and the older 'cougar woman' with a younger lover. Servilia is shown to be ruthless, hurting Octavia with the truth about her husband simply to manipulate the girl into doing as she asks, not because she genuinely cares for her. This portrayal shows Octavia to be easily persuaded by both her mother, in sending her repeatedly to Servilia's house, and by her lover, in seducing her own brother to gain information, which could be reconciled with the historical representation of her as a model Roman women, who does as she is asked.

Octavia and Octavian

¹⁵⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 38:41-40:08

¹⁵⁶ National Criminal Justice Reference System 1979

The incestuous relationship between the future Emperor Augustus and his older sister Octavia seems likely to be part of a specific agenda by the TV producers of *Rome* (2005-2007), given the overall attitudes in Roman times towards incest being ‘of condemnation and horror’.¹⁵⁷ In fact, the Roman jurist Paul wrote that parent-child unions were against the *ius gentium*, or the set of morals all civilised people followed.¹⁵⁸ It is likely the producers and executives at HBO are more willing than other networks to show TV which pushes the boundaries, be that graphic violence or extreme sexual proclivity, such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) or more recently, *Game of Thrones* (2011-2017), both of which portray scenes that shocked the nation, at the time.¹⁵⁹ Whatever the reason, it has not been published before that Augustus ever had an incestuous relationship with his sister Octavia.¹⁶⁰ This makes their relationship as ‘out of the blue’ as the same-sex one between Servilia and Octavia and strongly supports the idea of an agenda.

Their relationship is set into play by the desperation of Servilia, who needs information from Octavian which will help her destroy Caesar. She encourages Octavia to ask him, revealing her hatred of Caesar to the audience by declaring “With the Gods help I will destroy him.”¹⁶¹ It is clear that she has not forgiven him for renouncing her and will stop at nothing to get her revenge. Octavia initially refuses, wishing Servilia would simply forget it but eventually she capitulates, asking Servilia “Would it make you happy?”¹⁶² This emphasises her character’s key weakness of wanting to make everyone happy, regardless of her own feelings and echoes her own historical portrayal. However, her initial attempts to wheedle the information out of Octavian fail, as he actually reveals a different secret of his; that he helped to kill a man. In a

¹⁵⁷ Strong 2008:222

¹⁵⁸ Strong 2005: 32; Just. *Digest* 23.68

¹⁵⁹ Strong 2008: 220

¹⁶⁰ Strong 2008: 219; Suet, *Aug.* 69.

¹⁶¹ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 24:00-24:04

¹⁶² *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 24:04-24:34

way that is truly HBO's style, this secret is almost ignored by Octavia, who sarcastically raises her glass to him.¹⁶³ When it is time to tell Servilia, she cares even less and this time uses Octavia's love for her to encourage her to commit the unspeakable, and seduce her brother. "You do have something he wants," is her opening line, while Octavia stares in horror.¹⁶⁴ "Young men tell their lovers everything," Servilia continues, ignoring Octavia's initial protests. Servilia then tries to turn Octavia against her family, calling them "a nest of snakes," while Octavia claims they love her.¹⁶⁵ Servilia replies "As I love you?" in a clear manipulation of Octavia's love for her, but it still does not convince Octavia to seduce her brother.¹⁶⁶ She is about to leave when Servilia deals the final heart-breaking blow. "Your mother killed Glabius."¹⁶⁷ Glabius was Octavia's husband in Episode One, *The Stolen Eagle* (S1. Ep. 1), whom she loved very much. Servilia is using the one thing she knows will get Octavia to do her bidding, despite the fact they are lovers. Octavia then, oddly, decides to seduce her brother and cross this moral line, in retaliation to her mother.¹⁶⁸ This shows her to be confused and indecisive, as she cannot make up her own mind and instead does what Servilia tells her.

The actual scene of seduction occurs in two parts, which would indicate that Octavia had time to reconsider, to calm down after Servilia's revelation earlier. Her first attempt at flirting with him earlier in the episode, leads to him reading a poem to her, an innocuous enough activity perhaps, except for the choice of poem. He reads Catallus' first 'Sparrow Poem', whose inspiration is the famous Clodia, who was accused of incest with her brother Clodius in one

¹⁶³ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 27:15-27:18

¹⁶⁴ Strong 2008: 226; *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 30:26-30:50

¹⁶⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 30:53-30:55

¹⁶⁶ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 31:00-31:04

¹⁶⁷ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 31:13-31:17

¹⁶⁸ Strong 2008: 226

of Cicero's speeches.¹⁶⁹ This allusion between the two sets of siblings could be accidental, but *Rome* (2005-2007) includes lots of subtle hints throughout the series which suggest not. The second scene is in Octavian's bedroom, where the siblings again engage in some light banter linking them to Cicero's speech, *Pro Caelio* 36, with Octavian claiming to only go to his sister's bed when he was scared, just as Clodius did with his sister.¹⁷⁰ This banter, along with a direct "You can take what you want now," from Octavia leads to the siblings sharing a kiss, and then having intercourse.¹⁷¹ The actual sex scene is not shown on screen, despite the show's proclivity to showing the full act, which could indicate a line that HBO will not cross. They want to push the boundaries, but they may recognise that incest is a boundary that even a modern society as today would not wish to see performed on TV.

