

CINEMATIC PORTRAYALS OF ANCIENT WOMEN:
CLEOPATRA VII, LIVIA AUGUSTA, SERVILIA CAEPIONIS AND THE THREE
WAVES OF FEMINISM

by

Andrea Schwab

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Buller, Department of History, and has been approved by the members of his/her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

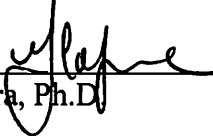
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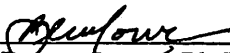
Jeffrey Buller, Ph.D.
Thesis Advisor




Boyd Breslow, Ph.D.



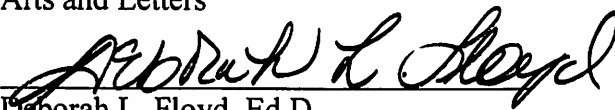
Ilaria Serra, Ph.D.



Benno Lowe, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of History



Heather Coltman, DMA
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of
Arts and Letters



Deborah L. Floyd, Ed.D.
Dean, Graduate College

December 5, 2016

Date

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ABSTRACT

Author: Andrea Schwab
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This project examines the modern perception of ancient women, specifically through the creative (and often anachronistic) lens of film. All three women examined, Cleopatra VII, Livia Augusta, and Servilia Caepionis, all exemplify the modern influence on interpreting historical sources, resulting in all three becoming agents of feminism in their own times. Each woman did not culminate the probable influence they had in Roman society, but they are instead reflective of the patriarchal paradigms understood by 20th and 21st century audiences. The burgeoning feminist ideologies of the 20th century would influence the depictions of each character in an anachronistic fashion, distorting the actual control such figures had in history. While Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra capitalized on youth and sexuality as tools of powers, Siân Phillips' Livia emphasized age and experience to advance in patriarchal Rome. Servilia, however, was an older

matron who had both the experience and the sexuality to control those around her.

While each figure approached it in very distinct methods, their common goal of changing Roman politics was reflective of the continued (and relatively unchanged) perception of ancient Roman women: as intelligent, yet dangerous, figures that served to derail patriarchal Roman politics.

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my dear friend, Mark Pickering. May the memories of him always remind me to follow the passions in my life.

CINEMATIC PORTRAYALS OF ANCIENT WOMEN:
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INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT WOMEN IN MODERN FILM

I have never wanted to be a queen! Cleopatra was a role, and I am an actor, so it was fun to play one, but it's not real. The real Cleopatra had an incredibly complicated life, and she had to be very, very canny to survive as long as she did. For me, the most interesting thing about her was her passion. The things that are important to me – being a mother, a businesswoman, an activist – are all things that were borne out of great passion.¹

Kim Kardashian, an American socialite and fashion icon, interviewed actress Elizabeth Taylor nearly 50 years after her pinnacle role as Cleopatra in Mankiewicz's 1963 reproduction, *Cleopatra*. Kardashian, a globally recognized name for fashion and trendsetting, publicly proclaimed Taylor's influence on her business and aesthetic, practically relaunching Taylor's career back under the lens of twenty-first century America, a move that needed little assistance once the classic blue-eyed Cleopatra reappeared for the re-release of the film for its anniversary in 2013. Taylor's depiction of the infamous Egyptian queen persists in the American cultural conscious with such pervasiveness that it is near impossible to separate the two, either on a public or a

¹“Elizabeth Taylor talks with Kim Kardashian,” *Harper's Bazaar*, February 9, 2011, accessed September 10, 2016, <http://www.harpersbazaar.com/celebrity/latest/news/a676/kim-kardashian-elizabeth-taylor-interview-0311/>.

scholarly level. David Lodge explores the consequences of using a permanent modern lens through which we view historical figures, lamenting that “we can’t avoid reading Shakespeare through the lens of T.S. Eliot’s poetry. I mean, who can read Hamlet today without thinking of ‘Prufrock’?”² While modern perspectives often shed light on historical (and in Lodge’s case, narrative) sources, they also become so intertwined that anachronistic values cloud the true historical significance.

The advent of moving pictures and recording technology would only perpetuate and spread modern cultural interpretations at a rapid rate. During the last century, historians have studied the role cinematic reproductions have had on the understanding of the past. For the filmmaker, the historical film genre is one rife with engaging narrative and dynamic characters, but one that presents its own set of challenges: The time that separates modern audiences from historic events forces filmmakers to establish identifiable elements, resulting in largely anachronistic adaptations that are more reflective of twentieth century values. The classical world has proven to be no exception, and as a popular film subject since the widespread use of media technology in the late 1800s, it has demonstrated the success in its blending of two distinct periods.

Film scholars debate the impact such anachronistic elements would have on the public perception of history, and the potential problems that come with condensing

² David Lodge. *Small World: An Academic Romance* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1984): 52. Charles Edelman also applies this theory to his examination of Shakespeare. For more information, please see: Charles Edelman “Shakespeare and the Invention of the Epic Theater: Working with Brecht.” In *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 58, Writing about Shakespeare*, edited by Peter Holland, 130-6. London: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

extensive textual sources into a relatively short window. Scholars such as Pierre Sorlin, Robert Rosenstone, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Philip Rosen all address historical cinema as an expressive avenue to be taken as credible academic sources. There is an apparent split in the historiography, however, over whether or not historical films distort contemporary accounts. Sorlin contended, “even if [historical films] are based on records, they have to reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show,”³ resulting in at least some baseline for creative reinterpretation of history. Zemon Davis argues in a similar fashion, contending most films seek periodization through costuming and props, capitalizing on what deemed the ‘cultural capital’ of a specific time and place; all of these factors contribute to the authenticity of film, its goal to convince the audience that the events presented are true to the accounts. This goal becomes less clear-cut the more directors insert their own vision into history, suggesting multiple possibilities for telling the same story, a phenomenon shared with historical documents.⁴

Modern depictions of the classical world often exploit gaps in the textual accounts, taking advantage of the lack of knowledge to supplant their own interpretations. This occurrence is perhaps most apparent in depictions of ancient Roman women, who are largely absent from historical accounts but wildly influential in cinematic reproductions. Throughout the twentieth century, ancient Roman women have been fashioned (both physically and ideologically) from modern aesthetics, resulting in

³ Pierre Sorlin. *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1980): 19.

⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis. “‘Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead’: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity,” in *Yale Review* 76, 4 (1987): 461.

characters who are representative of their contemporary releases rather than their historical origins. Cleopatra VII, Livia Augusta, and Servilia Caepionis, specifically, become agents of modern feminism in their characterizations; famous actresses depicted each of these figures (Elizabeth Taylor, Siân Phillips, and Lindsay Duncan, respectively), further propelling their characterizations as representative of contemporary thought. These characterizations, while anachronistic and improbable, reveal how American audiences perceived ancient Roman women, and how twentieth century rhetoric distorts the actual influence these women had in history. As I will demonstrate in my concluding chapter, each character embodies a different development within modern feminist rhetoric, transforming the ambiguous ancient woman into figures of independence and inclusiveness.⁵

Cleopatra VII Philopater is one of the most widely recognized women in history, largely due to her continual depictions since her death. Historically, however, there is little information directly from Egypt, and Cleopatra does not appear on the Roman record until 50 B.C.E., when she is already described as “a clear-headed, resourceful, and above all, ambitious young queen.”⁶ Augustan authors and later Latin biographers provide the most information on her prolific presence, and despite the consistent tone of

⁵ For this purposes of this project, the ‘waves’ of feminism will be defined along the following guidelines: first wave feminism as representative of post-bellum and suffragette rhetoric of the 1920s, second wave feminism as embodying 1960s and 1970s racial inclusiveness as well as anti-patriarchal sentiments, and third wave feminism as post-1990s scholarship that builds on the inclusive rhetoric of the second wave.

⁶ Stanley M. Burstein. *The Reign of Cleopatra* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004): 11.

suspiciousness, Cleopatra's abilities are undeniable. Scholars such as Stanley Burnstein deduce that most of Cleopatra's political knowledge came from years of watching her father struggle to keep his own throne, effectively witnessing what diplomatic strategies were particularly useful in dealing with the Romans. Per the Egyptian custom, Cleopatra was married to her brother King Ptolemy, with whom she was engaged in a civil war with over absolute power. During her civil war, she captures the attention of the would-be emperor, Julius Caesar.

According to Plutarch, in an effort to have a private audience with Caesar, Cleopatra famously hid herself inside of a rolled carpet only to be unraveled in his quarters. This occurrence was so startling, and even somewhat charming, that Caesar was immediately taken into Cleopatra's presence to the extent of intervening in her civil war against Ptolemy.⁷ Within nine months of Caesar's arrival, Cleopatra gave birth to their alleged son, Caesarion. Caesar's contemporaries lamented his thinly veiled affair, citing Cleopatra's 'mysticism' as encroaching on traditional Roman values.⁸ Caesar's assassination in 44 B.C.E. changed the dynamics between Egypt and Rome as Cleopatra fled back to Egypt, only to be thrust back into Roman politics at Mark Antony's arrival in 41 B.C.E. Like Caesar before him, Antony entered an affair with Cleopatra, both while married to prominent Roman women and engaged with civil struggles. Antony's involvement with Cleopatra came at a slight to the increasingly powerful Octavian, who

⁷ Sir Thomas North, trans. *Plutarch: The Lives of Julius Caesar* (London: Macmillan, 1915): 42.

⁸ In his *Epistulae ad Atticum*, Cicero noted that he did not trust the queen during her time in Rome. For more information, please see: Cicero, *Epistulae ad Atticum* 15, 15.2.

previously solidified their political alliance through Antony's marriage to Octavia.

Antony and Cleopatra's whirlwind affair jeopardized the much-needed Egyptian grain supply that Rome relied on, fueling xenophobic rhetoric against the queen.⁹ Political tensions reached an apex after the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E., in which Octavian's clear victory resulted in the deaths of both lovers.¹⁰

Their deaths would change the course of Roman political organization, and would remain in the public mind for centuries after. Shakespeare would readapt the infamous affair in his play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, just one of many renditions that reflects a more modern understanding of historical events. Cleopatra's notoriety made her a figurehead of sexual charm and decadence; symbolically, Cleopatra was anti-patriarchal in her unorthodox nature, an ideal agent for the early feminist movements in 20th century America. As Lodge suggested, there is one depiction of Cleopatra that stands out as the epitome of cultural blending on film: Mankiewicz's 1963 epic film, *Cleopatra*. This version reveals more about 1950s American ideology and fashion than it did about ancient Rome. Taylor's public life would only add to Cleopatra's historical identity as a sexually voracious figure, immortalizing the modern woman as separable with that of Cleopatra's.

⁹ Cicero, being directly involved in pre-Augustan affairs, was perhaps the most scathing against Cleopatra in his *Epistulae ad Atticum*.

¹⁰ There are several varying contemporary accounts over this matter. Roman poets Horace and Propertius, writing within ten years of the event, claim a poisonous asp killed Cleopatra. Later sources and modern scholars, however, challenge this notion as implausible and overdramatized. For more information, please see: Horace, *Odes*, 1.37; Propertius, *Elegies*, III 11.

While Mankiewicz's version of Cleopatra is perhaps the most salient, both for its longevity as an American cinematic icon and for its epic production cost, it is not the only rendition of Roman women. In an effort to appeal to the home entertainment market, the British Broadcast Company (BBC) produced *I, Claudius* as part of their Masterpiece Series. Like previous depictions of the classical world, *I, Claudius* focused on the high politics of early imperial Rome. It differed, however, in its emphasis on small-scale narrative, shying away from elaborate battle scenes; in making this transition, *I, Claudius* posits that individuals, rather than epic battle scenes, determined the course of major historical events. Therefore, the women portrayed in the show played an integral role in shaping Roman politics. Perhaps most important was Siân Phillips' portrayal of Livia Augusta, who became the main antagonist through her malicious actions against her own family.

Phillips' Livia encompassed some of the core values of second wave feminism, which called for greater inclusion of different cultures and races in mainstream society; while Phillips (and Livia) was a white woman, her mature age made her unique among depictions of young and fertile Roman women, especially when directly juxtaposed with Taylor's Cleopatra. Her dialogue echoed the anti-patriarchal sentiments of feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Valerie Solanas, directly criticizing the rigid paradigm both ancient Rome and 20th century America established. The contemporary sources rarely discuss Livia outside of speculation over her role in the imperial lineage, making her rare appearance in contemporary sources a largely sinister one. Despite this image, Livia was still among the giant cast of extras in the grand historical narrative of this tumultuous

period in Roman history, casting her onto the sidelines as ancient historians group their attention to the ongoing battle for ultimate power in Rome.¹¹

Livia discreetly influenced Roman politics during a pivotal transition between Republic and empire, seemingly entering Augustus' life at an opportune time. Before the end of 39 B.C.E., Augustus divorces Scribonia and breaks off his brief marriage to Fulvia's daughter Claudia, paving the way to solidify a marriage with a then-pregnant Livia. Contemporary historians such as Suetonius and Cassius Dio speculate on the reasoning behind both parties abandoning their responsibilities for a whirlwind marriage. Dio contends that their affair begins while Augustus is still married to Scribonia, his first wife. Livia's infamous beauty could have lured Augustus, as Tacitus posits, but perhaps more likely is the added benefits her lineage would bring to Augustus' early career; by aligning himself with a powerful and noble family, Augustus would justify his new rulership. Furthermore, Livia is heavily pregnant with Drusus at the time of their alleged courtship, waiting only mere days after Drusus' birth before beginning their wedding ceremonies. Tiberius Nero would die only a few years after the marriage, naming Augustus as guardian to both of his sons, placing both in line to the imperial throne.¹²

Scholars, both contemporary and modern, agree that Livia is a model matron during a time of sexual deviancy. Livia "embraced and embodied age-old concepts of ideal Roman womanhood, [making] her public persona a deliberate sop to nostalgia for a

¹¹ Annelise Freisenbruch. *Caesar's Wives: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Roman Empire* (New York: Free Press, 2010): 8.

¹² Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 48.44.

mythical, more virtuous past.”¹³ In order for the first empress to succeed in her new role, she would need to maintain and publicize traditionalist values, which moves away from late Republican excess. In light of this realization, Livia becomes one of the most forefront figures in modest values, exuding qualities similar to those seen in Lucretia. Cassius Dio notes the humble manner with which the first imperial family composed themselves with, citing that the empress rarely fusses with her appearance, embodying Augustus’ desires for a traditionalist reputation.¹⁴ Livia’s influence was so prevalent that Augustus eventually agrees to adopt Tiberius under the Julii name, placing him in direct line to Augustus’ position.

Despite Tiberius’ adoption, Livia still felt the threat of Julia’s child, Agrippa Postumus. At a fairly young age, Augustus exiles Postumus to Planasia, and at this point in the account Tacitus notes Livia’s manipulation of Augustus’ advanced age. Livia “ensnared her *senem Augustum* [elderly husband],” expanding on Tacitus’ usage of *senem* to denote senility.¹⁵ Postumus would fall victim to Livia’s manipulation. During Tiberius’ campaigns in Pannonia, the imperial household faces a series of scandals and exiles that slowly places him in the front lines of succession. Livia’s early political maneuverings would finally come to fruition when Augustus departs for his final campaign in 14 C.E. Augustus becomes plagued by diarrhea and fevers, and as soon as

¹³ Freisenbruch, *Caesar’s Wives*, 31.

¹⁴ Cassius Dio. *Roman History*, 54.16.5.

¹⁵ Barret, *Livia*, 58.

their company split from that of Tiberius' his condition becomes worse, prompting Tacitus to blame on the only constant: Livia's presence.

Both Tacitus and Dio speculate that Livia would smear poison on figs that Augustus personally picked for himself, both however are careful in placing their accusations. There is no definitive proof of Livia's involvement, and even less so of Tiberius', but what could be deduced is the uncertainty of the events surrounding the dying emperor. Several authors diverge in the records, often offering somewhat contradictory accounts of the role Tiberius had and whether or not he knew of his mother's alleged deed. Based on the transgression of imperial events, it appears as though the longer Livia remains, the more suspicious the public would become of her intentions, especially regarding the whirlwind of events that would take place following the emperor's death in 14 C.E.

Livia's exposure after Augustus' death rose exponentially. Within his will, Augustus designates several honorific titles to his widow, even adopting her into the Julian clan, an unprecedented gesture at that point. All of the accusations piling against her, however, brings into question the proper role for women in the public sphere – most vocally by Agrippina, and privately by Tiberius himself. According to Suetonius, Livia personally directs soldiers as well as the common populace, an especially delicate topic for Tiberius considering his reputation in the military.¹⁶ Tacitus comments on Tiberius and Livia's relationship, claiming “either mother and son were still good friends or, if

¹⁶ Suetonius, *Augustus*, 50.

they were not, they concealed it.”¹⁷ During Livia’s final years, Tiberius visits only once, and when she died in 29 C.E., Tiberius chose not to attend the funeral. Livia’s dying wish, and possibly her goal in her efforts to ascend her family to the throne, is deification and retention of her honorary titles. Despite her service to her state and to her emperor-son, Tiberius refuses her deification and annuls her will, confirming their tumultuous relationship. It is not until twelve years after her death that Livia would be granted her dying wishes. After the reign of the infamously insane Caligula, who instilled divinity for his sister Julia Drusilla during their incestuous relationship, Claudius (Livia’s grandson) grants Livia her deification.

