The Depiction of Slavery in Ancient World Television Drama: Politics, Culture and Society.

Thesis

How to cite:


For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2019 The Author

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Redacted Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.000111e7

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
The Depiction of Slavery in Ancient World
Television Drama: Politics, Culture and Society

Claire Elizabeth Greenhalgh

Thesis submitted to The Open University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS)
The Open University
March 2020

(Some of the content has been removed/redacted for copyright reasons, primarily images taken from the film and TV texts cited in this thesis).
Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that is has not been previously submitted to the Open University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.
Abstract

This thesis examines the reception of Roman slavery in recent ancient world television drama through one primary text, Starz’s Spartacus (2010-13) and what it reveals about the way we conceptualise ancient slavery in this under-researched medium. Applying a key tenet of reception theory, namely that fictional works set in the past potentially yield insight into the concerns of the present, it explores how the series’ representation of slavery reflects contemporary issues around gender, sexuality, race, identity, status and power. My comparative methodology comprises an in-depth character and thematic analysis of the series and other recent onscreen slave narratives.

It shows that the series is subject to a range of influences, from modern popular culture to aspects of the classical sources. However, commercial imperatives still drive the selection and appropriation of material. This explains the ubiquity of certain tropes generic to the cable industry, namely graphic sexual content and violence, and enslaved women in particular are portrayed almost exclusively through the lens of sexual slavery. Since the series is about a slave rebellion, it privileges the most brutal aspects of slavery and portrays the institution as inherently dehumanising, violent and disempowering. This study also shows that the series can be situated within a wider tradition of representing slavery onscreen, while the moral ambivalence of servile characters, behaviour and attitudes not only reflects more complex modern TV narratives, but also indicates a desire to differentiate the series culturally and politically from the legacy of the famous 1960 film. Finally, by using slavery to explore themes such as the abuse of power, the importance of liberty and
resistance, and the implications of denying bodily and sexual agency and rights, it encourages audiences to reflect upon injustices in their own societies.
Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Joanna Paul, Dr Trevor Fear and Dr Tony Keen for their support, advice and guidance over the five years that it has taken me to complete this study. Secondly, the CHASE DTP consortium which generously funded the final eighteen months, thereby easing the financial struggles which characterised the early period of my studies. And finally, the wonderful staff on the Open University Document Delivery team who sourced so many of the essential books and articles which made this thesis project possible.
Table of Contents

Chapter One:
Introduction .............................................................................................................8

Chapter Two:
The Modern Slave Narrative and the Problematisation of Resistance ..........35

Chapter Three:
The Uses and Abuses of Slave Sexuality ......................................................72

Chapter Four:
The Slave Body: Shaming, Naming and Maiming .......................................119

Chapter Five:
The Problematisation of Servile Violence in *Spartacus* .........................154

Chapter Six:
Slavery and Race in *Spartacus*: The Complication of a Tradition ..........184

Chapter Seven:
Slavery: The Roman Perspective .................................................................230

Conclusion ...........................................................................................................277
Bibliography…………………………………………………………………284

Appendix: List of Spartacus Episodes and Main Characters………………..361
Chapter One

Introduction

Among my earliest memories of engagement with antiquity are watching the heroic Judah suffering the dehumanising indignity and pain of unjust servitude in *Ben-Hur* (1959), or the romanticised relationship between the lovely slave Eunice and her master Petronius in *Quo Vadis* (1951) on television in the late 1970s. Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960), with its stirring tale of slavery and rebellion, was also an eagerly watched Sunday afternoon tradition in that now distant era of three channel television. It is from these experiences, later supplemented by the more recent TV adaptations which comprise the primary case studies for this thesis, that my interest in the onscreen depiction of slavery in the ancient world first began. However, I was also dimly aware that they were not representations of real Roman servitude, but, rather, constructed to make me either sympathetic to these victims of Roman persecution and brutality, or to side with characters who treated slaves humanely. While studying for my MA in Classics, I began to realise how far the Hollywood version of the past, and its depiction of slavery, deviated from the known facts as they have been transmitted to us from antiquity and I was keen to understand more fully the various political, social and cultural agendas shaping these dramatic re-configurations of the ancient world. I was particularly intrigued by what these screen texts had emphasised, excluded, adapted, misappropriated or simply re-written to appeal, and make their stories relevant, to a contemporary film or television audience. Consequently, I have long been interested in the way we receive
history in a society where visual media increasingly play such a prominent role in shaping and entrenching popular assumptions about the past.