Immediately after the act, we see the siblings deal with the aftermath in notably different ways. Octavia, the instigator, attempts to rationalise the act by claiming "you and I are above such petty convention," when Octavian reminds her that incest is wrong by convention.¹⁷² This could be an attempt to convince herself, and the audience, that incest was common among royals, such as Cleopatra, and that they, as members of the old and powerful Julii family, should not be worried either.¹⁷³ However, as she says this, she is lying in his bed, facing away from him and looking miserable, which does not correlate with her brave words.¹⁷⁴ This body language would suggest that she is very aware of what she has just done, and how it would affect everyone if society found out. This feeling of shame and regret that the audience start to pick up on, fits with a character who has been portrayed as weak through most of the season, with one notable exception; when Pompey rejected her after her mother

¹⁶⁹ Strong 2008: 227

¹⁷⁰ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 40:30-40:38

¹⁷¹ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 41:12-41:50

¹⁷² *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 42:08-42:35

¹⁷³ National Geographic Magazine 2010

¹⁷⁴ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 42:08-42:35

had allowed him to have sex with her before the proposed marriage, and she shouted that she wanted him dead.¹⁷⁵ The force which she shouted it made her seem like she had a hidden reserve of strength, which unfortunately has been hidden again. Octavian, however, remains cool and collected, even quite detached given he has just slept with his sister.¹⁷⁶ He informs her, without any regard for her feelings, that “incest is not merely wrong by convention, it is wrong in essence,” meaning the biological defects that children of incest can produce. However, this is interesting that he mentions that as in ancient times they may have known about the physical defects as we do in modern times, but simply not cared.¹⁷⁷ He continues to suggest that the reason she seduced him was to get something; “I suspect you shall renew your strange interest in Caesar’s health now.”¹⁷⁸ This analysis of their coupling shows that even though he knew she wanted something from him, he still went along with a most debauched act, even by ancient standards. This suggests a deviant nature, and a hint that his character would develop towards further deviant behaviour later on in the show. At this point, Octavia bursts into hysterics, and the audience begin to feel a little sympathy for her, as we realise he used her just as she was attempting to use him. She has failed at the sophisticated seductress, and ends the scene clinging to her brother, weeping, begging him not to tell their mother, unaware a servant is watching them.¹⁷⁹ This is a key scene, and a key relationship, as Octavia has been used as a weapon in the war of intrigue between Atia and Servilia, and portrays how power can be attained through any means, and how quickly it can shift, as Octavia realises Servilia has used her and so the power shifts back to Atia. Octavia has also been used by her own brother, which suggests the power Octavian will wield in the future, as he is not worried about incest with his sister ruining any future plans, and in fact, this is one of the first scenes where Octavian starts to stand up to his mother and show his masculinity.

¹⁷⁵ *Rome*, Season One, *The Stolen Eagle*, 2005-2007 38:40-39:20

¹⁷⁶ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 42:35-42:56

¹⁷⁷ National Geographic Magazine 2010

¹⁷⁸ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 42:55-43:00

¹⁷⁹ *Rome*, Season One, *Utica*, 2005-2007: 43:07-43:30

Conclusion

That Rome is often portrayed a certain way in film and TV as the centre for debauchery and vices, through its' evolution from the early Christian novels of *Ben-Hur* (1880) and *Quo Vadis?* (1896) to the decadence of *Cleopatra* (1964) and *I, Claudius* (1976) to the more recent TV spectacles of *Spartacus* (2010-2013) and *Rome* (2005-2007), suggests that the audience have come to expect the characters to be portrayed a certain way as well, with the elite Roman men and women shown as corrupt, sexually explicit and manipulative, meaning that any attempt to portray those characters as virtuous may not succeed, as the audience expects them to be the outrageous, sexual and morally reprehensible so that the hero, who is often not a Roman, such as General Maximus in *Gladiator* (2000) who was Spanish, and in *Ben-Hur* (1959) the main character Judah was a Jew, can be seen to overcome or defeat the corrupt, overbearing image of Rome, often the emperor. It is the same with female characters specifically, where there is already such a strong standard in how to portray them, that any new media would be taking a risk to portray the main female characters as virtuous, as they could be seen as 'boring'. The development of female characters from literature to media shows a marked interest in a certain type of woman being portrayed, and suggests that HBO used the established portrayals and developed them further to create a new take on the female characters of being shadow rulers and having more control over the political manoeuvres than previously shown on media.

The portrayals of Atia, Servilia and Octavia may not be completely based on their historical literary references but the amalgamations of them along with the popular representations of corrupt Roman women, such as Messalina, Livia and Julia, has created a new generation's strong, feminist role models, pulling the strings in political machinations because they cannot

rely on the leading men to accomplish what they want. It is the opinion of this thesis that for all intents and purposes, the men in HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007) are mere puppets in the lives of the Roman women who influence them. It could be said that, yet again, HBO's *Rome* (2005-2007) is a show about women, written by men.

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