Livia Augusta becomes infamous both for embodying the ideal matron and for the scandalous accusations placed against her. Her modest ideals are the desired standard for all Roman women to follow, emphasizing the key values Augustus posited on his empire. Livia’s public persona greatly differed from her private life, in which she purportedly uses underhanded and fatal tactics to manipulate the imperial lineage in favor of her own family. Popular figures such as Marcellus, Drusus, Julia the Elder, Germanicus, Piso, and even Augustus himself may have fallen victim, but Livia’s legacy is undeniable, and her influence over imperial politics shapes a large part of Roman history. The late empress even molds the way in which women would situate themselves in future Roman politics, her life becoming an example in practically all aspects.

¹⁷ Tacitus, *Annals*, 3.64.

Livia's depiction in *I, Claudius* would more so reflect the sinister perception of her through history, capitalizing on the murder speculation as an agent of anti-patriarchal rhetoric. Her physicality as a matron supported the modern notion of inclusion, and would become a possible platform for later depictions of ancient Roman women. One such depiction was Lindsay Duncan's Servilia in the Home Box Office (HBO) series, *Rome*. This depiction would represent an original blend of the first two discussed, attributing both sexuality and maliciousness onto a lesser-known Roman matron. The progressive nature of HBO's network partly contributed to Duncan's portrayal, introducing facets such as homosexuality and noble suicide that are unsubstantiated by contemporary sources. The end result is one that is more reflective of third wave feminism, attributing more power to Servilia as a historical figure than is likely.

Servilia Caepionis, or Servilia of the Junii, is most recognized as the mother to famed defector, Brutus.¹⁸ On a lesser level, she is also described as Julius Caesar's mistress until 64 B.C.E., before his campaigning in Alexandria. Of the three women examined, Servilia was the least acknowledged in the contemporary sources, warranted only scant references that were tied to her involvement with Caesar. Although there is little known of her initial upbringing, Plutarch and Suetonius detail her two marriages, both of which ended unceremoniously. There is also little mention of Caesar and Servilia's first meeting, but Suetonius and Plutarch note her presence as his mistress by

¹⁸ Although Servilia has other children, namely three daughters, they are largely left out of the accounts.

64 B.C.E.¹⁹ Her role as the great ruler's mistress was a subject of scandalous speculation by her contemporaries, who often lambasted Caesar for his public rejection of his wives. In his *History of the Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius claims that Caesar loved Servilia "beyond all others," purchasing a black pearl worth six million sesterces for her, well before he ascended to dictatorship. Suetonius also posits that Servilia may have been prostituting her youngest daughter, Junia Tertia, to Caesar.²⁰ Caesar's campaigns against Pompey would seemingly slow his relationship with Servilia, and after Pompey's defeat and subsequent retreat after the Battle of Pharsalus, Caesar would turn his attention towards Egypt. It is at this point in the account that Latin authors direct their attention to Cleopatra, largely leaving Servilia out of the narrative until Caesar's assassination in 44 B.C.E.

The lack of contemporary information on Servilia makes her ideal as a modern cinematic depiction: Filmmakers can exploit gaps in the account to interject their individual creative visions, resulting in more prevalent modern influences that make historical plotlines more relatable to cinematic audiences. In the case of Servilia, Duncan's portrayal was more reactionary to third wave feminism, capitalizing on the taboo nature of a sexually promiscuous Roman matron. The manipulation of Servilia's historical presence transformed her into a vehicle of modern feminism, attributing the

¹⁹ Plutarch, *Brutus*, 5.2; Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 50.1.

²⁰ His speculation derived from a particularly lucrative real estate deal between Caesar and Servilia during the Civil Wars. For more information, please see: Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 50.1.

downfall of Caesar to her influence (and on *Rome*, her revenge as a slighted lover). Servilia's status as a sexually independent matron, both in the historical account and in the modern portrayal, also builds on the modern identity established around both Cleopatra and Livia.

Each figure studied were popular depictions at the time of their release, capitalizing on trends both in production and in terms of spectator habits: *Cleopatra* (1963) was a monumental affair that reflected the excess of later 1950s consumerism while *I, Claudius* was more small-scale (both on set and in distribution). The unique direction *I, Claudius* took partially explains Phillip's characterization of Livia, who was less flamboyant than the other women examined. HBO's *Rome*, on the other hand, was broadcasted during a large upswing in primetime programming; its popularity bolstered by its especially sexual content, which also reflected a change in audience preferences.

The global fascination over the ancient world has been longstanding, compelling different cultures across time to compare themselves with the failures of such pervasive empires. Scholarly interpretations and narrative retellings allowed various audiences to access a far-flung culture, shedding light on the changing perceptions of historical figures. Ancient Roman women are just one small part of the historical narrative, yet they become key perpetuators of major events through seemingly insignificant actions, bringing into question the impact their characterizations would have on the popular perception of historical women. Although each figure examined, Cleopatra, Livia, and Servilia, are shaped by distinct modern values, their similar identity as agents of feminism makes them key to understanding the portrayal of ancient Roman women.

HOW LIZ TAYLOR CHANGED CLEOPATRA: A BLEND OF ANCIENT BIASES AND MODERN FEMINISM

The Historical Woman in Film

Since its inception in the 1880s, the film industry has shaped the public perception of major global events by establishing a visual narrative of the written word. Audiences and critics alike have been shocked and amazed at the cinematic depiction of Roman life, providing a glimpse into what they assumed was daily life in ancient Rome. As a general trend, historical films rarely have storylines that focus on women, similar to women's lack of representation within their contemporary sources; most historical epics focus on bloody battles or tense political drama, using any female presence as opportunity to include sexuality. These films often characterize historical women into one of two extremes: the cunning and manipulative villain, or the seductress. Scholars would not examine Roman women in film until the 1970s, concurrent with both the American feminist movement and the liberalization of film censorship. Classicists and historians alike detailed women's burgeoning role in historical epics, emphasizing both women's changing status in modern society as well as what that change meant for reimagining historical events.

Despite the increased attention women and minorities received after the 1960s, the general tendency in film was to exclude women as historical cinematic subjects, thereby limiting the amount of material scholars can work with. Before Joseph

Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963), historians could reference only a few historical films that were female-focused, reflective of both restrictive censorship policies and changing tastes in cinema. Even fewer were historical films centered both on Rome and on a female figure. By the early mid-1990s and 2000s, however, a resurgence in feminist scholarship boasted an influx of research on Roman women in film. Elizabeth Taylor's rendition in 1963 would spark immeasurable scholarly discourse, given its high profile as a popular historical film and as cultural showcase of American values. Feminists would also use Taylor's depiction to springboard discourse on women's role in film.

Cleopatra's Presence in History and Today

Cleopatra is generally unpopular in her contemporary appearances. There are few Egyptian sources on Cleopatra to reference, so scholars have to rely on Roman sources that contain obvious biases against the queen, representative of the common mistrust Roman authority posited in foreigners and educated women. She purportedly knew several languages and had a charming presence. Since her death in 30 BCE artists, poets, musicians, and filmmakers have attempted to envision Cleopatra. Her depictions, both scholarly and fictional, consistently have the 'exotic' element to them. While the original Latin authors lauded Cleopatra's beauty, it was clear she was known for her decadence and luxury above all. This characterization would translate into the various depictions that became popular in the 20th century, capitalizing on her physical appearance as a tool of power.

Modern filmmakers exploited the fragmented and biased accounts on Cleopatra, capitalizing on her physical beauty as an agent for her political goals. The first film set in

Rome was *Cléopâtre* (1899), showing both its notoriety for the genre as well as Cleopatra's popularity among the public. Since then, her likeness has been in at least nine international films and three television series, among countless other depictions. Theda Bara's rendition in *Cleopatra* (1917) was noted as one of the most lavish production sets of its time. Although much of the footage has been lost, promotional posters and brief interviews suggested Bara's risqué wardrobe. At the time of its release, *Cleopatra* (1917) faced censorship by the Chicago Board of Censors. Bara's wardrobe would only be the beginning of the apparent taboo tone of the film. According to the Board's complaints, there were several scenes with 'excessive nudity' and 'suggestive behavior.' Despite the initial backlash, cinematographers did not shy away from Cleopatra as a subject. Cecil DeMille directed *Cleopatra* in 1934, casting Claudia Colbert as the illustrious queen. Colbert's Cleopatra represented the public perception of female sexuality in 1930s America, just as Theda Bara was to 1910s France. DeMille described Colbert's Cleopatra as "[...] perfect. She was the imperious queen [...] She was Egypt." Colbert's statuesque appearance, coupled with her confident character dialogue, remained consistent with how filmmakers (and the public) viewed Cleopatra – as a fiercely independent and clever woman, unorthodox for most historical films.

This depiction would reach an apex in Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963). Elizabeth Taylor's version was perhaps the most iconic role of both the genre and the decade, reflecting the most extravagant attempt at blending ancient themes with modern aesthetics. Twentieth Century Fox set the budget at \$2 million, yet the final cost exceeded well over \$45 million due to production delays and Rouben Mamoulian's resignation as

director in 1962. The film represents Mankiewicz's renewed vision of Cleopatra, one that emphasized a femme-fatale personality popular at the time.²¹ His final product showcases Taylor as a beauty of the Nile, complete with art deco inspired sets and wardrobe. Her luxurious appearance is directly juxtaposed with her witty dialogue, a trait that only emphasizes her unorthodox presence. Her dialogue, often riddled with defiance and self-confidence, reflected the changing perception of women since suffrage.

Mamoulians' vision for the film was drastically different from Mankiewicz's. The former originally depicted Cleopatra as "a virginal young girl waiting to be deflowered by the god, Caesar,"²² a view that would prove to be problematic for both historical veracity and recent feminist revivals. Mankiewicz wanted to create a project that was believable, and to him, only a mentally strong woman could seduce two of Rome's greatest leaders. Eventually the new director would separate the film into two halves, each representing Cleopatra's individual affairs with Caesar and Marc Antony. This separation truly showcased Taylor's ability as an actress as well as Cleopatra's historical development.

²¹ E. Lacey Rice. "Cleopatra (1963)." *Turner Classic Movies*, January 2007, accessed February 19, 2016, <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/102757%7C102758/Cleopatra.html>. When Mankiewicz took over, there was only ten minutes of usable footage from the previous two years Mamoulian directed the film. With the budget already passed by \$7 million, Mankiewicz rewrote the entire script. While both he and Twentieth Century Fox both agreed his decision was necessary, his revisions slowed filming to a stand still and cost millions just to maintain the empty sets and cast payroll.

²² Cheryl Bowen and R. Barton Palmer, *Joseph L. Mankiewicz: Critical Essays with an Annotated Bibliography and a Filmography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001): 110.

Taylor's first on-screen appearance in *Cleopatra* foreshadows her characters' progression in terms of presence and dialogue. Keeping true to the contemporary account Taylor appears before Caesar wrapped in a rug, but not before some suggestive banter:

[Apollodorus carries Cleopatra in the room, hidden in a rug]

Apollodorus: That sword, Caesar [motions towards Caesar's dagger]. The rug is such a delicate weave. If I may untie it for you--

Caesar: Turn it over first. [...]

[Apollodorus carefully flips the rug]

Caesar: I find one can tell more about the quality of merchandise [cuts rope] by examining the, uh, backside first.²³

The scene continues as Caesar (portrayed by Rex Harrison) then dramatically rolls Taylor out of the plush rug as an exaggerated entrance. Cleopatra seductively gazes at Caesar as Apollodorus reads off her many prominent titles, and just as the contemporary sources describe, Caesar is in awe at Cleopatra's beauty; Taylor's burlesque posing only exaggerates the intended effect. Caesar's dialogue, while meant for comic relief, reflects the more modern perspective on women in history. Caesar is shocked that a brazen woman controls such a large asset to the Roman Empire, her beauty further adds to the amazement.

From dialogue to scene movement, Caesar and Cleopatra's first scene reveals Mankiewicz's intended character development for Cleopatra. Even though Cleopatra arrives to seek help from Caesar, she rebukes Caesar when he attempts to control her

²³ *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963) Amazon Prime Video streaming.

movements.²⁴ Both Caesar and Cleopatra sit rigidly upright during their exchange, literally and figuratively acknowledging mutual respect for the others' presence. When Caesar attempts to dismiss Cleopatra, however, he stands up and towers over her. Cleopatra challenges Caesar by openly ignoring his order, declaring that she will not be treated like a servant.²⁵ Cleopatra's defiance adds to Mankiewicz's femme-fatale motif and is representative of early feminist ideologies, a stark resistance to traditional patriarchal structures.

Regardless of Taylor's posing and suggestive necklines, her lines still voiced clear resistance to the patriarchy present both in ancient Rome as well as in 1960s America. As a first wave feminist representation, Taylor's appearance gave her the necessary agency to interact within patriarchal confines, but her dialogue directly challenged the very same paradigm she fit into. Taylor's bath scene, while done barely clothed, transcends time in its commentary against a sheltering society. In the scene, Caesar arrives at Cleopatra's luxurious bathhouse unannounced. Unlike the previous slight against her status that she ignored, Cleopatra decides to mock the Roman rumors by stating, "The Romans have fabulous rumors about my bathhouse and my handmaidens...and my morals."²⁶ Mankiewicz then leads the audience through the

²⁴ Her sharp rebuttal is possibly intentional. Caesar meets Cleopatra's young brother Ptolemy in the previous scene, and after learning Ptolemy has Pompey killed, orders Ptolemy to return to his bedchambers. Mankiewicz could be juxtaposing Ptolemy's conceding nature with Cleopatra's resistance.

²⁵ *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963) Amazon Prime Video streaming.

²⁶ *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963) Amazon Prime Video streaming.

bathroom as Caesar arrives, using the camera to pan out and display the enormous marbled room. Taylor's rendition of Cleopatra's decadent bathhouses is possibly one of the most decadent reinterpretations to date: Taylor changes into a flimsy covering, reclining back while several scantily clad servants tend to her nails. Amidst her pampering, Cleopatra barely notices the emperor of Rome, lazily muttering "oh, it's you," as she shifts on her side. In one sense, Cleopatra's behavior is a clear act of seduction. In another perhaps more profound sense, her actions were a mockery of the patriarchal expectations of the time.

Although the historical Cleopatra was proficient in several languages and experienced with diplomacy, leaders in the surrounding area had little faith in her abilities because of her gender. Instead of receiving praise for her pious works and general tolerance of outsiders, Greeks and Romans alike criticized her for her involvement in politics; Latin sources point to Cleopatra as the downfall of civilized Roman society who used her beauty to gain power, thereby diminishing her capabilities as queen. Misogynistic plotlines would not have satisfied a 1960s America, however, prompting Mankiewicz to create a Cleopatra that was even more strong-willed than her contemporaries suggested.

Taylor's Cleopatra is fully aware of the Romans' slander and chooses to mock the Romans' image of her in her bath scene. Her marbled bath house, her silk coverings, and all of her scantily-clad servants all paint the picture that the queen was indeed a flamboyant and self-centered figure – a situational irony considering that she purposefully staged her bathroom as such. For all of Cleopatra's efforts to remain coy

and mysterious, she is direct in demanding Caesar for his help in her civil war. In the midst of her seduction, Cleopatra suddenly covers herself and sits upright, advising Caesar of her brother's military movements. Caesar's response to Cleopatra's well-informed warning reflects the common Roman mentality towards assisting foreigners:

Cleopatra: [sits upright] Achilles is bringing his entire army to Alexandria. By tonight, he'll outnumber you 20 to 1, 30 to 1. He'll have the royal enclosure entirely surrounded.

Caesar: [looking down at the reclining Cleopatra] Except to the sea.

Cleopatra: Do you plan to sail away, great Caesar?

Caesar: Not for the time being.

Cleopatra: [angrily] Achilles may attack tomorrow, the next day, whenever it suits him!

Caesar: Very probable.

Cleopatra: In your wildest dreams, Caesar, can you possibly hope to hold the gates of this enclosure against such odds? And if you say once more – 'for the time being' –

Caesar: My officers say anything from a week to indefinitely. What would you estimate?

Cleopatra: [lays down once again] Before you're without water, without food, your troops slaughtered, picked off from the rooftops, poisoned in the brothels? A few days, Caesar. A few days at the most.

Caesar: I'm inclined to believe you. [to Cleopatra's bard] Young man, do you know this of Catullus? 'Give me a thousand and a thousand kisses, when we have many thousand more, we will scramble them and forget the score, so evil envy will not know how high the count and cast its evil eye.' [kisses Cleopatra's nearest servant].

Caesar: It couldn't possibly have been better in the throne room [leaves].²⁷

Cleopatra clearly intended to discuss retaliation efforts with Caesar, despite the setting of their conversation. She introduces valid points to the experienced commander who merely rebuffs her words of caution, answering her in short and disinterested statements. The brevity of his responses acts as an indirect dismissal of Cleopatra's (valid) concerns, instead focusing on the decadent scenery surrounding him. Everything about Caesar's presence in Cleopatra's bathhouse is representative of the Roman perspective on women and foreigners: He masks his reactions from Cleopatra lest take military advice from a

²⁷ *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963) Amazon Prime Video streaming.

woman, and although he does eventually insert Rome into Egyptian affairs, he does more so because of Ptolemy's defiance against Caesar's control rather than altruistic reasoning.