The idea that fictional historical works set in the past provide a lens through which contemporary concerns, anxieties and agendas can be explored, problematised and discussed is widely acknowledged,¹ and television is no exception. This thesis investigates how recent television drama uses Roman slavery as a conduit for illuminating various issues important to the receiving culture. My central research questions are: what are the main contemporary social, cultural, political, industrial, and historical influences, agendas and priorities shaping which version of Roman slavery appears on screen? And in what ways does the theme of Roman slavery ‘speak’ to modern TV audiences, and at this particular juncture in time? Ancient slavery has been explored in several film and TV dramas set in antiquity in recent years, for instance *Gladiator* (2000), *Boudicca* (2003), *Spartacus* (2004), *Empire* (2005), *Rome* (2005-7), *Agora* (2008), *The Eagle* (2011), *Spartacus* (2010-13), *Pompeii* (2014), and *Ben-Hur* (2016). These examples all incorporate slave narratives to an extent, but I use as my primary case study the Starz TV series *Spartacus* (2010-13), not only because it features an unprecedented cast of slave characters, but it is also the most ambitious version of the Spartacus story (where, for most audiences, classical slavery arguably begins and ends) to appear onscreen.

It has been claimed that television is now the world’s foremost democratic medium for both visual entertainment and the transmission of popular culture in the modern

For many, television drama may represent their only contact with history in an accessible and enjoyable way. The long-form serial television format also boasts numerous advantages, particularly over its sister medium, film. As Andrew Elliott argues:

The greater space afforded to individual character development, the interconnecting storylines which reflect the complexities of historical events…all afford the television series more space than cinema to reflect a heightened form of realism and authenticity in depicting human interactions.3

The television scholar Glenn Creeber goes further, arguing that the medium is ideally suited for dramatising large-scale historical narratives: ‘in terms of history the broad sweep of the television serial offers a narrative potential that the feature film and the single play can never quite achieve’.4 Arguably no better sign that contemporary TV drama has ‘arrived’ is the wildly successful series Game of Thrones being written about in the hallowed London Review of Books as a serious piece of social and political commentary on the modern age.5 Yet, despite the medium’s structural advantages (namely more intense and complex depiction of human emotions, experience and relationships than is permitted by shorter-form film), influence, popularity and global reach, ancient world television drama remains under-studied within the sub-discipline of classical receptions, particularly when compared to film which continues to attract scholarly attention.6

---

2 Spigel and Olssen, 2004: 1; Butler, 2012: 3.
4 Creeber, 2005: 7. See also Landsberg on the advantages of the long-form serial which ‘enables them to represent [historical] change over time’ (2012: 108).
6 See pp. 20-21 below.
The topic of the reception of classical slavery is even more neglected. Indeed, to
date, there has not been a single book-length study of the depiction of ancient slavery
in either film or television drama. This gap in published research is therefore one
clear justification for my own study, but it is also underpinned by other, more urgent
cultural, political and social reasons which make this topic worth studying at this
particular moment. The way we conceptualise and value notions of liberty and
equality in contemporary western society have become vital questions, particularly
in the wake of Occupy Wall Street and other grassroots protests, for instance the
Greek *Indignados* or Spanish *M-15 Movement*, which sprang up in 2011 against the
power and influence of an unaccountable global financial elite (the so-called ‘1%’) and
the perceived erosion of democratic values which accompanied it. These were
disparate movements, but they were united by ‘a general feeling that the system is
rigged in favor of the privileged’.