Caesar's soldiers intercept Caesar as he exits the bathhouse, warning him of warships just off the coast. Although he ignores Cleopatra's worries in her presence, when he is alone with his men Caesar orders a swift and efficient attack on Achilles, demonstrating that he indeed shared the same concerns. He then departs, ordering, "but not before tonight. I need this day." When one of Caesar's officers questions his comment, another officer responds that, "I can't give you that information. Not for the time being."²⁸ Mankiewicz makes Caesar's intentions clear through the circular dialogue. While Caesar assists Cleopatra politically, he does so in order to curry favor and seduce her. His assistance, however, is more a takeover as he challenges the imperial succession with the birth of he and Cleopatra's son, Caesarion. There is little mention of Caesarion in the contemporary sources. Nevertheless, what scholars can deduce is the ever-present Roman bias against Caesar's only son. Even though Caesar never recognizes the child, Romans back at home view him as the physical embodiment of a political scandal that would pose a threat to Rome's future. It also guaranteed Cleopatra's involvement in Roman affairs to the chagrin of the senate. There is a marked shift in Taylor's Cleopatra after the birth of Caesarion. With her rule restored and a permanent connection to Rome's leader, Cleopatra shifts her focus to maintaining her new position rather than seeking more power.

²⁸ *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963) Amazon Prime Video streaming.

Unlike Cleopatra, Caesar continues his quest for power by demanding a ‘dictator for life’ title from his senate. Their concession places Caesar and Cleopatra at the zenith of political power, and allows him to invite Cleopatra and her son to Rome. In an effort to showcase Cleopatra’s political transition, Mankiewicz turns Cleopatra’s first procession in Rome into a grand spectacle, spending an obscene amount of money on both props and stage entertainers. *The Wall Street Journal* would call the ten-minute scene the epitome of Taylor’s cinematic career, and the point at which Taylor’s alluring beauty would become synonymous with the far-off queen.²⁹ Although it was one of Taylor’s defining moments, other performers take up most of the scene time. Skilled archers, scantily clad women, and exotic African dancers paraded “as slowly as the people wanted,”³⁰ turning Cleopatra’s arrival into the entertainment for the day. It would not be until the final two minutes that Taylor would make her entrance on an onyx sphinx, a black background that makes her entirely gold ensemble stand out even more; Mankiewicz purposefully left out extensive dialogue from the scene, keeping the camera centered to keep Taylor and her procession the literal focus of the scene. Mankiewicz’s shock value entertained both the Romans in the film and the American audience, confirming the well-publicized budget in

²⁹ Toby Wilkinson. “How Elizabeth Taylor Redefined Cleopatra,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2011. Accessed March 11, 2016. <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/03/24/how-elizabeth-taylor-redefined-cleopatra/>.

³⁰ *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963) Amazon Prime Video streaming.

one short sequence. When Cleopatra and Caesarion eventually make their way down to Caesar they both bow to the Roman leader, arousing cheers from the Roman crowd.³¹

Roman politics quickly devolve after this scene to the infamous Ides of March, prompting Cleopatra to make a hasty escape. The queen and Caesarion depart with the help of Marc Antony, who subtly hints at his attraction. In a fleeting moment, he tells Cleopatra that “and with you, even at my best, it’s never easy to say my meaning,” to which the mourning widow retorts, “but you speak so well, Antony, I’ve been told how excitedly you read Caesar’s will to the sobbing, murdering free citizens of Rome.”³² Mankiewicz may have begun the historic affair on a sour note, but Antony’s affection for the queen is apparent; Antony meets Octavian’s appointment with no resistance to quell the xenophobic Romans, and reveals to Cleopatra his plans to have Caesar deified, ultimately connecting Caesarion with not just a great leader, but a god.

The film’s first half represents the burgeoning relationship between Caesar and Cleopatra. On a larger scale, the two figures represent their respective countries: Caesar embodies the typical Roman masculinity and dominance whereas Cleopatra is the

³¹ Amidst the cheers and the remnants of her grand entrance, Cleopatra winks at Cesar – a simple gesture that perplexed historians and film critics alike. While it has not been confirmed either by Mankiewicz or Taylor, Cheryl Bowen and R. Barton Palmer posit the most possible theory: they argue that the wink breaks the forth wall by which Taylor signifies to the American audience that the film was well worth the hype. Bowen and Palmer also contend that she is alluding to the equality between herself and Caesar. For more information, please see: Cheryl Bowen and R. Barton Palmer, *Joseph L. Mankiewicz: Critical Essays with an Annotated Bibliography and a Filmography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2001).

³² *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963) Amazon Prime Video streaming.

nurturing mother, a common personification of the Nile River.³³ Film critics and historians alike comment on Mankiewicz's ability to interchange the two figures' roles fluidly, resulting in a storyline that not only has dynamic character development, but also addresses the nuanced personalities within the historical accounts. Written sources have more time and space to develop a story, especially since most accounts are written some time after the fact. Time, budgeting, and societal expectations all constrain historical films from achieving the same effect. Directors attempt to make up for these discrepancies by compressing practically all aspects of history: settings, emotions, and situations all face a degree of embellishment that serve to combine as many nuances as possible. In a way, actors reinvent historical figures in the way sets define visualization. Taylor and Richard Burton would go on to redefine Cleopatra and Antony's affair for decades to come.³⁴

Liz & Dick as Historical Parallels

Historians and playwrights have discussed the infamous' couples tragedy for centuries, becoming more sympathetic as time passes. Ancient and Shakespearean retellings would reshape the historical accounts, emphasizing the whirlwind love affair rather than the gritty politics surrounding them. For Mankiewicz, the indulgent couple would fit in perfectly with his extravagant perspective of imperial Rome, one that would

³³ The Nile River's maternal personification derives from the Nile's regular flooding and retreating that allowed for efficient crop planning.

³⁴ Robert A. Rosenstone, "Inventing Historical Truth on the Silver Screen," *Cineaste* 29, 2 (2004): 30.

substantiate the common romanticization. This time, however, actual passion would fuel their depictions as Taylor and Burton engaged in their own affair during production. Their light attempts at discretion quickly publicized their scandalous relationship, directing America's focus to the film on the whole. Between the monumental production delays and inappropriate staff relations, the failing Fox project soon became the most anticipated film of the year. The massive amount of attention prompted Fox and Mankiewicz to remarket *Cleopatra* as the romance of the century, although to which couple they are referring is questionable.³⁵

All things Egyptian had fascinated Americans since the 1922 discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb. The cultures' extravagant and infamously exotic lifestyle was reminiscent of the flapper culture, thereby making it easy to assimilate the aesthetic into contemporary trends, arguably resulting in the Art Deco movement.³⁶ Egyptian style and history would become the popular choice for consumer advertising, flooding the American conscious with the unfamiliar culture.³⁷ The popular interest in Egypt also spurred filmmakers to reexamine how they approached ancient settings. Although most historical films cost more to produce than other genres, mainly due to massive staff requirements and lavish set designs, it was Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* that redefined the standards for big-budget Hollywood productions. The 'spare-no-expense' attitude

³⁵ Countless interviews corroborate Taylor and Burton's behavior.

³⁶ Richard La Motte, "Designing Costumes for the Historical Film," *Cineaste* 29, 2 (2004): 52.

³⁷ For more information regarding Egyptian-inspired advertising, please see: Bob Brier, "Egyptomania!," *Archaeology* 57, 1 (2002): 16-22.

Mankiewicz adopted was not uncommon in 1950s commercial America either. By the time production began in the late 1950s, many had become accustomed to spending extra for convenience and style.

Richard La Motte best summarizes how most filmmakers resolve discrepancies within modern understandings of the past:

The reality of the past is the reality of the *past* [...] and every attempt at a new recreation is inexorably tied much more to the esthetics of the period of translation than to the period being translated. Why? Because we live in the 'now,' and films are supposed to connect with the 'now' audience, so 'now' sensibilities are *always* going to intrude.³⁸

Following La Motte's logic, *Cleopatra* was not so much a reflection of actual historical events as it was a cultural identity of the late 1950s. Mankiewicz's costume designs harkened to the classic 1950s cinched silhouette, and Taylor's ostentatious hairstyles were more on trend with high fashion rather than Egyptian aesthetics. In addition to physical appearances, there was a distinct effort to cast white female leads in the 1950s, unlike racially ambiguous leads in previous decades³⁹. Fifty years before Taylor's depiction, Theda Bara's dominated Fox studio's vision for *Cleopatra*. Fox publicized everything about Bara as Arabian and mysterious despite her Jewish upbringing in Cincinnati in an attempt to make her as similar the Egyptian esthetic as possible.⁴⁰ These

³⁸ La Motte, "Designing Costumes for the Historical Film," 52.

³⁹ This casting trend was not exclusive to actresses. In 1961, Paramount Pictures casted Mickey Rooney as 'Mr. Yunioshi' in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and in 1965 a English Henry Silva depicted the Japanese secret agent 'Mr. Moto' in *Mr. Moto Returns* (1965).

⁴⁰ Francesca T. Royster contends that Fox even made up the name 'Bara,' the backwards-spelling of 'Arab.' She argues that to keep up her mysterious reputation, Fox would allow only select interviews and restrict how often she could comment, giving the impression of not knowing English. For more

attempts would only be temporary. The French-American Claudette Colbert would replace Bara as Cleopatra in Cecil De Mille's 1934 rendition, abandoning Bara's image and thereby beginning a new trend in cinematic casting and publicity.⁴¹

All of the grandeur and scandal that surrounded Taylor and Burton, lovingly named 'Liz and Dick' by the public, threw *Cleopatra* into the media spotlight⁴². Their newfound publicity immediately followed the revived interest in Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy's purported affair after Monroe's death in 1962. Every aspect of *Cleopatra* fell under intense public scrutiny, and when Liz and Dick emerged, Fox had little option but to retaliate against their scandalous relations. By this point, however, filming had essentially finished and Taylor aptly assessed her value to the studio. Americans were more eager than ever to not only see some of Hollywood's most expensive work, but also to see an infamous scandal play out on the silver screen.

The second part would not disappoint. Similar to the first half, Mankiewicz begins *in media res* three years after Caesar's assassination, during Antony's various military and political campaigns. The intimate dialogue between Taylor and Burton challenged the shock and awe brought by set and wardrobe designs. Mankiewicz wastes no time in introducing the audience to 'Liz & Dick,' beginning the second half with a

information, please see: Francesca T. Royster, *Becoming Cleopatra: The Shifting Image of an Icon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁴¹ Royster, *Becoming Cleopatra*, 11.

⁴² Some actors even went on record complaining about the affair, contributing production delays to their quarreling off-set. Anna Tims, "How We Made Cleopatra," *Guardian*, July 15, 2013, accessed March 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jul/15/how-we-made-cleopatra>.

meeting between the couple. Although Mankiewicz split the film into two halves, he directly juxtaposes the two relationships to show a growing maturity between the characters. Whereas Caesar was late (and even absent) from his initial meeting with Cleopatra, Antony is timely and outwardly courteous.⁴³ For the audience and Mankiewicz, the characters' meeting was less about political stratagem as it was a glimpse into Antony (and Burton's) affection for Cleopatra.⁴⁴

Mankiewicz establishes a clear divergence from the first half by contrasting Caesar and Antony, and more importantly, Cleopatra's reaction to each of them as individuals. By this point, Taylor's Cleopatra already has a solidified claim within her own kingdom, placing her in a more advantageous position than when Caesar initially arrived during her civil wars; the three year gap between affairs also allowed Cleopatra absolute reign over Egypt, increasing her already questionable independence. Despite Cleopatra's probable diplomatic growth, *Cleopatra* only merits it a fleeting comment during Antony and Cleopatra's first extensive interaction:

Antony: These can't have been uneventful years for you. You rule Egypt alone.

Cleopatra: Oh, they have been busy, but not full. There's a difference. There cannot be enough hours in the days of a queen, and her nights have too many. So I fill them with memories.

Antony: [clenches fists] Of Caesar?

Cleopatra: And of a dream...that almost came true.

⁴³ *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963) Amazon Prime Video streaming.

⁴⁴ While complimenting each others' garb, Antony remarks, "I enjoy almost all things Greek." As a clever play on words, Cleopatra responds, "as an almost all-Greek thing, I'm flattered." Their playful banter shows an already-escalated relationship, bypassing any character development that would have otherwise been necessary.

It is apparent where Mankiewicz intends to lead the film. Within just a few lines, Mankiewicz condenses a great historic meeting into a dramatic quip between prospective lovers, presenting a romantic conflict early to alleviate audience demands.

Perhaps unintentionally, Mankiewicz mirrors the progression of the couple as they were represented in the sources. Historically, the Augustan authors did not detail the beginnings of the infamous affair between Cleopatra and Antony, nor did they have to say much of Cleopatra in the three years after Caesar's assassination. The authors instead speak to Cleopatra's overwhelming charm once she reinserts herself into Roman affairs, her guiles once again colluding a Roman man away from traditional values and towards decadent mysticism. Likewise, Mankiewicz bypasses any romantic buildup and advances the affair quickly after the second half begins. Antony and Cleopatra had an already well-established relationship even before Octavian interfered. The scandalous affair between Taylor and Burton added another level to the whirlwind romance playing out on screen: the jealousy Antony has over Caesar and Cleopatra is a probable parallel with Burton and his feelings over Taylor's existing marriage. *Cleopatra* entertained not only those still fascinated by Egypt, but also those who enjoyed celebrity scandals.⁴⁵

On an even larger scale, *Cleopatra* (both the film and the figure) is a macrocosm for a burgeoning liberal movement and the conservative backlash it would face; women's changing role in film spoke to their growing independence achieved after suffrage. In 1966, the MPAA would enforce more strict censorship for future films, making

⁴⁵ The fiftieth anniversary of the theatrical release prompted many newspapers and magazines to reexamine the film. Many journalists likened Liz & Dick to the Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt affair onset of *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005).

Cleopatra one of the last films to remain true to contemporary popular culture until the MPAA lessened their grasp in 1966. Although *Cleopatra* is mild in comparison with other contemporary taboo films, the prospect that viewers would experience the tumultuous affair firsthand both excited and worried the MPAA. While Bara and Colbert's depictions were largely popular at the time of their release, it was Taylor's version that would resonate most with American movie audiences as the over-the-top aesthetic and public scandal were not seen in prior depictions. Taylor's embodiment of female independence made her a figurehead for first wave feminist ideology, which sought fundamental political and society equality.

Critical Reception of *Cleopatra* (1963)

Despite the star-studded cast and extravagant budget, Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963) received mixed reviews upon its initial release. Even the cast members themselves were unsure about the film. Taylor herself expressed disgust toward the final product, claiming excessive directing and spending robbed Cleopatra's story of passion, resulting in a superficial recreation. As Lodge contended, critics were unable to separate historical content from modern embellishments, some even claiming, "it is impossible to separate [...] the film from the individual lives which have been caught up in the bringing to the screen."⁴⁶ It was clear the iconic 1950s aesthetic dominated much of Mankiewicz's

⁴⁶ "Cleopatra," *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 28, 1963, accessed February 12, 2016. <http://ezproxy.fau.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/564645229?accountid=10902>

attempts to appear historically authentic, and although he may have succeeded in terms of narration, the film's trendiness (both visually and socially) made it a modern spectacle.⁴⁷

Cleopatra's substance perhaps left contemporary audiences desiring more, but most American moviegoers were not seeking films with historical accuracy. Just like its predecessors, *Cleopatra* represented the cultural identity at the time of its production; audiences flocked to see the film not to learn about Cleopatra, but to see what \$30 million and the image of the 1950s would produce. As *The New York Times* noted upon its release in 1963:

Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra is a woman of force and dignity, fired by a fierce ambition to conquer and rule the world [...] but she is not an ancient queen, mind you, in the quality of her thought – nor, indeed, in the modified style of her exceedingly lower gowns, Mr. Mankiewicz has wisely not attempted to present us with historical copies.⁴⁸

Mankiewicz's Cleopatra was clearly not a "historical copy" of the mysterious queen, but was rather a vehicle for Fox's extravagant image of the ancient Far East. The fiftieth anniversary of the films' release in 2013 prompted many modern critics to re-examine the film, but their hindsight would showcase the errors contemporaries failed to mention.

It was not until decades after its release that some called the film Hollywood's most expensive disappointment, lacking both historical substance and genuine interaction between characters. Mankiewicz's style and flair were undeniable; with its extensive

⁴⁷ It should be noted that some reviews skip over Taylor and Burton entirely, a concerted effort to shine light on a film despite its scandalous reputation. *Variety* named Mankiewicz as the genius behind the film for his ability to finish a seemingly doomed project. For more information, please see "Review: 'Cleopatra,'" *Variety*, December 31, 1962, accessed February 3, 2016, <http://variety.com/1962/film/reviews/cleopatra-2-1200420431/>.

⁴⁸ Howard Thompson, "Unveiling 'Cleopatra': Director-Scenarist Outlines Concept, Growth, Trials of a Screen Epic High Hurdles," June 1963, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.fau.edu/docview/116364825?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=10902>.

budget it was difficult for critics to avoid mentioning scene design or Taylor's countless wardrobe changes. Unlike film critics, however, most scholars grouped the film with other failed historical reproductions, the most common argument being that a movie with such a large budget would suffer in quality, and the trend to 'monumentalize' history ultimately glosses over differences, disparities, and irregularities.⁴⁹ While *Cleopatra* blended historical content and modern interpretation, in doing so it abandoned the specificities of political conflict and ethnic differences.⁵⁰

For all of its shortcomings, *Cleopatra* set the stage for future historical epics. While most American production companies avoided large-scale historical epics after *Cleopatra*, mainly because of Fox's near-bankruptcy, there were a handful that received international funding. European directors spear-headed the movement to revamp the image of the classical world, which suffered from what would become repetitive "reasonably authentic" representations.⁵¹ The end result was a clear separation between American and European cinematography in how *Cleopatra*, and other classical women, were portrayed. Whereas the American aesthetic was more in line with authenticity, European directors preferred a more avant-garde approach that capitalized on the ethnic and cultural diversities in antiquity.⁵²

⁴⁹ Elisabeth Bronfen, "Monumental Cleopatra: Hollywood's Epic Film as Historical Re-Imagination," *Anglia* 131, 2 (2013): 219.

⁵⁰ It should be noted, however, that the original film was projected at six, not four hours, long; the two hours of footage cut perhaps expanded on the political atmosphere.

⁵¹ Jon Solomon. "In the Wake of 'Cleopatra': The Ancient World in the Cinema since 1963," *The Classical Journal* 91, 2 (1996): 116.

The Continued Popularity of Roman Women in Film

Both American and international cinematographers have capitalized on antiquity as a popular theme for projects. Bara and Colbert's representations would only be the beginning, paving the way for one of history's most expensive films. Taylor's representation differed, however, as it proved itself as both unique and representative to the burgeoning post-WWII identity of the American woman. Aesthetically, Taylor embodied the ultimate luxury. Her porcelain skin and dark hair made her an ideal candidate to portray the infamous Cleopatra, at least within a 1950s American context; her notoriety outside film sets would also serve as free publicity for Fox Studios.

It would not be until the color television became more accessible in the early 1970s that American filmmakers would more adamantly return to classical themes. In 1970, Hartford N. Gunn Jr. founded the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), granting North America regular access to the plethora of European productions; the extravagant style largely appealed to American audiences, renewing the demand for more historical epics. Historical mini-series became the media of choice, offering a less expensive, and often more accurate, option for budding independent production companies. Mini-series also allowed for longer run times, giving more opportunity for both character and plot

⁵² This sentiment is not to suggest that American productions were historically or aesthetically inaccurate, but the inclusion of recognizable facets (marble columns, sphinxes, etc.) is less common in the European cinematic tradition. For more information, please see: Jon Solomon, "In the Wake of 'Cleopatra,'" 116.

development. Despite these potential advantages for antiquity-based cinema, American producers centered their attention on early Christianity rather than Augustan Rome.⁵³

PBS began its *Masterpiece Theater* series in 1971, a programming endeavor that would expose Americans to popular British television classics. One of these popular mini-series entitled *I, Claudius*, would play an integral role in reimagining what it meant to be a powerful woman in ancient Rome, and in modern America. Emperor Augustus' wife in the series, Livia Augusta, is key to understanding American's changing cinematic perspective on antiquity. While she is not as popular a historical figure as Cleopatra, her unorthodox presence in Roman politics builds upon how ancient Roman are treated both by their contemporaries and by 20th century cinematographers.

⁵³ Jon Solomon provides a thorough account of both American and international biblical films since *Cleopatra*'s release. Please see: Solomon, "In the Wake of Cleopatra," 121-3.

SECOND WAVE FEMINISM IN FILM: LIVIA AUGUSTA IN BBC'S *I, CLAUDIUS*
AS A FIGUREHEAD OF INCLUSIVITY

Livia as a Cinematic Subject

Historians often use a combination of material and written sources to construct a story around fragmented accounts, supplementing what already exists with a credible possibility. Filmmakers perform similar duties – their focus on individuals, rather than a larger narrative, makes a more extensive backstory necessary. The trend for historical cinematographers to examine their subjects on a micro-scale stems from the audience's ability to identify with shared experiences, transcendent of time; selecting one historical figure or event creates more possibility for the audience to identify with a relatively unknown period, even moreso true for topics before the 1800s.⁵⁴ Livia Augusta's contemporary representation is one of treachery and manipulation, casting a shadow over her capability as a ruler and Roman matron. Historically, she is the wife to Augustus Caesar, one of the most powerful rulers in Roman history. Livia obtained access to unmatched power and influence through their marriage, all during a critical transition in Roman political history. Her closeness to such power made her a subject of scandal and speculation, especially during the Augustan succession crisis. As a modern figure, Livia

⁵⁴ O'Connell. "Viewing History," 17.

represented the inclusive rhetoric of second wave feminism, her age and influence unique to previous depictions.

To Augustan historians, Livia encapsulated the consequences of a decadent lifestyle, tainted by her thirst for power. These idealisms are so prevalent throughout history that even twentieth century cinematographers take notice, using contemporary descriptions as the basis for their own characters' motivation. The most notable example resides in the Robert Graves' television adaptation, *I, Claudius*, which BBC broadcasted in 1976. Welsh actress Siân Phillips portrayed the infamous empress, taking advantage of both her presence and her life experiences as a 1950s woman to its fullest potential; the final product encompassed not only a powerful woman in antiquity, but also a powerful woman in 1970s western culture.

Livia in BBC's *I, Claudius*

The opening sequence for the show, which was kept consistent throughout the series, foreshadows the events within the imperial household. A single, black snake slithers across a mosaic depiction of Claudius Nero, the main protagonist in the show. The snake represents deceit and treachery, its dark color further telling the immorality that would take place. The series as a whole relies on the emperor Claudius' narrative, Livia's crippled grandson who also has a debilitating stutter, a focal point of ridicule.⁵⁵ Claudius begins the show with his narration, questioning a Sybil in Cumae regarding the

⁵⁵ It is important to note the significance of Claudius' role as narrator. Both historically and cinematically, Claudius was far removed from the initial affairs of the Julio-Claudians, making his testimonies somewhat unreliable. Throughout the series, he often referenced hearsay and ambiguous documents as his main source base, further demonstrating his temporal removal from the beginning of the show.

fate of Rome to which she replied, “[...] what groans beneath the Punic curse, and strangles in the strings of purse, before she mends must sicken worse,”⁵⁶ an answer that suggests the continual sickening of Rome. It is at this moment that Claudius, known as the historian emperor for his well-read nature, decides to write about his corrupt family and ultimately their downfall.

Claudius begins his retelling *in media res*, in the aftermath of Marc Antony and Cleopatra’s deaths and well after Augustus’ establishment of the new imperial household – the Julio Claudians. From the pilot episode, Livia’s role in the household is apparent – her domineering attitude and supervisory role coincides with her contemporary portrayal, highlighting Augustus’ attempts in creating a more centralized Roman family. The camera slowly pans over members present while Claudius recounts their relation. Upon reaching Livia, Claudius states, “then there was Livia, her mind always turning, always scheming,”⁵⁷ after which the camera steadily zooms in on her calculating face. The focus on Livia’s impassive face accentuates the difficulty in reading her emotions, for both the show characters and the audience alike; in turn, this would shroud Livia’s intentions throughout the show, unless specifically stated or during a close up. The director, Jack Pulman, often relied on this camera technique to show the audience when Livia was scheming, integral in foreshadowing future plots and Livia’s characterization.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, “A Touch of Murder,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

⁵⁷ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, “A Touch of Murder,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

Within the first few lines, Livia's stern and dignified persona are made obvious: when a Greek orator, brought to speak about the Battle of Actium during a festival, shares playful quips with a Roman guard, Livia interjects, "Thallus, we'd be glad if you'd discuss your personal problems in your own time," after which she daintily bites at a fig. Early on in Aristoarchus' oration, he remarks, "Emperor of Rome, a most remarkable man. But even more remarkable was Livia, his second wife. If Augustus ruled the world, then Livia ruled Augustus."⁵⁹ During his lauding, Augustus leans over to Livia with a knowing smile and softly kisses her shoulder, showing both his resignation and his acceptance of such a comment. By projecting Livia's character as so forthright and commanding so early in the series, the shows' interpretation becomes clear: her clearly superior position contributed to her brazenness as Livia herself manifested the consequences of a new Roman rule. Her influence on a powerful figure such as Augustus was a clear indicator of feminist ideology.

Typically, Roman women are not acclimated to political environments (like the imperial household), let alone educated beyond rudimentary means. The primary sources specifically point out Livia's superior education given to her by her mother, Alfidia, as well as detailing her familiarity with her fathers' politics. This directly translates into the *I, Claudius* rendition, where Livia quickly adapts into the rapidly changing environment by working early to secure her sons to the throne. Her advantageous position as

⁵⁸ Sandra R. Joshel. "I, Claudius": Projection and Imperial Soap Opera," in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome and Modern Popular Culture*. Sandra Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire Jr., eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2001): 145.

⁵⁹ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, "A Touch of Murder," directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

Augustus' wife, and occasional advisor, allows her a firsthand look at Augustus' intentions for an heir – giving her ample time to react appropriately. Within the first episode, even Claudius notes that “grandmother Livia, her mind always turning, always scheming,”⁶⁰ clearly working to disrupt the family dynamic as her eyes slowly gaze over her dinner guests (Octavia, Julia, Agrippa and Marcellus –Augustus favors as an heir). While Claudius' early assumptions are based off of rumors and his own conclusions, Livia's intentions are clear.

The first episode, entitled “A Touch of Murder,” demonstrates Livia's quick movements in eliminating her political rivals, beginning with the young and much-favored Marcellus. Shortly after hosting a round of games, Marcellus is bedridden with a “slight chill in the stomach,”⁶¹ almost immediately after Augustus leaves Rome to tend to the eastern provinces. Livia, seemingly shocked by the progress of her work, rushes to visit the sick Marcellus – their entire dialogue bolsters the situational irony. Livia enters and immediately cups his face in her hands, exclaiming that she will personally prepare all of his food, an otherwise excessively polite offer to all of the unaware spectators. Taking on a maternal role to the fullest, Livia insists on moving her quarters next to Marcellus in the absence of his family. At the encounters' end, Marcellus thanks Livia, which she boldly replies, “oh no dear, goodness has got nothing to do with it.”⁶² At this

⁶⁰ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, “A Touch of Murder,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

⁶¹ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, “A Touch of Murder,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

point in the series, Livia's character has the most development and the clearest motivations, fully acting on the role of a snake in the garden just as the contemporary sources portray her.

Livia as an Anti-Patriarchal Feminist

Siân Phillips appears in the first six episodes of *I, Claudius*, and with each episode her Livia portrayal becomes increasingly sinister. Livia's emotional range is quite limited, especially in comparison with Augustus and Julia's boisterous characters. Phillips depicted usually as either pensive or outraged. Contemporary sources rarely discuss emotions in their accounts, more often ancient authors regard emotions as the downfall of greatness especially in the military. More notable in works such as Livy and Tacitus, overly emotional figures are depicted as irrational and having poor judgment, reflecting an overall favoritism towards more level-headed personality. This directly translates into *I, Claudius*, where the longest-surviving characters (like Claudius and Livia) exude a calm demeanor that seem uninfluenced by the arrogance surrounding them. Livia's silence also shuts out the spectators from understanding her motivation for much of the show, forcing audiences to draw their own conclusions about ancient Roman women.

Historians, contemporary and modern, often regard the Julio-Claudian lineage as excessive and power hungry, plagued by the constant stressors of murder and betrayal. Members such as Marcellus and Drusus publicly proclaim their certainty on succeeding

⁶² *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, "A Touch of Murder," directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

Augustus, reveling in their popularity as Roman citizens clearly favor them. Already posing a threat to Livia's goals, both their behaviors' fuel her necessity to eliminate them, especially with their growing popularity and direct opposition to the empire.

Representing just two examples of emotional and arrogant displays, Marcellus and Drusus die quickly in *I, Claudius*, corresponding with the Roman opinion of over emotional displays. Claudius and Livia, on the other hand, survive the longest due to their calm nature.

This 'calm' perhaps also highlights an aspect of the growing 1970s feminist movement: up until the recent decades before *I, Claudius*' release, women were metaphorically silenced from social and political equality. Livia's rise to power, while extraordinary given her gender and tumultuous surroundings, was possible because she avoided being too public. Her alleged involvement in Roman affairs is speculative at best, and there is little known documentation of Livia's direct actions. The lack of historical presence is unsurprising and occurs to countless women throughout history, but understanding this absence within a modern feminist construct is key to Pulman's Livia. *I, Claudius*' Livia allowed feminist audiences to identify with the character both in her time as well as their own, creating a widely-accessible character for both British and American audiences.

Throughout the series, Livia maintains a calm demeanor and is observant of not only the changing political environment, but also the evolving relationships between her own family members. The favored camera angling is a constant close-up of Livia, especially during critical plot points. Julia, Augustus' daughter, announces Marcellus'

death within the first episode by wailing and crying hysterically, flinging herself into Livia's arms. Livia returns Julia's grief with a swift slap to the face, shaking her and replying, "this is no way for a Roman woman to behave!"⁶³ Livia then seizes the opportunity to give Tiberius a chance at succession by insisting he "take care of Julia," then shoving the wailing woman into her sons' arms.⁶⁴ With her plans clearly in motion, and her character motivations apparent, the director focuses in on the situational irony – Livia's calm demeanor and empathetic attitude are only a cover up over Marcellus' death. The director makes her the only figure in focus for the remaining two minutes, emphasizing her apathetic reactions and ability to get away with murder.

I, Claudius' Livia represents a duality of nurturing mother and relentless murderer. The question remains, however, if this portrayal is true to the historical accounts, and what the modern interpretation suggests about cultural understanding. While contemporary historians like Tacitus and Cassius Dio condemn Livia for murder, their temporal proximity to the events in question somewhat dampens their credibility; it was entirely possible, even common, for historians to use hearsay and other unreliable accounts as a reference point, ultimately resulting in rumors circulating. The mistrust Romans place on erudite and popular women is apparent in the Augustan sources, directly translating into cinematic reproductions. Historical film critics address the possible consequences of such adaptations to understanding events and the attempts to

⁶³ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, "A Touch of Murder," directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

⁶⁴ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, "A Touch of Murder," directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

capture history as objectively as possible. Miranda Landy contests, “popular history [...] implies that this type of representation is unhistorical [...] relies on clichés, on wisdom inherited from the past, and on an emotional investment in the past,”⁶⁵ making the genre a distorted perspective from the historical accounts, a large part due to its subjective nature in interpretation.

Film scholars largely disagree over whether or not historical media should be subjective, the origins of distorted representation. For centuries, historians focused on remaining as objective as possible in their analyses, the common belief being that subjectivity lends itself to a skewed perspective. Many have argued, however, that true objectivity is unattainable as personal experiences, cultural upbringing, and academic training constantly taint it.⁶⁶ While scholars like Landy and Rosenstone debate the harmful impact of subjectivity, others such as Hayden White defend emotional portrayal as another outlet into modern perception. White argues that “[historical films] may be shaped by different principles, but there is no reason why a filmed representation of historical events should not be as analytical and realistic as any written account,” including melodramatic reinterpretations, such as Livia Augusta’s murders.⁶⁷

Both Robert Graves and the producers of *I, Claudius* note their usage of historical documents to reconstruct what life could have been like in the Julio-Claudian household,

⁶⁵ Marcia Landy. *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 12.

⁶⁶ Peter Novick. *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 7-8.

⁶⁷ Hayden White. “Historiography and Historiophoty,” in *American Historical Review* 93, 5 (1988): 1195.

particularly regarding the emperors. Early in the show, there is careful purpose in highlighting Augustus' goals for a perfect Roman family – his constant desire to increase the Roman population through early marriages and several children are a core part of his social laws, and one that would fuel his actions during his reign. For example, his daughter Julia and Livia's son Tiberius maintain a tumultuous marriage, to which Augustus advises Tiberius, “we can't go cutting the knot every time we get into a quarrel!”⁶⁸ even acknowledging that they were imperfectly matched. While the general storyline follows in accordance to the original sources, creative licensing most notably takes precedence in the shows' dialogue, creating a large space for the series to reinterpret not what happened, but how. Their main tool to manipulate events is Livia, as she stands out as unorthodox; the consistent accusations against her only assist in her portrayal as the cunning empress. Even her son Tiberius comments on her unusual behavior by exclaiming, “just for once I wish you'd act as a normal Roman woman,” to which Livia cleverly retorts, “in order to do that, I'd have to be surrounded by normal men!” emphasizing her need to adapt to the civil struggle occurring around her.⁶⁹

There were few moments in *I, Claudius* where Livia's reveals her motives, but in one particular scene with Plautius, she clearly details her plan by exclaiming: “Oh no, I shan't tell [Augustus]. He wouldn't appreciate it coming from me. You see, he would in

⁶⁸ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, “A Touch of Murder,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

⁶⁹ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 1, “A Touch of Murder,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 20, 1976, accessed March 17, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

his mind, my motives. No, no. It must be someone else.”⁷⁰ By giving the audience a glimpse into Livia’s mind, the situational irony in the next scene is more obvious. She convinces Lucius, Julia’s son, that he is guilty by association since he would not come forward with information he allegedly knows, molding the situation to her advantage as demonstrated by their banter:

Livia: You knew about it! You knew all along, but you did nothing – nothing!

Lucius: But what could I do, I’m not her keeper.

Livia: You could have gone to Augustus.

Lucius: But – but I thought that, like everybody else, he knew and had just closed his eyes to it.

Livia: Shame on you. [snatches list of names from Lucius]. Shame that you should think him such a man when he thinks so highly of you.

Lucius: She’s my mother, would you have me inform on her?

Livia: You could have come to me! You could have come to me. Do you think, if I’d know, I’d have stood by and done nothing? Don’t you think I’d have tried to save her for her own sake? And now it’s too late to save either of you!

Lucius: Ye gods. I should have told you, it’s true.⁷¹

I, Claudius’ Livia is a deft manipulator, and the insight in this scene with Plautius highlights this aspect. Livia clearly forces Lucius to tell Augustus the new information regarding Julia in an effort to avoid having her motives questioned. She claims, “That you did nothing was bad enough. But what you did was much worse, you aided and abetted [...] You acted as her proprietor and her pimp!”⁷² By not only noting his passivity, but also further implicating Lucius in the scandalous behavior, Livia corners

⁷⁰ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 2, “Waiting in the Wings,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 27, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

⁷¹ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 2, “Waiting in the Wings,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 27, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

⁷² *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 2, “Waiting in the Wings,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 27, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1.