Another contemporary movement that underpins some of these cultural responses is
*Black Lives Matter*. Established in 2013 by three black activists in response to a
spate of killings of unarmed black men by white police officers, it also began to gain
traction around the same time that these slavery texts appeared. Indeed, the 2016 TV
remake of *Roots* was interpreted by one critic as a ‘spikily relevant’ miniseries for
the ‘Black Lives Matter era’. Although these movements might postdate the
production of the series, it is still being watched today and they are therefore all part
of the same cultural moment. Finally, we must not discount the ‘Obama’ factor. The

---

7 On the movement’s aims see Van Gelder, 2011; Gitlin, 2012.
9 Gilbert, 2016.
election of the first mixed race American president in 2008 may have played a role in helping to bring these stories of barbarism and resistance to the small screen, as Americans are forced to reflect upon their own shameful slave past and its ongoing legacy in contemporary race relations. I will be exploring some of these issues in more depth at key points in this thesis, particularly in the chapter on race.

Contemporary popular culture has, in part, responded to these developments with a plethora of media ‘slave’ narratives which both champion and problematise the primacy of political and individual freedom, social justice and human rights in contemporary society. By reflecting upon a time when the oppression and exploitation of one group by another was sanctioned by law and custom, these dramas potentially sharpen awareness of and outrage at the injustices and inequalities in our own societies. Much of this media interest has focused on the topic of American slavery. In the period 2012 to 2016 no fewer than seven films on this topic appeared in cinemas: *Django Unchained* (2012), *Lincoln* (2013), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Freedom* (2014), *The Keeping Room* (2014), *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) and *Free State of Jones* (2016). In the same short period, the iniquities of the British slave system were also dramatised in *Belle* (2013). Partly influenced by the success of these films, television has also responded more recently with several stories about American slavery, for instance *The Book of Negroes* (2015), *Roots* (2016), a brutal remake of the seminal 1977 television series, and *Underground* (2016-17) about the escape of a group of slaves from a brutal southern plantation led

---

10 In 2019, *Harriet* was released, about the female slave fugitive Harriet Tubman who leads other slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad. It is a very strong resistance narrative. *The Long Song*, adapted from Andrea Levy’s 2010 novel about British slavery in Jamaica and focusing on servile agency and resistance, premiered on the BBC in 2018.

11 Although not strictly a ‘slave’ film, the futuristic *Elysium* (2013) also explored the theme of the disenfranchised underdog and widespread social inequality that Occupy tapped into.
by a strong and resistant black hero figure, Noah. All represent the horrors of slavery in graphic detail, privileging the viewpoint of the black slaves and their courage, agency, and above all, strong desire to resist. This spate of works is particularly significant since up to the appearance of these recent examples, slavery has not recently been explored in television drama, suggesting how relevant these stories about oppression, resistance and liberation have become for contemporary audiences.  

Slave narratives have also been popular in other genres: fantasy dramas (often heavily influenced by ancient and medieval history, such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-19), fictionalised early modern worlds (*The Last Kingdom*, 2016-), the New World (*Black Sails*, 2014-17), futuristic dystopias (*The Hunger Games*, 2010-15 and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 2017-), as well as other science fiction (*Westworld*, 2016-). Other recent productions may not feature an explicit slave narrative, but still highlight the importance of individual agency, political or national independence and resistance to oppression and injustice. These include the films *King Arthur* (2004) and *Robin Hood* (2010), the BBC TV series *Robin Hood* (2006-9), and the multi-award winning HBO miniseries about the American War of Independence, *John Adams* (2008). The human desire for liberty can easily be read as a universal concept and

---

12 Most date from the 1970s/80s and include *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman* (1974), *Roots* (1977) and *Solomon Northrup’s Odyssey* (1984). They coincided with a raft of so-called ‘slavesploitation’ films such as *Slaves* (1969) and *Mandingo* (1975). It is claimed that these early TV works were a response to the 1960s Civil Rights movement and black Americans’ desire to represent their own past (Creeber, 2004: 23).