Lucius into telling Augustus.⁷³ Pulman and Graves clearly interpreted Livia as the main proponent to the Julio-Claudian lineage, despite the absence of concrete evidence suggesting so.

As a historical mini-series, *I, Claudius* had an advantage in longer on-screen time, removing the need for ornate set designs to compensate for historical aesthetic. The directors focus on dialogue instead, showcasing Livia's intelligence rather than her sexuality by giving insight to her motivations. Whereas Taylor's Cleopatra was more unorthodox because of her sexuality, Phillip's Livia was unusual for her dialogue and direct affiliation with murder, a facet never introduced with Cleopatra. Neither *Cleopatra* (1963) nor *I, Claudius* show their female leads directly committing murder, but when Taylor's Cleopatra orders a death, such as her sister's, it is not treated as a crime but rather a political maneuver. Although Livia has similar intentions as Cleopatra, to figure out and manipulate Rome's inner workings, her acts are considered far more treacherous. Both figures' actions have insurmountable consequences for Roman history, yet each receives vastly different treatments by modern interpreters. Taylor's Cleopatra, partly shaped by off-set scandals and preconceived notions of the queen, coincided with the decadent Art-Deco movement sweeping America. The push for gender equality, coupled with Livia's more advanced age, would result in a much more conservative (yet no less menacing) depiction of another ancient Roman woman.

⁷³ Livia eventually convinced Lucius to tell Augustus by exclaiming, "And to think that I, his wife, must expose the corruption within his own family," perhaps one of Siân Phillips' most ironic lines in *I, Claudius*.

By the fourth episode, aptly named “Poison is Queen,” Claudius warns Germanicus that Livia intercepts all imperial letters, keeping a firm grip on how much information reaches Augustus. Claudius then details Postumus’ final remarks which outlines Livia’s involvement:

He said [stammers] [Livia] had put [Livilla] up to it. [...] I’ll tell you what Postumus thinks of her, and what he thinks will stand the hairs up on your head. He believes that over the years, [Livia] has systematically destroyed his mother, his two brothers, and quite possibly his father, Agrippa. He believes she poisoned Julia’s first husband, Marcellus, and had a hand in our father’s death when he saw what she was doing. He believes he poisoned our grandfather. He believes she will stop at nothing to ensure that Tiberius follows Augustus.⁷⁴

Postumus’ assumptions are correct, but it is important to note Claudius’ usage of hearsay in the situation. Up until his final meeting with Postumus, Claudius has no inkling of Livia’s activities – in the short matter of time it took for Postumus’ banishment and Germanicus’ return from Germany, Claudius fully believes in Livia’s capabilities to commit such acts.

Claudius, a notably well-read emperor with no battle experience, develops a strong sense of paranoia by adolescence. *I, Claudius* took note of this, even Germanicus exclaimed, “you think there’s a plot in everything,”⁷⁵ emphasizing Claudius’ natural suspicion. His paranoia is justifiable decades later, when assassination attempts shroud him and he faces murderous behavior by Caligula’s hands. Claudius’ outlook with *I, Claudius* is representative of actual events in the Augustan sources; the reliance on hearsay and an individuals’ personal bias, could strongly influence a figure’s portrayal in

⁷⁴ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 4, “Poison is Queen,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired October 11, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 2.

⁷⁵ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 4, “Poison is Queen,” directed by Jack Pullman, aired October 11, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 2.

writing. While *I, Claudius*' Livia certainly commits the deed Postumus accuses her of, there is no substantiation to this extent of Livia's involvement in the original texts, indicative of creative licensing skewing historical events for entertainment value.

Roman Women as Feminists

The transplanting of the written word onto a moving screen is subject to wide interpretation, especially regarding ancient sources which have no material substantiation. Unlike other historical epochs, such as post-World War II America or the European Renaissance which contain a myriad of sources, the classical world does not have the advantage of a printing press, let alone a largely literate population. Most ancient sources are fragmented and often incomplete, classical languages themselves even offer vastly differing meanings in their diction due to authors transforming words to better suit their writing style. While these authors are reaching a fairly narrow audience with their comprehensive historical works, they still seek to immortalize both themselves as authors and Rome as a glorious empire; these desires most likely lead to a degree of embellishment, usually pertaining to both heroes and the morally corrupt. Livia is no exception. Though most sources extensively implicate her with the various Julio-Claudian murders, only merely suggesting she is involved, it left future historians and filmmakers ample room to exaggerate the account. When considering Livia's deceitful portrayal, she is synonymous with a common motif: the evil stepmother and untrustworthy woman. Even though she lives centuries ago, she is cast as an archetype familiar to the average moviegoer, making her story not only entertaining but also relatable.

As the series' title suggests, Claudius is the micro-focus in the larger narrative of Julio-Claudian politics. His story is similar to Livia's in that it represents one of silent struggle; his physical deformities (a club foot and a hindering stammer) prevent him from being taken as seriously as other characters, namely the emperors who precede him. Livia, however, remains an integral part to the narrative, for her actions in securing her son Tiberius to the throne would eventually leech into future succession, even after her death. By the fourth episode, Augustus is entirely senile and in Livia's contention unable to rule Rome effectively, even telling the emperor, "your mind has gone soft [...] no one can talk to you anymore."⁷⁶ During one poignant scene, Livia beckons a dying Augustus to receive a delegation from Rome. He stares at her silently, but intently, with his skin grayed and his mouth moving incoherently. She erupts, exclaiming "you know I only came on this journey to look after you, but you won't let anyone prepare you food. It's quite embarrassing, people might think we're trying to poison you,"⁷⁷ all the while the camera does not move from the emperor's pallid face. The only sound heard is Livia's seemingly pointless conversation, which continues despite Augustus' clear inability to respond. His head lolls from side to side while his eyes occasionally widen at Livia's discussion of Tiberius, his silence in keeping with the lack of music and Livia's absence from the camera. The emperor dies with his eyes looking directly to the audience and

⁷⁶ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 4, "Poison is Queen," directed by Jack Pullman, aired October 11, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 2.

⁷⁷ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 4, "Poison is Queen," directed by Jack Pullman, aired October 11, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 2.

with Livia's monologue changing pace, another instance in which she reveals her true emotions regarding the empire:

You should have listened to me. You should have. You know that, don't you? I've been right more often than you have, you know. But because I was a woman, you pushed me into the background. Oh, yes. Yes you did. And all I ever wanted was for you [slight pause] and for Rome. Nothing I ever did was for myself. Nothing. Only for you, and for Rome. As a Claudian should. Oh, yes my dear. I am a Claudian. I think you were apt to forget that at times. But I never did. No. Never. No.⁷⁸

Livia's final words to Augustus reflects the tendency for the Roman patriarchy to isolate women from the political realm, and while a common practice, proves difficult for figures like Livia to achieve greatness independently. Livia's damning tone also speaks to the distrust against women in general, especially during imperial Rome when republican men are often juxtaposed with wicked women.⁷⁹ Livia also reveals the intentions of her murderous actions: to compensate for the inequality placed against women in imperial Rome, Livia takes the imperial dynamics into her own hands by underhandedly manipulating the Augustan succession, effectively inserting herself into the politics without infringing on societal standards.

Augustan authors never mention Livia's final words to the emperor, giving Pulman and Phillips creative liberties in Livia's monologue. It is in this speech that the feminist sentiment of the 1960s and 70s is most prominent. Livia's words, and perhaps more importantly her actions, are a direct response against the Roman patriarchy which confined her. Most of her monologue, however, is not specific to the historical context and could be applied to many gender struggles through time. The universality of Livia's

⁷⁸ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 4, "Poison is Queen," directed by Jack Pullman, aired October 11, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 2.

⁷⁹ Sandra R. Joshel. "*I, Claudius*," 147.

situation suggests a social commentary on the part of Pulman, who used the empress as a voice against gender issues.

Livia further substantiates her sentiment when Claudius arrives to attend the senatorial reading of Augustus' will. She, along with the Julio-Claudian cohort, perceives Claudius as a bumbling fool, often leading them to divulge to him more information than normal – in essence, Claudius acts as an information beacon and a tool for the audience to gather the internal thoughts of surrounding characters. In their exchange, Livia's bitterness towards her exclusion became even more apparent; Claudius, despite being a well-read individual and the late emperor's grandson, is not allowed in the senate due to his physical deformities. On the other hand, the senate excludes Livia simply because of her sex.

Similar to several of her other actions, *I, Claudius* reimagines Livia's characters to an extent far beyond the limitations of the contemporary sources. While Tacitus and Cassius Dio speculate Livia poisoning figs, there is no mention of will tampering or cruel behavior towards her grandson, Claudius. Instead, the show reiterates the motif of evil women versus virtuous men – on a further note, Livia stands for the decadent nature of the empire, while the men represent the 'morally-righteous' republic. Even Augustus desires to return to private citizenry in a conversation with Drusus, explaining, "ruling an empire is a heavy burden, one I would have given up long ago if not for my wife Livia."⁸⁰

⁸⁰ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 2, "Waiting in the Wings," directed by Jack Pullman, aired September 27, 1976, accessed March 19, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 1. According to Joshel, "the good men who are the chief victims of female agency are not only good fathers, loving husbands, and loyal brothers, they (Augustus, Drusus, Postumus, Germanicus, and Claudius himself) are also advocates of the republic."

The serial represents the contemporary mentality that women are the plague of Roman society, hindering it from reaching its true potential through their malicious actions. It is within this formula that Pulman drives Phillip's character motivation.

As *I, Claudius* continues, Livia's actions and reputation alike becomes less discreet. She is, however, already advanced in age at this point. Tiberius, weary of putting up with an overbearing mother, consults with Thrasyllus to assess Livia's death:

Tiberius: I want you to cast my mother's horoscope.

Thrasyllus: Your mother's? What for?

Tiberius: Because I want to know how much longer I have to put up with her. That's what for.

[...]

Tiberius: She's had great admiration for you [Thrasyllus] ever since you prophesied that she'd outlive her husband.

Thrasyllus: That was obvious. I could see she had every intention of doing so.⁸¹

Thrasyllus' remarks reveal an important plot point for the audience: while Livia perhaps succeeded in duping her immediate family, the underlying distrust Roman society had for untraditional women casted suspicion on her from the beginning. Her closeness to the imperial line would only enhance the mistrust, culminating into explosive conflicts the closer Livia is to death.

Livia's Death and the Continued Popularity of the Historical Genre

Livia's final episode, "Queen of Heaven," reveals her 'true' intentions behind her actions. On her deathbed, Livia chooses her great-grandson Caligula to hear her final wish: to be deified just as Augustus was, granting her access to heaven and spiritually

⁸¹ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 6, "Queen of Heaven," directed by Jack Pullman, aired October 25, 1976, accessed March 27, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 3.

saving her from her wicked deeds.⁸² His response foreshadows the corruption that would follow the Julio-Claudian lineage:

Caligula: I hear you're dying grandmother.

Livia: [weakly] Will...you...

Caligula: Make you a goddess? [smiles wickedly and leans back] And what makes you think that a smelly old woman like you could become a goddess? I don't need you anymore, you see grandmother, my secret will die with you. You're going to stew in hell forever and ever. Let me tell you something. [lays next to Livia] Drusillus has made another prophecy, told Tiberius. He said that one who is going to die very soon will become the greatest god the world has ever known. No temples will be dedicated to anyone but him in the whole Roman world, not even to Augustus. Do you know who that one is? [whispers] Me. [louder] Me. I shall become the greatest god of them all.

Livia: [a single tear rolls down her cheek].

Caligula: And I shall look down at you, suffering all the torments and I shall say, 'leave her there, leave here there forever and ever and ever. [kisses Livia on the lips] Goodbye great-grandmother.⁸³

In comparison with previous episodes, Livia's weakened appearance comes at a shock to the audience. What few words she utters are barely audible, reminiscent to Augustus' own death bed. Both scenes' camera angling remains on the dying, directing the audience to focus on the character's reaction rather than the dialogue. In this case the audience witnesses Livia shedding a single, poignant tear. Her reaction to Caligula's damnation speaks volumes to both her character motivation and development: it is originally thought that Livia murders to have her family on the throne, but her emotional display towards not being deified proves her ultimate desire to have a lasting legacy through deification.

⁸² Tiberius' son Castor falls victim to his unfaithful wife Livilla, who is having an affair with the head of the Praetorian guard, Serjanus. Serjanus, in hopes of putting his own lineage on the throne, convinces Livilla to murder her husband by promising her marriage. Sticking to true *I, Claudius* themes, they gradually poison the emperor prospect, leaving the imperial household baffled at his mysterious death. Tiberius is quick to appoint Caligula as his heir, given their shared interest for the sexual taboo. At this time, the emperor is the sole entity that could grant deification.

⁸³ *I, Claudius*, season 1, episode 6, "Queen of Heaven," directed by Jack Pullman, aired October 25, 1976, accessed March 27, 2015, on BBC, DVD (Image Entertainment, 2000), disc 3.

Ancient and classical cultures placed emphasis on a lasting legacy, most notably those who were not great politicians or historians. In a culture where concrete preservation was not practiced, many sought remembrance through great achievements and victories, most often through military campaigning. These options, however, isolated women, who were left to find their own legacy only through marriage to a prominent man. Livia Augusta was no exception to this occurrence. Even her first marriage was an attempt to become a legacy, and although it failed due to political strife, her second marriage to Augustus proved to be her direct line to notoriety.⁸⁴ Her infamy, however, was moreso due to her unorthodox behaviors and supposed murders, marking her as yet another corrupted woman in Roman history and another subject for later reinterpretation.⁸⁵

While there are not nearly as many Livia reinterpretations as Cleopatra, Phillips' Livia is notable for her presence despite being surrounded by some of Rome's most powerful men.⁸⁶ *I, Claudius* marks an important turn in cinematic history, both for historians and the general public. Livia's character development, although achieved in a mere seven episodes, reflects the popular perception of well-known Roman women: while resourceful and intelligent, they are also manipulative and embody the negative

⁸⁴ For more information regarding Roman legacies, please see: Elke Hartmann. "Wealthy Women and Legacy Hunters in Rome during the High Roman Empire," *Annales* 67, 3 (2012): 605-28; S. E. Smethurst. "The Growth of the Roman Legend," *Phoenix* 3, 1 (1949): 1-14; James S. Ruebel. "Politics and Folktale in the Classical World," *Asian Folklore Studies* 50, 1 (1991): 5-53; Mary T. Boatwright. "Theaters in the Roman Empire," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 53, 4 (1990): 184-92.

⁸⁶ *Cleopatra* (1963) received more attention than *I, Claudius*. The ardent publicity efforts surrounding Taylor's rendition left a more tangible impact in American cultural identity than *I, Claudius* perhaps did.

consequences to Rome's decadence. Critics and historians alike laud Phillips' performance, and Pulman for his ability to effortlessly combine various contemporary accounts; historical mini-series would prove to be Pulman's most effective tool in developing a dynamic retelling.

Relative to silver screen counterparts, television programming is more static, allowing for a more natural character development unhindered by heavily condensed plots.⁸⁷ Whereas the 1950s consumer culture influenced set design and publicity for *Cleopatra*, there was a greater emphasis on the political landscape during 1970s media, unsurprising given the tumultuous events in the years prior. *I, Claudius* (and other BBC television productions) spent considerably less in achieving the 'authentic' visualization, usually done through props and battle scenes, instead focusing on intimate monologues.

This change, however, would contribute to *I, Claudius*' initially low ratings. After two weeks of low ratings, the original cast feared the show would not gain momentum due to its generally unfamiliar content and lack of battle scenes. Soon thereafter, their ratings skyrocketed and awarded them critical acclaim for their historical series turned drama. In a later interview, director Herbert Wise corroborated Pulman's intentions for his unorthodox approach:

⁸⁷ Ben Lawrence. "'I, Claudius,' what HBO can learn from the BBC classic," *Telegraph*, June 4, 2013, accessed April 7, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10096739/I-Claudius-what-HBO-can-learn-from-the-BBC-classic.html>.

We agreed right at the beginning that we weren't going to make a period piece [...] We wanted to make it contemporary. We wanted to make the point that human psychology hasn't changed much in the last 2,000 years. We don't throw people to tigers anymore, but we still fight.⁸⁸

Wise and Pulman clearly worked towards using *I, Claudius* as an agent for modern dilemmas; the ancient setting was the marked separator between *I, Claudius* and other contemporary family dramas, all of which fell into similar storylines of murder and power struggle. There remained a common theme between these representations: Roman society, regardless of time, was a corrupt one plagued by societal strife and a constant concern over finances, and women were constants of their situation.

Scholars, too, not only praise *I, Claudius* for its entertainment, but also for its effective attempt at conveying some common historical patterns: a transfer of power (both on the large scale of Rome, and the small scale imperial palace), the status of women, and the widespread consequences associated with an overextended empire. Despite some clear historical inaccuracies, the environment Pulman creates is perhaps the closest rendition produced in the 1970s, free of overdramatized battle scenes and focused instead on the political atmosphere.⁸⁹ Livia was the main proponent in establishing both an ancient Roman setting as well as the more modern plot lines; Pulman (and to an extent, Robert Graves), juxtaposed Livia's regality as a Roman empress with the murderous plotlines international audiences were interested in. The final product showcased Livia, a woman rarely mentioned in history, as a strong female lead that

⁸⁸ Thomas Vinciguerra, "Imperial Rome Writ Large and Perverse," *New York Times*, November 23, 2012, accessed April 12, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/arts/television/i-claudius-returns-in-a-35th-anniversary-dvd-set.html>

⁸⁹ Many have pointed to the anachronistic treatment of Caligula, specifically, that his mental illness and religious fantasies occurred much earlier than Cassius Dio posited.

murdered political enemies through patience and wit, a fitting depiction for the resurging feminist ideologies. Livia's age would also echo the inclusive rhetoric of second wave feminism, which strived for social equality among all economic classes.

Similar to Taylor, Phillip's personal life would play a role in shaping her on-screen depictions. In several interviews, Phillips laments her first marriage to Peter O'Toole as oppressive and damaging to her initial careers. Her comments about their marriage speak to a larger gender struggle in 1950s America. "I was very feeble, but I was also a child of my generation. The pressure was huge to be compliant, to be complaisant, to be quiet. Not to be a nuisance [...] Clever women never nagged."⁹⁰ The societal expectations for ancient Roman women were remarkably similar for American women in the 1950s, and each figure (Livia and Phillips) culminated different ways which women endured patriarchal standards. Phillips' own struggle resonated much with Livia's own story: they are both capable and influential women hampered by strict expectations.

⁹⁰ "When the Magic Wore Off," *Guardian*, February 21, 2001, accessed February 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jul/29/biography.features>.

SERVILIA OF THE JUNII IN HBO'S ROME: AGE AND PHYSICALITY AS TOOLS OF FEMINIST POWER

Servilia Caepionis, or Servilia of the Junii as *Rome* (2005-7) named her, was an integral figure during Julius Caesar's rise to dictatorship. She was both the mother of Marcus Junius Brutus, one of Caesar's assassins, and Caesar's mistress in his formative years. Historically, Augustan authors place her into a similar paradigm as both Cleopatra and Livia: an amalgamation of the mother-whore duality that often reduces a figure's significance. Cinematic portrayals would further emphasize this treatment for all three Roman women, but the shifting cultural values and advancements in media technology would differentiate them these figures in significant ways. Servilia, as depicted by Lindsay Duncan in HBO's television series *Rome* (2005-7), represents a unique blend of both Cleopatra and Livia's characters: She was both a nurturing mother and a manipulative seductress. Although she was perhaps not as memorable as an exotic Egyptian queen or an emperor's wife and mother, Servilia's role as an extramarital lover would eventually influence Octavian's strict moral reforms. Despite her prominence in high Roman politics, she has very little historical or cinematic presence until *Rome*. Nevertheless, the attention garnered from that depiction would reflect a new, and very popular, avenue of portraying Roman women.

Historically, Latin authors mention Servilia only in the context of the men with which she associated. Cicero and Plutarch, however, note her capabilities in remaining in

high Roman politics.⁹¹ A large part of Servilia's abilities could be attributed to her upbringing. As a noble woman orphaned at a young age, Servilia gained access to political education as well as freedom from many of the restrictions commonly imposed by a *paterfamilias* structure. Servilia's affluent standing allowed her to live with other relatives, mainly her uncle, after her parents' death. Roman legislation organized society along rigid patriarchal standards, which placed the eldest male relative with power (or, *patriapotestas*), over the entire family. Servilia's uncle, Marcus Livius Drusus, would become her legal guardian; he served as tribune until he died at an early age, shortly thereafter Servilia married another tribune, Marcus Junius Brutus the Elder.

Plutarch debated when her affair with Julius Caesar began; even positing that Brutus was Caesar's natural heir, although it was unlikely given that Caesar was only fifteen years older than Brutus.⁹² Unlike his later affair with Cleopatra, Caesar was much more public with his affections toward Servilia, despite their marital status. While authors such as Plutarch and Suetonius said comparatively little regarding Servilia's influence, her presence in Caesar's inner circle was apparent and widely accepted among the Roman elite. Plutarch details one particular account during the Catiline trials in 63 BCE, when Servilia reportedly sent Caesar a love letter, which was read aloud to the entire senate.⁹³

⁹¹ Like her contemporaries, there is little said regarding Servilia. Cicero and Plutarch provide the most details in their *Epistulae ad Atticum* and *Life of Brutus*, respectively.

⁹² Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives vol. VI*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918): 137.

⁹³ Plutarch, *Cato*, 24.1

As the mother to one of history's most famous assassins, she has also received substantial analysis across different disciplines. Classicists, historians, sociologists, and psychologists alike have examined Servilia's influence in raising Brutus, in stark juxtaposition to how the modern world approaches Cleopatra and Livia. The attention paid to Servilia's maternal role would ultimately take precedent over hypersexualization (unlike with Cleopatra), and the weak implications to Caesar's murder did not prompt many contemporary authors to depict her as treacherous (as was the case with Livia). Modern scholars expanded Plutarch's theory on Brutus' paternity, analyzing Caesar's assassination as the result of an Oedipal complex rather than political tensions. For example, Thomas Africa psychoanalyzed Brutus through the lens of the 'Coriolanus effect,' which places Servilia in a unique, and powerful, role:

Deprived of a father early in life, obsessed with pleasing his mother, following her advice in most matters, and subordinating his own life to her, the hero was successful in military affairs but ill-equipped for political life because of his arrogant tantrums. [...] Although Brutus represents the darker side of the Coriolanus syndrome, a galaxy[sic] of Roman worthies drew strength from the widows who dominated their childhoods and guided their youthful ambitions.⁹⁴

Servilia's dual role as both a mother to Brutus and a mistress to one of Rome's most powerful leaders makes her a complex figure for modern interpretation, one that is a unique blend of third wave feminism and preconceived notions of Julian politics.

HBO's *Rome* would provide an effective avenue for depicting Roman women, most notably Servilia's probable involvement in politics that contemporary authors potentially did not acknowledge. The gaps in the contemporary accounts of her life would lead,

⁹⁴ Thomas W. Africa. "The Mask of an Assassin: A Psychohistorical Study of M. Junius Brutus," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8, 4 (Spring 1978): 602-3.

similarly to both Cleopatra and Livia, to more sinister depictions, both for modern entertainment and as a plot device.

HBO's Divergence from Traditional Cinema Styles

As a television network, HBO set high standards for its productions, both in regards to creative licensing and budgeting. Technological advancements would allow more profitable networks, like HBO, to include more elaborate battle sequences and digitally enhanced set designs, adding a layer of authenticity otherwise unavailable to earlier productions, such as the PBS version of *I, Claudius*. *Rome*'s opening sequence even featured animated depictions of crudely drawn graffiti on Roman walls amidst clips of bustling markets.⁹⁵ By depicting a broader and more realistic environment, namely the city itself and its historically relevant provinces, *Rome* allowed for more complex interactions between the actors and the setting. These interactions, in turn, would introduce two facets that would set *Rome* apart: class warfare and homosexual relations. Unlike *Cleopatra* (1963) and *I, Claudius*, *Rome* placed greater emphasis on establishing relationships between Romans of all classes. It is within this context that the show's creators, Bruno Heller, William MacDonald, and John Milius, placed their interpretation of the Roman woman as independent *dominae*, or masters of their households.

Like many other historical series, *Rome* begins *in media res*, in the weeks leading up to Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. It is clear that the directors centered the events of

⁹⁵ The role of graffiti is particularly important, both in ancient Rome and for modern cinema, as it suggests transgression and the 'voice' of otherwise marginalized populations. For more information, see Christopher Lockett, "Accidental History: Mass Culture and HBO's Rome," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38, 3 (2010): 110-1.

the series' events on Caesar's actions, a common cinematic tactic given how most historical sources operate under the 'Great Man' theory.⁹⁶ In this scenario, *Rome*'s earliest episodes build the anticipation for Caesar's return from his campaigns in Germany; most of the supporting figures, such as Pompey and Servilia, organize their actions in preparation for his return. The directors introduce Servilia within the pilot episode, "The Stolen Eagle," but the methods in which they do so were unique, and foreshadowed her character as cunning and unorthodox. In her first scene, Brutus returns to Rome from campaigning with a letter from Caesar, revealing intimate details about their relationship:

[Servilia narrating]: Dearest Servilia. Forgive my long silence. These last long months were full of iron and mud and blood, and no time for letters to friends. Be sure that I have been thinking about you with great affection. I long to be together and alone with you.

[Slave]: 'Great affection,' 'long to be alone,' you think he says such things to his wife?

[Servilia]: 'Affection,' what's that? He could not say 'love.'

[Slave]: Would you have him pluck a harp? He's a soldier, not a poet.⁹⁷

Servilia's desire for a deeper level of emotional involvement suggests the affair's longevity, and foreshadows the problems that will follow. As Servilia's slave points out, Caesar's rank and occupation would hinder further advancement. The directors juxtaposed Caesar's letter to Servilia with his letter to his niece, Atia, who was also vying for Caesar's attention.⁹⁸ Caesar's interactions with Atia in this occurrence were more

⁹⁶ The Great Man theory is the popular nineteenth century philosophy that posits individual efforts, rather than collective occurrences, propel history forward. For more information, please see: Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841).

⁹⁷ *Rome*, season 1, episode 1, "The Stolen Eagle," directed by Michael Apted, aired August 28, 2005, on HBO, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

formal, and suggested an important role for high-ranking Roman women: to help determine which female relative should marry, and to whom.

Women in HBO's *Rome*

Rome depicts Servilia as a capable and sophisticated woman, although her motivation is often unclear. Unlike Livia and Cleopatra, who were directly tied to imperial figures to back them politically and financially, Servilia must rely on Brutus' political rank. This distinction, both in regards to class and gender, is unique to the series, and adds another level of complexity in portraying Roman women. It is with Servilia, as well as other women of even lower ranking, that audiences are introduced to a sense of limitation in regards to imperial influence. Although she was the mistress to one of Rome's greatest leaders, Servilia was not given political agency in the same manner Livia and Cleopatra were.

Servilia is also unique because of her unorthodox relationship with Caesar. The affair directly contradicted several social rules, and its taboo nature stopped Caesar from publicly acknowledging it, but it also suggested Servilia's extensive reach. *Rome*, as a series, placed Roman women in a particularly manipulative *modus operandi*.⁹⁹ Within the

⁹⁸ Atia, while closely connected to Roman politicians, wanted to remain in Caesar's good graces given his rapid rise to power. Within the first episode, Atia has her son, the future emperor Octavian, personally deliver a white stallion to Caesar in Gaul. *Rome*, season 1, episode 1, "The Stolen Eagle," directed by Michael Apted, aired August 28, 2005, on HBO, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

⁹⁹ By the third episode, Atia has forced her daughter Octavia to divorce her husband so she could marry the significantly older Pompey. Atia even offers Octavia to Pompey for premarital relations, which ultimately backfire when he chooses Calpurnia as his next wife. In contrast, Niobe, the wife to Roman commander Lucius Vorenus, lies about the paternity of her child. *Rome*, season 1, episode 3, "An Owl in a Thornbush," directed by Michael Apted, aired September 11, 2005, on HBO, accessed June 11, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

first few episodes, *Rome* establishes a complex network of class interactions between many of the women; the different expectations of each class would play an integral role for each woman as they progress through the series, most notably Servilia. The third episode, “An Owl in the Thornbush,” highlights the nuanced differences between each woman’s standing. The scene organization within this episode is reminiscent of *I, Claudius*’ first dinner scene. Each character reclines and faces each other in typical Roman etiquette, but the dinner party setting imposes strict social boundaries on not only how each character interacts with each other, but also with the host. The dinner party takes place during Caesar’s march towards the Rubicon as Pompeian supporters vandalize Atia (and by extension, Caesar’s) home. Atia condemns Caesar openly and threatens to “stab him in the neck,”¹⁰⁰ ridiculing the young Octavian when he intervenes on Caesar’s behalf. Brutus chastises Atia in his response, “it might be tempting to abandon Caesar, but in doing so we look like mere slaves to fashion,”¹⁰¹ exchanging a knowing look with his mother Servilia.

The scene, albeit brief, simplifies some of the key relationships between both gender and class, establishing a representative sense of social standing. Servilia remained silent for its duration, both to maintain secrecy and avoid upsetting Atia, revealing the limitations within their relationship as two prominent Roman women. The director, Julian Farino, also distinguishes the characters’ ages in a subtle manner: while a young Octavia

¹⁰⁰ *Rome*, season 1, episode 3, “An Owl in a Thornbush,” directed by Michael Apted, aired September 11, 2005, on HBO, accessed June 11, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

¹⁰¹ *Rome*, season 1, episode 3, “An Owl in a Thornbush,” directed by Michael Apted, aired September 11, 2005, on HBO, accessed June 11, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

and (although, to a lesser extent) Atia become emotional over the Pompeian vandals, the older Servilia remains quiet and seemingly unaffected. Similar to *I, Claudius*, *Rome* treats excessive emotion as a sign of weakness, especially within the rigid framework Roman society imposes.

The similarities between *I, Claudius* and *Rome* are numerous, partly due to HBO's affiliation with the British Broadcast Company (BBC), which would provide both aesthetic and casting connections that proved integral to the modern understanding of Rome. The laborious attention given the details of BBC's approach to historical verisimilitude, as showcased by *I, Claudius* and *Doctor Who*.¹⁰² HBO's affiliation with the BBC also gave it more direct access to some of Great Britain's most prominent actors. In several interviews, Duncan cited the appeal American interpretations of Roman women held:

I met Bruno [Heller, the writer] and Michael Apted [director of the first two episodes]. They sold it to me. They talked about this woman who I've never heard of any they told me of the two key relationships that would be of most interest to anybody now, which was mother of Brutus and lover of Caesar – not just a lover, because there were thousands, but a very important one [...] I thought, 'well, she's got to be interesting.' And I was curious as to why no-one's [sic] ever heard of her, although I don't have any answers about that.¹⁰³

Duncan comments on Servilia's historical ambiguity, but that *Rome*'s writing gave the largely fictionalized character more dimension. According to *The New Yorker*, HBO adopted BBC's capitalization of the 'Great Woman Theory,' the notion that "pillowtalk

¹⁰² BBC's critically acclaimed *Doctor Who* showcased a similar attention to details when it came to set designs, for both futuristic scenes and those set in actual historical events. For more information, please see: Fiona Hobden, "History Meets Fiction in 'Doctor Who, the Fires of Pompeii': A BBC Reception of Ancient Rome on Screen and Online," *Greece & Rome* 56, 2 (2009): 147-63.

¹⁰³ "Lindsay Duncan plays Servilia," *BBC Press Office*, October 18, 2005, accessed July 11th, 2016. http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/10_october/18/rome_duncan.shtml.

and poison” propelled historical events; a similar outcome for several female characters in *I, Claudius* as well.¹⁰⁴ While historical documents do not substantiate these characterizations, they reveal the extent of modern impositions on the ancient world.

Roman women’s involvement in high politics was perhaps not as pervasive as suggested by modern cinema. *Rome* operates, at least in several episodes, under the paradigm that “men do not move or act in a war that is clearly theirs without first being influenced by at least one woman.”¹⁰⁵ The series would mark a departure away from prior depictions of the classical world in that it would move away from the ‘sword and sandal’ style that had become so popular. American audiences had long since equated historical epics with monumental sets, ultimately a hindrance for the relatively small television studios. *Rome*, for its multi-million dollar gross cost, lacked the spatial enormity that many critics expected. This limitation could perhaps be attributed to the BBC’s influence, and its preference over attention to detail. Duncan even lauded this facet in several interviews, claiming that she agreed to the project without needing a script.¹⁰⁶

Like other HBO programs, sex and violence are in the forefront during the first half of the show, perhaps as a device to engage the viewers’ attention. More critical themes emerge, however, after this point. Power, persuasion, and adaptability all divert

¹⁰⁴ Tad Friend. “Power Play: ‘Rome’ returns to HBO,” *New Yorker*, January 15, 2007, accessed July 11, 2016. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/01/15/power-play-2>.

¹⁰⁵ “Analysis, Episode V: *The Ram has Touched the Wall*,” *Rome: An Historical Analysis of Season I*.

¹⁰⁶ “Lindsay Duncan plays Servilia,” *BBC Press Office*, accessed July 12, 2016. http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/10_october/18/rome_duncan.shtml.

the ultimate focus of *Rome* from the ancient world to the modern one. The influence of women remains a constant throughout the series and serves as the root to many historical inaccuracies. It is clear that modern cinematographers placed emphasis on the relatively unknown, or completely fictional, Roman women. This anachronistic shift is evident in the fictionalized rivalry between Atia and Servilia, a contentious relationship that is not historically based, and places both women in manipulative perspectives. According to HBO's description of Servilia, "[she is] sophisticated, elegant, and subtle, and considers herself several rungs above Atia in the social hierarchy, a fact that chafes Atia."¹⁰⁷ While there was likely social tension between the two, given their proximity to Caesar, the "almost cat-like actions between both [...] seems to deviate greatly from what would have been expected of women at this time."¹⁰⁸ *Rome* suggests that women held more influence than what was likely, and places several of its female characters in relatively independent roles despite the prominence of *patria potestas*.

The societal tensions between several characters comes to a peak in the following episode, "Stealing from Saturn," as Rome prepares for Caesar's arrival after his enactment of martial law. In vying for Caesar's attention, Atia hosts a dinner party in celebration but is irate when he invites Servilia as well; it becomes clear that after eight years on Gallic campaign. Both women planned to seduce Caesar during his rise to absolute power. This 'love triangle' motif further defines both characters as it reveals the

¹⁰⁷ "Rome: Servilia of the Junii," *HBO.com*. 2005. Accessed July 17, 2016. http://hbo-rome.wikia.com/wiki/Servilia_of_the_Junii.