13 This featured a strong modern rights influenced agenda, with the oppressed medieval serfs compared to slaves.

14 The story of Robin Hood as scourge of the corrupt ruling classes continues to appeal to filmmakers (if not audiences). There was a recent, poorly received 2018 film.

‘unchallenged as the supreme value of the Western world’,\textsuperscript{16} and so appealing to filmmakers and audiences alike. However, although it may be a self-evident virtue, it is certainly not a guaranteed fact of human life. And therefore, when threats against it seem more visible, especially in the form of political threats/social injustice, rather than actual deprivation of liberty, movements such as Occupy and BLM spring up, and contemporary popular culture responds accordingly. This recent spate of slave narratives and the arrival of a new Spartacus around the same time, suggests that the universal struggle for freedom is very much part of the contemporary moment.

Indeed, while this thesis is concerned with the reception of Roman slavery, I acknowledge that the desire for liberty (\textit{libertas}) is a recurring theme in all slavery narratives and, crucially, under Roman law freeborn and slave status were fundamentally entwined: ‘The principal distinction made by the law of persons is this, that all human beings are either free men or slaves’ (Justinian \textit{Institutes}, 1.9). Freedom was also seen as central to the 1960 film’s political messages,\textsuperscript{17} while the idea of liberty is regarded as integral to American self-identity.\textsuperscript{18} Although, in antiquity as in the present-day, a definitive working definition of freedom remains elusive,\textsuperscript{19} it is fundamental to discussions of slavery, and the exploration of why these ‘liberation tales’ are so compelling to modern audiences. Therefore, this thesis engages throughout with the way freedom intersects with and drives the slave narrative.

\textsuperscript{16} Patterson, 1991: ix.
\textsuperscript{17} Winkler, 2007b: 53.
\textsuperscript{18} Patterson, 1991: ix. See also Foner, 1998: xiii-xxii.
\textsuperscript{19} Brunt, 1988: 283 argues that freedom was ‘better experienced than defined’. For definitions of Roman political liberty, see Wirszubski, 1950 and more recently Arenas, 2013. The only book length study of liberty in popular culture I have found is Cantor, 2012 but it is about libertarian values, rather than liberty as such, although his statement ‘centrality’ of freedom ‘in the experience of the American people and their great experiment in democratic life’ (ix) resonates with his recent spate of slave narratives.
There are many differences between and within these various slave narratives, whether in terms of setting, focus and purpose. The characters have contrasting motivations for resisting, and are not always either virtuous or heroic, with complex and ambivalent attitudes towards liberty and servitude, which this thesis will tease out and investigate. However, what unites them is the notion that audiences need to believe that men and women suffering under oppressive and unjust regimes resist/resisted and asserted their rights as individuals regardless of their particular historical or social circumstances. This portrayal of resistance to oppression and slavery as somehow a timeless, continuous aspect of the human character is crucial to understanding the appeal of these productions, particularly in periods of social, political or cultural tension and uncertainty. As Creeber notes of Roots, these TV series have the ability ‘to translate and humanise historical facts for a contemporary audience’.\footnote{Creeber, 2004: 29.} In this thesis, I investigate how recent television drama uses ancient (specifically Roman) slavery as a conduit for illuminating some of these concerns.\footnote{Greek slavery (Greece is one of the five attested historical slave societies, Finley, 1980: 79-82), simply hasn’t appeared onscreen. Even the recent TV series Atlantis (2012-15) didn’t feature identifiable slave characters.}

**Spartacus and Other Depictions of Ancient Slavery**

As one of the ‘most extensive and enduring’ slave systems in history,\footnote{Harper, 2011: 3.} the importance of slavery to Rome is undisputed.\footnote{Harper and Scheidel, 2018: 95.} While accurate data on the slave population are hard to come by, it is claimed that between 20 to 40% of the population of Roman Italy consisted of slaves,\footnote{Scheidel, 2005: 64-65.} and the number of slaves per head