¹⁰⁸ "Analysis, Episode V," *Rome: An Historical Analysis of Season 1*. Accessed June 5, 2016. <http://www.anselm.edu/internet/classics/Rome/SUMMARIES/05.html>.

extent each is willing to go to further for net goals. Atia, who *Rome* depicts as already having several affairs including one with Marc Antony, also arranges a public attack on Servilia that forces her into social isolation until Caesar's banquet.¹⁰⁹ Servilia's presence at the banquet perturbs the much-younger Atia, who condenses Servilia's relationship with Caesar as 'absurd', given her age and rank.

Rome as a Modern Feminist Environment

Although *Rome* places an emphasis on the intangible reach its female characters have, there is also an apparent paternalistic restriction to their actions. Atia and Servilia use their influence to manipulate the people and situations around them, but they both do so to secure a permanent place next to Caesar. Working within the patriarchal confines of Roman *patriapotestas*, each woman fully exploits her resources, and often times circumvent Roman law to advance publically. It is with this method that HBO follows the traditional cinematic depiction of Roman women as the embodied corruption of the society, but simultaneously gives them agency through their deeds.¹¹⁰ This key difference is more representative of feminist interpretations, unsurprising given HBO's reputation as a progressive and cutting-edge network.

¹⁰⁹ At the end of the previous episode, "An Owl in the Thornbush," Atia has Timon (another lover) ambush Servilia's caravan in the streets, stripping her naked and publicly shaming her. Atia's attacks Servilia for informing Octavia, Atia's daughter, that Atia had Glabius (Octavia's former husband) killed. These anonymous public attacks were more reminiscent of a modern mafia drama, and adds an unsubstantiated dimensions to Roman women.

¹¹⁰ Maureen Ragalie elaborates on Roman literary tradition of using the female body as a metaphor for Roman corruption. She most notably points to Tacitus' treatment of Emperor Claudius and his wife, Messalina, arguing that contemporary historians viewed his inability to control his wife was a metaphor for his reign. For more information, please see: Maureen Ragalie. "Sex and Scandal with Sword and Sandals: A Study of the Female Characters in HBO's *Rome*," in *Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity and Classics* 1, 1 (2007): 1-20.

After the first four episodes, there is a more permanent presence of Roman men within the city, most notably Caesar, Marc Antony and Octavian, further fueling the rivalry between the main women. Servilia and Atia's conflict demonstrates a more traditionalist view of women in antiquity, as coercive figures who rely on their sexuality to obtain what they really want. In episode five, "The Ram Has Touched the Wall," Antony reveals Caesar and Servilia's affair to Atia, claiming that not only did Servilia "unman" Caesar, but also that the entire army was aware of this fact.¹¹¹ Atia voices her complaints to the young Octavian, urging that, "if he were not mewling in bed with that witch, he would be chasing down Pompey. It is not trivium [who Caesar sleeps with], the Republic is at stake!"¹¹² Atia, however, refuses to intervene, concluding that "such sordid couplings have a way of turning out badly anyhow, with no one's special doing."¹¹³ In a malicious attempt to separate the couple, Atia commissions pornographic graffiti that embarrasses Caesar and questions his morality.¹¹⁴ Allen Coulter, the episode's director, suggests Atia indeed retaliates by placing pornographic graffiti of the couple around the city – an inaccurate detail that suggests both influence and manipulation.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ *Rome*, season 1, episode 5, "The Ram Has Touched the Wall," directed by Allen Coulter, aired September 25, 2005, on HBO, accessed June 29, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

¹¹² *Rome*, season 1, episode 5, "The Ram Has Touched the Wall," directed by Allen Coulter, aired September 25, 2005, on HBO, accessed June 29, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

¹¹³ *Rome*, season 1, episode 5, "The Ram Has Touched the Wall," directed by Allen Coulter, aired September 25, 2005, on HBO, accessed June 29, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

¹¹⁴ At this point in the series, Caesar is still married to his third wife, Calpurnia. Her character encompassed the virtuous Roman matron who often worried about societal appropriateness. Atia's graffiti forced Calpurnia to give Caesar an ultimatum.

Coulter juxtaposes Atia and Servilia's actions, emphasizing the differences in their approaches. While Atia secretly commissioned public graffiti, potentially risking her reputation and good standing with Caesar, Servilia takes more private measures at retaliation; within the same episode, she performs a curse against both Caesar and Atia:

Let his penis wither, his bones crack, let him see his legions drown in their own blood. Gods of the inferno, I offer to you his limbs, his head, his mouth, his breath, his speech, his hands, his liver, his heart, his stomach. Gods of the inferno, let me see him suffer deeply, and I will rejoice and sacrifice to you.¹¹⁶

By evoking the gods, Servilia maintains a more historically probable persona.¹¹⁷ It showcases her piety as a noble Roman woman, her knowledge in executing rituals, and her penchant for secrecy as a means of revenge. Unlike Atia, who vocalizes her intents on most occasions, Servilia remains silent, a similar characterization to Livia. Despite *Rome's* efforts to create a historically convincing atmosphere, its treatment of Roman women is more reflective of the modern projections onto the ancient world, both onto individual figures and onto situations. Servilia becomes a vehicle for third wave feminist ideology after "The Ram has Touched the Wall." With her allegiance to Caesar viciously ended, *Rome's* directors posit that Caesar's assassination was the result of a jilted lover rather than deep-rooted political fracturing. This underlying motivation gives immense

¹¹⁵ Atia's actions not only humiliate the couple, but Caesar's wife Calpurnia as well. Calpurnia gives Caesar an ultimatum, threatening divorce and ultimately the military support her family offered. Caesar concedes to Calpurnia, scorning Servilia and shifting their dynamic for the rest of the series.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Duncan mentions this specific scene when discussing historical details, commenting that the metal scroll and stylus completed the scene as it was the focus. For more information, please see: Duncan, *BBC Press Office*.

power to Servilia's character, and speaks to the changing roles of American women in the 1990s and 2000s.

The political climate surrounding third wave feminism was more stable in comparison with the previous two waves, which gained momentum in the wake of other social movements. Early scholars couched third wave ideology as an expansion and reflection on the rights earned during the first two resurgences; during the 1990s, feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Rebecca Walker emphasized a more intersectional approach to social change, calling for inclusion of race and class in further legislation.¹¹⁸ It is important to note this distinction in rhetoric, as it denotes the "schizophrenic cultural milieu [that] on one side grants that they [women] have a right to improved opportunities, resources, and legislative support, and on the other side resists their politics."¹¹⁹ While Servilia alone did not encompass third wave ideals of diversity in terms of race, her societal status as a wealthy, widowed, noble makes her position unique to both contemporary and modern audiences.

On a larger scale, Servilia represents a postfeminist reaction to confining paternalistic structures. While all three figures (Taylor's Cleopatra, Phillip's Livia, and Duncan's Servilia) navigate imperial politics in unorthodox manners, it is Duncan's Servilia who most defiantly opposes Roman values; she represents a unique blend of the previously depicted women, an amalgamation of sexual empowerment and manipulative

¹¹⁸ Amber E. Kinser, "Negotiating Spaces for/through Third-Wave Feminism," *NWSA Journal* 16, 3 (2004): 130.

¹¹⁹ Kinser, "Negotiating Spaces," 133.

intellect. Her pseudo-homosexual relationship with Octavia, Atia's daughter and Caesar's niece, showcases this blend and speaks to the changing attitudes towards female sexuality in the twenty-first century. While classical societies tolerated homosexuality, it was within specific constraints that largely excluded women altogether. Contemporary accounts on the matter, especially those from Plutarch's biographical accounts, merely suggest homosexual relationships between men. Close friendships between members of the same sex were commonplace, but class became the greater distinction in relationships.¹²⁰

By adding homosexual relationships to its narrative, *Rome* introduces a facet of Roman life that gives agency to the restrained women – specifically, Octavia and Servilia. Their relationship, while a façade for Servilia's own purposes, provided a secretive outlet in a strict society, and was an exercise in using one's sexuality as a means of power.¹²¹ Octavia and Servilia begins their affair at the end of episode seven, "Pharsalus," and by episode nine, "Utica," two years have passed and Caesar begins his new affair with Cleopatra (episode eight, "Caesarion,"). There is much less fanfare surrounding Caesar's welcome, a sharp contrast with his previous arrival, and his reunion with his family is strained. He avoids Servilia, and although Servilia portrays herself as a

¹²⁰ Caesar and his successor, Octavian, enacted moral legislations that restricted premarital and extramarital couplings. They also sharpened the divide between social and economic classes, particularly concerned over 'freeborn' status. For more information, please see: Tacitus, *Annals* 3.5; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 14.

¹²¹ Octavia alludes to Servilia about a 'terrible affliction' (*morbis comitialis*, or epilepsy) that plagued Caesar, an aspect that suggested Caesar did not earn the gods' favor. Caesar's supposed epilepsy is a commonality among several depictions, and serves to 'humanize' a seemingly divine figure. For more on the representations of Caesar's epilepsy, please see: Michael Trimble and Dale C. Hesdorffer, "Representations of Epilepsy on the Stage: From the Greeks to the 20th century," *Epilepsy and Behavior* 57 (2016): 238-42.

resilient, virtuous matron, Caesar's rejection enrages her further. While most Roman women relied on the status of male relatives, Servilia uses what little power the women around her have to take revenge on Caesar.

There is a defining moment in Servilia and Octavia's interactions that separates Servilia from other depicted Roman women depicted in American and British modern popular culture: Servilia directly asks Octavia to seduce her own brother for information, squelching Octavia's reluctance by telling her Atia had Glabius (Octavia's first husband) murdered. When the matron's sexuality was not enough, she resorts to underhanded tactics, a further blending of Cleopatra and Livia's prior characterizations. Just as Servilia manipulates Octavian, so too, does Octavia manipulate her brother, Octavian, resulting in an incestuous coupling that disrupts power balances between several characters. Atia, furious at her children and Servilia, secretly organizes a public attack on Servilia, in which she is stripped and beaten in the streets. The attack, while not life threatening, symbolically shamed Servilia and forced her into temporary societal isolation.¹²² *Rome* places its female characters into a strict duality of the sexually voracious manipulator, or the unaware and naïve pawn, reflective of the ideology that third wave feminism combats.¹²³

¹²² For more information on the symbolism behind Servilia's shaming, please see: Antony Augoustakis, "Women's Politics in the Streets of Rome," in *Rome Season One: History Makes Television*, ed. Monica Silveira Cyrino (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 117-29.

¹²³ Maureen Ragalie notes that Octavia could be a younger version of Servilia and Atia, using her sexuality as means to manipulate others. Octavia's character goes through minor shifts as she craves reprieve from her limited role, and while the Roman matrons use her for their own means, Octavia maintains a level of control for the information she knows. Interactions between class and age highlight this

Duncan's Servilia characterizes the inclusive dialogue of third wave feminism. Her age and ambiguous sexuality, an aspect Atia frequently comments on, makes her atypical among depictions of power. Her actions, however, contradict some foundational notions of modern feminism, and instead are reflective of changing sentiments in the early 2000s. Third wave scholars, such as Bonnie Dow and Carol Clover, argue that cinematic depictions cast an overly optimistic light on the power of individualism and make identity synonymous with politics.¹²⁴ In the case of *Rome's* Servilia, the overestimation of her power misinforms audiences of her contemporary presence as well as condenses modern feminist rhetoric within patriarchal confines; she uses her son's power and Caesar's political weaknesses to advance her own plans. While Servilia was not as radical as Cleopatra or Livia in their characterizations, the slight against her becomes the sole motivation behind Caesar's assassination, and her ability to advance such plans distorts the actual expectations of Roman women.

Placing Ancient Values in a Modern Context

These distortions, however anachronistic and ill-fitting, do breakaway from the traditional depiction of mothers throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, and showcases HBO's progressive impact on historical women. While 'Girl Culture,' a socio-political phenomenon that promoted the individualism and feminism of America's female youth in

theme, particularly with the common female characters (Niobe and Eirene, a soldier's wife and slave, respectively). For more information, please see: Maureen Ragalie, "Sex and Scandal with Sword and Sandals: A Study of the Female Characters in HBO's *Rome*," *Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity and Classics* 1, 1 (2007): 1-20.

¹²⁴ Merri Lisa Johnson, introduction to *Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts It in a Box* edited by Merri Lisa Johnson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007): 19.

the 1990s, was gaining momentum, cultural anxiety regarding aging and feminine power also grew. These anxieties and counter-ideologies drove the previously popular depiction of the impassive, and often cognitively absent, mother.¹²⁵ Servilia, and other mothers on HBO's network, take a more direct role in plot advancement, acting out against patriarchal confines, even at the expense of their own children. From the standpoint of feminist theory standpoint, this transition is reactionary to anti-feminist ideology, especially after the second wave. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn contends:

Concerns about the dangers of essentialized identity categories (such as "woman" or "mother") have caused feminists, especially after the Second Wave, to be wary of universalizing terms that can minimize or conceal the differences among us. This retreat, however, has coincided with a turn in the political sphere towards social conservatism that has increasingly challenged feminism to face and name the injustices suffered by poor women and working women of all classes and races.¹²⁶

Servilia's unorthodox representation as both a Roman woman and a deceitful mother was reflective of the changing sentiments regarding women. *Rome* and *I, Claudius* challenged the boundaries of depicting the feeble mother, but it was *Rome* and Duncan's Servilia that clearly changed modern sentiments of motherhood and individual power.

Servilia's power culminated with Caesar's assassination, and the events leading up to it empowered her more as a modern figure than an ancient woman. Atia and Servilia maintain a fierce rivalry throughout the first season, and it only escalates as Rome's political struggles worsen. In episode ten, "Triumph," Servilia strengthens her resolve against the Julii clan, inserting herself into the fracturing senatorial politics

¹²⁵ Powerful female figures such as Buffy Summers from FOX's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and Regina George from *Mean Girls* (2004) have relatively absent mothers who advance their daughter's independence. For more information, please see: Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011): 5.

¹²⁶ Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *Unruly Girls*, 7.

working against Caesar. While under the guise of recovery after Atia's arranged attack, Servilia secretly creates and distributes an anti-Caesarion pamphlet with the help of Quintus Pompey (the son of Pompey Magnus, Caesar's political rival killed in Egypt), but signed it using her son Brutus' name. In this moment, Servilia echoes the earlier-depicted Livia, putting her own children at risk to advance her own plan. By placing Brutus' name on the pamphlet, she cast her son in a treasonous light and fueled more anti-Caesarion rhetoric among the senators. There are no records of Servilia's involvement in this mass defection, and the exaggeration of her power is more consistent with modern anti-patriarchal ideology than ancient Roman life.¹²⁷

Servilia's influence, although misinterpreted as Brutus' doing, has its intended effect by episode eleven, "The Spoils," Brutus becomes the perceived savior of republican values. Graffiti depicting Brutus killing Caesar appeared all over the city, prompting Caesar to send Brutus to Macedonia. Servilia, perhaps anticipating Caesar's growing imperiousness and his rejection of Brutus, seems unsurprised by Brutus' changing political allegiances. *Rome's* directors highlight Servilia's misperceived involvement in Caesar's assassination in episode twelve, "The Kalends of February," reducing Caesar's death to Servilia's personal motivation as she seemingly becomes the most important conspirator. It is Servilia, not Caesar's infamous defectors, who coordinates the attack – first by recognizing Lucius Vorenus' importance to the plebeians (thereby ensuring his survival), then by using information obtained by Octavia during her

¹²⁷ *Rome*, season 1, episode 10, "Triumph," directed by Alan Taylor, aired November 6, 2005, on HBO, accessed August 18, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

tryst with Octavian, lures Vorenus away from Caesar before the attack.¹²⁸ In the episode, Brutus and the other conspirators meet at Servilia's home to discuss the assassination plot. It is then that they discuss Lucius Vorenus, another main character, as Caesar's bodyguard and the need for his disposal. Servilia, in efforts to both keep Lucius from Caesar yet alive, has her slave inform Lucius of his wife's marital infidelity. There is an apparent polarity in Servilia's characterization once her plan is realized, and in preparation for Caesar's imminent death, she makes a final transition from Roman matron to a malevolent figure.

Alan Taylor, the director for the pivotal episode, depicts Servilia in an especially damning light, even in comparison with the more violent men. *Rome* abandons its duality of nurturing mother and vengeful woman in favor of historically inaccurate narrative that instead harkens to the modern image of a radical feminist, hell-bent on dismantling patriarchal confines. Servilia invites Atia and Octavian to her home as the conspirators work to isolate Caesar on the senate floor, an act of pure intimidation and cold revenge as she informs them of the imminent assassination. Their exchange is more evocative of a modern mob drama rather than on historically based facts, and Servilia's language is perhaps the most directly challenging dialogue from a Roman woman:

Servilia: So you see, the tyrant is dead, the public is restored, and you are alone. Would you like some honey water?

Atia: I won't, thank you.

Servilia: Please don't be afraid. I won't harm you. Not yet.

Atia: Harm? Why would you wish us harm? We've always been great friends. Politics is[sic] for the men – I always –

¹²⁸ *Rome*, season 1, episode 12, "Kalends of February," directed by Alan Taylor, aired November 20, 2005, on HBO, accessed August 18, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

Servilia: Not yet. I will make you suffer slowly. Slowly and deeply, as you made me suffer. First, I want to see you run. Run for your life. Run to some rat hole in Greece or Illyria. Wherever you like. I shall come and find you.¹²⁹

Servilia's abandonment of niceties indicates the perceived extent of her power, as indicated by both Servilia's assumption in the success of the assassination, and by Atia's complete submission. Although Servilia openly threatens the entire Julii family, Atia maintains her social graces and the role of the submissive Roman matron. Taylor juxtaposes Atia's submissiveness with Servilia's newfound power, widening the rift between the contemporary and modern understanding of the Roman woman. Atia embodies the more historical understanding of the Roman woman, as a sexually amoral and scandalous figure. Servilia, however, represents a blend of ancient perceptions and modern ideology to the extent that she becomes a modern woman in an ancient setting.

What is perhaps equally important is young Octavian's reaction to Servilia's threat: though he remained silent, his stare both foreshadowed his future treatment of 'unruly' women as well as embodied the patriarchal reaction, both in the ancient and in the modern context. Historically, the young Octavian eventually would create moral legislation to control Roman women and encourage more traditional marital practices.¹³⁰ *Rome* attributes this occurrence to Servilia and Atia's influence on Octavian's life, but historically it came from a need for a more stable Roman population. Even Antony fails to see Servilia's importance in the following episode, "Passover," until Atia warns him

¹²⁹ *Rome*, season 1, episode 12, "Kalends of February," directed by Alan Taylor, aired November 20, 2005, on HBO, accessed August 19, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

¹³⁰ Gaius, *Institutiones*, 1.194.

about Servilia's extensive influence.¹³¹ In this way, modern feminist ideology permeates into the cinematic depictions, in part as a narrative device and in part as a bridge between two distinct cultures.

Servilia's Anachronistic Death as Feminist Martyrdom

Servilia's ascension is short-lived and speaks to the actual constraints of Roman society. Although she succeeded in coordinating Caesar's murder, she is unable to maintain her control over an especially fragile Brutus, who makes concessions with Antony in the aftermath of the assassination. Her eventual decline is reflective of Roman values regarding emotion – Servilia's desire for revenge against Caesar, and eventually the entire Julii clan, overshadows her rational thought. Atia kidnaps Servilia after a botched assassination attempt, which failed largely due to the hire of the disloyal slave, Duro.¹³² Brutus' death in the episode, "Philippi," severs Servilia's political influence and only male connection to upper Roman society, forcing her (and in a modern context, other radical feminists) to rely on their physical body as a tool of power and expression. The episode entitled, "Death Mask," opens to the Junii household in mourning. Servilia attempts to wear Brutus' *imago* (or, death mask), an expression of a mother's grieving as well as a symbolic yearning to maintain political power in the patriarchal society.

Enraged over Brutus' death, Servilia's angrily proclaims, "no more sleep!" and enacts

¹³¹ *Rome*, season 2, episode 1, "Passover," directed by Tim Van Patten, aired January 14, 2007 on HBO, accessed August 19, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

¹³² The power dynamic between Servilia and Atia remains the same despite Servilia's captivity; Servilia is resilient, directly challenging Atia's perceived authority. Timon, Atia's Jewish henchman, frees Servilia after a particularly cruel torture session. *Rome*, season 2, episode 4, "Testudo et Lepus," directed by Adam Davidson, aired February 4, 2007 on HBO, accessed August 24, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

fidem implorare (“to ask for restitution,”), a ritualistic embodiment of humility and demand for justice.¹³³ Servilia spends two days in front of the Julii home in tattered clothing, and with no food, until Atia meets her in person. Servilia abandons social restrictions on her physical body in the ultimate public display – a ritualistic curse against the Julii family that is not substantiated in the sources, but rather symbolically epitomizes the modern feminist struggle:

Gods below, I am Servilia of the most ancient and sacred Junii, of whose bones the seven hills of Rome are built. I summon you to listen. Curse this woman! Send her bitterness and despair for all of her life. Let her taste nothing but ashes and iron. Gods of the Underworld, all that I have left I give to you in sacrifice, if you will make it so.¹³⁴

Then, without hesitation, Servilia stabs herself in the chest, a fashion similar to Lucretia.¹³⁵ Servilia’s suicide is a final effort for vengeance against Atia, and illustrates the polar stances modern cinematographers took regarding Roman women. Atia, and to a

¹³³ Antony Augoustakis provides a more thorough discussion on the historicity of the ritual, including the significance behind the disheveled, humbling appearance. He concludes that the comparison between Atia’s coiffed persona and Servilia’s impoverished one would shame Atia, both publicly and personally. For more information, please see: Antony Augoustakis, “Effigies of Atia and Servilia: Effacing the Female Body,” in *Screening Antiquity: Rome Season Two: Trial and Triumph*, ed. Monica S. Cyrino (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015): 122-3.

¹³⁴ *Rome*, season 2, episode 7, “Death Mask,” directed by John Mayberry, aired March 4, 2007 on HBO, accessed August 24, 2016, <http://play.hbogo.com/rome>.

¹³⁵ Sextus Tarquinius, one of the nearest successors to the Tarquin throne, made camp with his fellow brothers after a failed siege of Ardea. While making camp, Livy subtly scolds them for their excessive “feasting and carousing among themselves.” During one of their bouts, the princes enter a heated debate over who had the most virtuous wife, in which Tarquinius Collatinus proclaimed his the most worthy. After the group travelled to Rome and saw their wives “feasting and frolicking with their friends,” a practice heavily frowned upon in early monarchical Rome, they sped off to Collatia to find Lucretia hard at work. Tarquinius, enthralled with Lucretia, violates her chastity. In response, Lucretia stabs herself in public as a declaration against the corruption of early Roman monarchy. For the complete story, please see: Livy, *The Founding of Rome*, 66-8.

lesser extent, Octavia's, reaction, represented a more traditional view regarding women: demure, humble, and socially acceptable. Servilia, on the other hand, manifested the extreme measure of anti-patriarchal feminism. Through her vengeful suicide, Servilia relinquishes patriarchal control over her physicality and symbolically warns spectators of the Julii's growing power. Servilia's suicide, while more of a direct act against Atia, also placed a curse on the entire Julii family, effectively cursing the ultimate *paterfamilias* of Rome. Historically, Servilia survives the subsequent political purging after the second triumvirate, her death due to natural causes rather than a heroic suicide.¹³⁶ This disparity between representations highlights the modern influence on historical women; rather than depicting the values of ancient Rome, Servilia is instead a vehicle for modern feminist rhetoric, a more familiar concept to twenty first century audiences.

Critical Reception of HBO's *Rome*

Despite *Rome*'s increasing popularity, and the expansion of its broadcast to international audiences, HBO did not renew it for another season, leaving the narrative at the cusp of Octavian's takeover. The production location in Italy came with an exorbitant cost, and the success of other programs such as *The Sopranos* and *Entourage* made *Rome* a comparable failure. After the public announcement of the series' cancellation in 2007, however, the public maintained mixed reactions over the show. Critics commend HBO for its lavish production costs, a fact that was hard to deny when examining their set designs, but lambast it for its inability to maintain large ratings like other HBO

¹³⁶ Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives*, 247.

productions. *The New York Times* argued that “for all its license and vivid detail, ‘Rome’ never stirred the kind of excitement and devotion that surrounded ‘The Sopranos’ or ‘Sex and the City,’”¹³⁷ an indication that *Rome* had failed partly because of the greater success of completely fictionalized, and more relatable, programming.¹³⁸ *USA Today* commented that *Rome* paled in comparison with *I, Claudius* for its exemplary casting and microcosmic treatment, contending that the series “makes little initial effort to draw an audience into its sprawling story.”¹³⁹ Although other historically-based shows such as *Deadwood* and *Game of Thrones* replaced *Rome*, the short-lived series had a tangible impact on how modern American audiences viewed Roman women.

Rome’s inclusion of atypical relations between class and gender, and perhaps more importantly showcasing how these interactions could have played a role in ancient Roman history, distinguished the series from previous depictions of Roman women. Each woman, whether she was noble like Servilia or enslaved like Eirene, characterized a popular, contemporary perception that reflected the patriarchal control in Rome. Modern

¹³⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, “Friends, Romans, Countrymen, Lovers, Haters, Murderers, Barbarians,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2004, accessed August 1, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/03/opinion/friends-americans-countrymen.html>

¹³⁸ For more reviews on *Rome*, please see: Paul B. Harvey, Jr., review of HBO’s *Rome*, directed by Bruno Heller et al, HBO, “Rome Yet Again,” *Archaeology*, September 6, 2005, accessed August 27, 2016, <http://archive.archaeology.org/online/reviews/hborome/>; Dana Stevens, review of HBO’s *Rome*, directed by Bruno Heller et al, HBO, “Toga Party: HBO’s Rome is an expensively mounted, lovingly researched, snore,” *Slate*, August 26, 2005, accessed August 27, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/surfergirl/2005/08/toga_party.html.

¹³⁹ Robert Bianco, review of HBO’s *Rome*, directed by Bruno Heller et al, HBO, “HBO’s ‘Rome’ burns with realistic depiction of ancient life,” *USA Today*, August 25, 2005, accessed August 25, 2016, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/reviews/2005-08-25-rome_x.htm.

perceptions echo similar values regarding Roman woman and their perceived role in society. The prevalence of feminist rhetoric, however, gives cinematographers a bridge in connecting two distinct cultures. Servilia becomes a figurehead for third wave feminism, both in her historical persona as a widowed Roman matron and in her anti-patriarchal dialogue; while this distorts Servilia's probable influence in her contemporary settings, it does reveal how American filmmakers supplant ancient women into improbable and anachronistic situations.

CONCLUSION: ANCIENT WOMEN AS AGENTS OF MODERN FEMINISM

American cinematographers have transplanted modern values onto ancient Roman women, capitalizing on the lack of attention contemporary authors gave them in efforts to transform their personas for entertainment. All three women examined, Cleopatra, Livia, and Servilia, all exemplify the modern influence on interpreting historical sources, resulting in all three becoming agents of feminism in their own times. Each woman did not culminate the probable influence they had in Roman society, but they are instead reflective of the patriarchal paradigms understood by 20th and 21st century audiences. These anachronisms result in a distorted perception of these women, granting them unlikely power and influence to advance the narrative.

Although Taylor's Cleopatra was not the first cinematic depiction, it was the most telling of how Americans viewed the quintessential 1950s woman: graceful, put-together, and capable of using her charms to seduce the powerful men around her. Taylor's depiction, while much later than the 19th century origins to American feminism, also coincided with the public interpretation of feminist movements. First wave feminism, typified by different women's groups working within the American political system, faced aggressive pushback from conservative legislators.¹⁴⁰ Patriarchal constraints, both

¹⁴⁰ While some of the feminists in the 19th century, such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, focused on suffrage in their initial rhetoric, their methods paved the way for later generations to pursue other goals. For more information, please see: Maureen Moynagh and Nancy Forestell, eds.,

on the historical Cleopatra and, to a certain extent, the modern Taylor, were demonstrative to the struggles influential women faced. Mankiewicz and other cinematographers filled their interpretation of ancient sources with modern dialogue and aesthetic, transforming a historical woman into a figure transcendent of time and culture.

Taylor's hypersexualized depiction coincided with the twentieth century perspective of Roman and Egyptian women in antiquity: as insatiable figures who were the true motivators in their history, propelling political events through careful tact. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963) also established the benchmark for future historical depictions; with its monumental production cost and star-studded cast, Taylor's image would permeate as an American cultural icon, her identity as a powerful and unorthodox woman cemented into the American cinematic conscious. The tumultuous socio-political environment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, would advance American feminism in a new direction, one that would challenge the preconceived notions of feminine influence and exclusionary practices.

The Civil Rights movement and push for racial equality gave feminists, especially black and Hispanic feminists, a platform to discuss workplace equality and reproduction rights. With this social change came a new perspective on how Americans had viewed themselves, especially with the influx of European programming by the British Broadcast Company (BBC). BBC's *I, Claudius* gave American audiences a very different picture of ancient Rome, one that Livia Augusta manipulated for her own bidding, and this

characterization would prove dramatically different from Taylor's flamboyant one. Whereas Cleopatra was the ideal figure for the commercialized 1950s woman, Livia culminated the inclusive nature of second wave feminism, and while there was little change to ethnic diversity in regards to casting, Siân Phillip's depiction of Livia granted power to a little known Roman matron, a far cry from Taylor's seductive Cleopatra.

I, Claudius marked a movement away from monumental productions, instead focusing on the character development and political atmosphere shaped throughout the season. Phillip's depiction, coupled with *I, Claudius*' microcosmic focus, altered how Americans envisioned ancient Rome as well as older women. The extreme situations brought by Livia's lack of maternal instinct questioned how 1970s Americans viewed motherhood, both in antiquity and in their own time. Livia is thus transformed into a conniving and murderous character, radical in her presence and in her dialogue, reflective of modern political and social values in America. Sandra Joshel comments on the impact of Phillip's dialogue for modern cinematography:

Reviewers turn horror at Livia into humor, and their almost patronizing appreciation of Siân Phillips's performance lessens the sting of any allegorical associations with the feminism of the present. *Claudius* tells us that Livia is a "wicked woman," Cooke that she is "a lady of unsleeping malevolence," However, through the knowing eyes of the *New York Times* reviewer, Livia's malevolence becomes "gorgeous," (O'Connor 1977). *Time* reduces Livia to "the wicked witch of the Tiber."¹⁴¹

It is apparent that Phillip's Livia encapsulated nonconformist values that echoed the more radical rhetoric of second wave feminism. Contemporary historians and modern filmmakers alike categorize Phillip's Livia into a strict duality of dotting mother and evil

¹⁴¹ Joshel, *Imperial Projections*, 149.

villainess, a characterization that reflects the popular perception of women. These characterizations, while condensing the importance of historical women like Livia, also create a relatable environment of patriarchal resistance, especially in the continuing momentum of modern feminism.

The liberal ideology of second wave feminism persisted into the American cultural conscious, perpetuating an image of the unruly woman fighting against conservative values. Cleopatra and Livia manifested these beliefs as dichotomous representations, but Duncan's portrayal of Servilia in HBO's *Rome* blended these depictions to become an identifiable feminist figure in the 21st century. Duncan's characterization of the Roman matron was an amalgamation of Livia's wiles and Cleopatra's sexuality, resulting in a very modern interpretation of ancient Roman women as sexually independent and constants of history. Unlike *Cleopatra* (1963) and *I, Claudius*, *Rome* gave more agency to its female characters by largely centering on their interactions outside the typical Roman exchanges. HBO approached ancient Rome with the most inclusive approach, featuring class interactions perhaps neglected by earlier renditions. Economic status and social mobility dictated how *Rome*'s female characters progressed through the series, and their reliance (or lack thereof) on the surrounding men shaped their 21st century depictions.

Rome marked a cinematic departure from traditional predictions of the ancient world, challenging the traditional and elitist 'sword and sandal' approach in favor of highlighting the unpredictable nature of high politics. Unlike previous depictions, which echoed the popular top-down approach to history, *Rome* presents history in a non-linear

fashion, attributing pivotal events to chance accidents. This difference assigns more influence to seemingly unimportant people in Roman society, including women and slaves, intertwining social aspects that previously were neglected by cinematographers. HBO's innovative approach to depicting the ancient world spoke to the modern social movements sweeping 1990s and 2000s America, especially the most recent resurgence in feminist scholarship.

For Americans, third wave feminism was a reaction to social concerns regarding the degrading environment and the stigmatization of non-mainstream sexuality. Third wave feminism also challenges the essentialist rhetoric of the previous two waves, criticizing over-generalizations as non-representative of the diverse American population. HBO reflected this school of thought in its various depictions of Roman women, taking special care to establish a narrative that focused on the influence each woman had. Servilia, perhaps the most complex of the women depicted, echoed modern values that spoke out against patriarchal paradigms and ageist rhetoric. A large part of *Rome's* narrative revolves around the idea that Servilia, a widowed Roman matron, manipulated the powerful men around her to bring down Caesar, an anachronistic occurrence that makes Servilia equally important to the politics and war commonly recognized.

The classical world remains as a popular film subject, both for Americans and international audiences. While centuries separate cinematographers from this subject matter, there are inherent similarities between the political fracturing of ancient Rome and the tumultuous global events of the 20th century. The women implicated in the changing Roman politick, while largely unaccounted for or ambiguous, become an

important plot device for filmmakers to advance narrative. Women such as Cleopatra, Livia, and Servilia become historical figures transplanted into modern situations, contributing to the link cinematographers create between antiquity and the present. Taylor and Phillips embodied two of the common characterizations for historical women, easily recognizable as the classic seductress and deft manipulator, respectively. Servilia, the least present in the historical accounts, received the most creative reinterpretation of the all three figures, resulting in a noteworthy blend of not only historical figures, but also of modern values.

The burgeoning feminist ideologies of the 20th century would influence the depictions of each character in an anachronistic fashion, distorting the actual control such figures had in history. The extent of these distortions was more specifically reflective to the feminist rhetoric at the time of the film's production, even affecting the casting of each woman. While Taylor's Cleopatra capitalized on youth and sexuality as tools of powers, Phillips' Livia emphasized age and experience to advance in patriarchal Rome. Servilia, however, was an older matron who had both the experience and the sexuality to control those around her. While each figure approached it in very distinct methods, their common goal of changing Roman politics was reflective of the continued (and relatively unchanged) perception of ancient Roman women: as intelligent, yet dangerous, figures that served to derail patriarchal Roman politics.

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