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Creeber, 2004: 29.
\item Greek slavery (Greece is one of the five attested historical slave societies, Finley, 1980: 79-82), simply hasn’t appeared onscreen. Even the recent TV series Atlantis (2012-15) didn’t feature identifiable slave characters.
\item Harper, 2011: 3.
\item Harper and Scheidel, 2018: 95.
\item Scheidel, 2005: 64-65.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
of population far surpassed anything seen in the New World. Yet, until recently, this significance has rarely been widely represented in the ancient world onscreen. Obviously, slaves were central characters in the 1960 Kubrick/Douglas *Spartacus*, and this film has proven instrumental in shaping popular perceptions of Roman slavery (as I explore in greater detail in chapter two).26 There was also a 2004 network TV miniseries *Spartacus*, starring Goran Visnjic as Spartacus, but dismissed (somewhat unfairly) as a ‘pallid’ reworking of its ‘majestic’ predecessor,27 it is little known today except as a point of comparison for scholars studying the wider reception of Spartacus onscreen.28 Beyond these Spartacus stories, slaves have usually played very minor or supporting roles and often carry little narrative significance. *Quo Vadis?* (1951) featured a female slave Eunice, there was Basil in *The Silver Chalice* (1954), and the swiftly manumitted Esther in *Ben-Hur* (1959), but cinema has tended to focus predominantly on the lives of Roman characters, or refracted the slaves’ experiences through their owners’ narratives.29 Television has followed suit, frequently casting slaves in supporting roles in various recent TV movies, from *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1984), to *Julius Caesar* (2002), *Empire* (2005), *Rome* (2005-7) and *Ben-Hur* (2010), but never as leading characters and, with the exception of one or two characters in *Rome* and Athene in *Ben-Hur*, rarely depicted with much nuance or complexity.

25 Lenski, 2018: 141. This significance is reflected in other genres. Robert Harris’s trilogy of novels on the life of Cicero (*Imperium*, 2006; *Lustrum*, 2009; and *Dictator*, 2015) as narrated by his competent slave secretary Tiro appeared around the same time. While Jerry Toner’s irreverent but well researched ‘manual for managing slaves’ (2014) was published shortly after the end of the Starz series. Slavery is ‘in vogue’.

26 *Spartacus* has enjoyed a healthy onscreen afterlife in Italian cinema, as well as the 1950s/60s peplum tradition. See Wyke (1997: 41-56) for a comprehensive analysis.

27 Lowry, 2004. He didn’t like the Starz series either, although acknowledged that it had improved by the final season (2013).


29 Blanshard and Shahabudin see Eunice as a device for redeeming her Roman master and lover Petronius (2011: 41).
By 2005, TV began to take a greater interest in the representation of Roman slavery. Although swiftly manumitted, one of the leading characters in the six-part ABC series *Empire* (2005), a sympathetic account of the rise of Octavian/Augustus, is the freedman Tyrannus. In the same year, the successful HBO/BBC series *Rome* was broadcast, an ambitious attempt to recreate what one scholar describes as the ‘multivalent fabric of Rome’. While the series follows the tradition of many 1970s-80s TV mini-series, and devotes considerable space to the sexual depravities and political lives of the corrupt Roman elite, the series has been noted for its unusual focus on the lower social orders. This means that several well-rounded slave characters also feature, and even play important supporting, if not necessarily decisive, roles, in the narrative.

Where these earlier texts featured more slave characters with narrative agency than in the past, it was the multi season Starz’s *Spartacus* which transformed the portrayal of Roman slaves onscreen. Filmed in New Zealand with an unknown and largely local cast, *Spartacus* was created by Stephen S. DeKnight, best known for his work on the cult TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), who also served as executive producer and lead writer (or showrunner) for the series. First shown in the United States on the American cable premium channel Starz in January 2010, and later aired on various networks around the world, including Channel 5 in the

---

30 A derivative and highly fictionalised work based heavily on *Gladiator* (2000), the DVD version has been renamed *Rome: Blood and Sand*, an obvious desire to exploit the success of HBO’s *Rome* and the first season of Starz’s *Spartacus*.

31 Cyrino, 2008: 3.


33 Lockett, 2010.

34 For background on the series, see Augoustakis and Cyrino, 2016: 1-8.
UK, it comprised three seasons of between 10-13 episodes. *Blood and Sand* (2010) charts the early years of Spartacus’s enslavement, culminating in the historical gladiatorial uprising at Lentulus Batiatus’s *ludus*. The final two seasons, *Vengeance* (2012) and *War of the Damned*, (2013) focus on the formation of the slave rebel army, its divisions and rivalries, as well as military victories, and conclude with annihilation at the hands of Crassus’s superior Roman forces at Lucania in 71 BCE (in which Spartacus is also killed). Additionally, in order to allow the Welsh actor who played Spartacus, Andy Whitfield, the chance to recover from cancer,\(^{35}\) there was a 6-episode prequel *Gods of the Arena* (2011) (henceforth GoTA). It explores the early years of the *ludus* prior to Spartacus’s arrival, and features the backstories of several of the series’ major supporting slave characters, notably Crixus, Oenomaus, Gannicus and Naevia. Although ‘out of sync’ with the rest of the narrative, GoTA gives vital context to these other slave characters, who feature heavily in this analysis, and is important for understanding the series’ portrayal of slavery beyond Spartacus.

Starz’s *Spartacus* is an ideal text for this study of slavery in recent television drama for several reasons. Firstly, regardless of its negative critical reception (with a few notable exceptions,\(^{36}\) this ‘gory low-rent spectacle’ and ‘early - and leading - candidate for worst series of the decade’\(^{37}\) was savaged by television critics), narrow focus on the male gladiatorial experience and obsession with graphic violence, sex and nudity, *Spartacus* is the first major and extended televisual reception of Roman

\(^{35}\) Sadly Whitfield died and the New Zealand actor Liam McIntyre was re-cast in the role for the final two seasons.

\(^{36}\) McGee, 2010; Ryan, 2012.

servitude. As one might expect from a multi-season TV series, its ambition dwarfs its predecessors. Whereas the running time of the film and mini-series came to just over three hours, *Spartacus* comprises over 40 hours of television drama and features an impressive cast of fictional and historical slave characters. Secondly, although it concluded six years ago (at the time of writing), it continues to find new audiences and is widely available on digital and streaming channels such as Netflix, potentially influencing perceptions of Roman slavery for a new generation of television viewers.

Thirdly, unprecedented screen time is devoted to the interior lives and experiences of the slave characters which goes far beyond anything attempted in earlier series, including HBO’s *Rome*. Slaves are not mere cyphers, narrative tools or token, passive and usually virtuous, victims of oppression and injustice, but fleshed out, nuanced and sometimes morally ambivalent individuals. Furthermore, whereas the 1960 film (still an important cultural benchmark for popular perceptions of Roman slavery), concentrated exclusively on the life and character of Spartacus, this production is unusual in that it partially displaces narrative attention away from the titular hero towards other, previously overlooked slave characters, many of them attested slave leaders cited in the historical sources. Indeed, I argue that it is the stories and experiences of these fictional and historical characters that reveals most about the series’ portrayal of slavery because they do not have to carry the ‘baggage’ of the Spartacan reception history. Fourthly, *Spartacus* permits analysis of the impact of the unregulated cable television model on the representation of slavery, when compared against its network-produced predecessors, an important consideration, as the media scholarship has recognised.38 Finally, the series provides

---

38 Elliott, 2015.
an opportunity to revisit the modern reception of an enduring popular icon, Spartacus. The extended treatment given to this familiar story of struggle and rebellion offers unique insights into how we view antiquity, Roman society and the place of slavery within it.

The sheer volume of material for analysis in the Starz series, and more importantly, the centrality of Spartacus to the modern understanding of classical slavery, make concentrating primarily on *Spartacus* the most effective approach to this thesis. However, this does not entail a complete downgrading of other recent TV series, most notably HBO’s *Rome*. Although there is a lack of consistent grounds for comparison with all aspects of the Starz series’ depiction of slavery, *Rome* precedes the Starz production by only three to five years, features a wide range of slave ‘types’ and offers a significantly contrasting representation of slavery (it is not about slave rebellion). It is also, like *Spartacus*, a prime example of the cable TV model which, as this thesis will show, is fundamental to understanding how the Starz series portrays the institution. For these reasons *Rome* constitutes a useful, indeed essential, comparator text to *Spartacus*, and will be cited at relevant stages throughout.

**Reviewing the Scholarship**

As noted earlier, television drama remains a comparatively understudied medium in classical reception studies. Where it does appear, it is frequently found in works which continue to devote more space to film, or, more recently, under the

---

39 His background, historical context and cultural reception will feature in chapter two.
collective rubric ‘onscreen’.\textsuperscript{41} Topics for discussion are wide-ranging, for instance sexuality,\textsuperscript{42} science fiction,\textsuperscript{43} the reception of mythical figures,\textsuperscript{44} and the appropriation of classical motifs in contemporary American television series.\textsuperscript{45} In general, contributions are usually short, comprising either stand-alone chapters within wider studies or isolated articles in a diverse range of publications, both classical and non-classical. Furthermore, the analysis can be superficial, at times consisting of useful but largely unoriginal summaries of prior and current scholarship, particularly in the multi-authored Blackwell and Cambridge Companions series.\textsuperscript{46}

That said, there have been two notable recent and welcome contributions to the discipline. The first is Ancient Greece on British Television (2018). Edited by the classicists Fiona Hobden and Amanda Wrigley, it includes chapters on documentaries,\textsuperscript{47} as well as science fiction,\textsuperscript{48} and the use of Greek drama in education.\textsuperscript{49} The second is TV Antiquity: Swords, Sandals and Blood (2019) by the media scholar Sylvie Magerstädt, which was published in the latter stages of the write up period of my thesis. It usefully explores how film and television culture influences the type of antiquity replicated onscreen, offering detailed textual, social, cultural and political analysis of several UK and US series, some of them previously

\textsuperscript{41} Specifically, Maurice, 2017; Augoustakis and Raucci, 2018; Safran, 2018.
\textsuperscript{42} Augoustakis, 2013; Raucci, 2013; Strong, 2013.
\textsuperscript{43} Hobden, 2009; Tomasso, 2015; Kovacs, 2015.
\textsuperscript{44} Blondell, 2005; Potter, 2018b; Magerstädt, 2019: 127-141.
\textsuperscript{45} Early and Kennedy, 2003; Futrell, 2003; James, 2008; Potter, 2008; Jenkins, 2015; Strong, 2018.
\textsuperscript{46} Kallendorf, 2007 (no chapter on television); Stray and Hardwick, 2008; Pomeroy, 2017.
\textsuperscript{47} Hobden, 2018; Foka, 2018; Wyver, 2018.
\textsuperscript{48} Keen, 2018; Potter, 2018a.
\textsuperscript{49} Wrigley, 2018.
marginalised or ignored in the extant literature. Although cinema continues to dominate studies of the reception of popular culture, these works dedicated to the small screen attest to growing scholarly interest in the way the television medium represents the ancient world.

Over the past few years there has been more substantive scholarship on Rome and Spartacus. While this attention is unsurprising given the length of these texts compared with their miniseries predecessors, it is still comparatively limited and unambitious in scope. Initial studies appeared in the form of isolated journal articles, or comparatively short essays in multi-authored anthologies on other themes such as ancient warfare, representations of gender and sexuality, video games, or studies of heroism in the sword and sandal genre. The scholarship has since been supplemented by the publication of four edited volumes exclusively devoted to these series, three of which appeared after I began this research project. Rome has been the subject of two book-length collections, History Makes Television (2008) on season one and Trial and Triumph (2015) on season two, both edited by the prolific American classicist Monica Cyrino, a key figure in the study of media classical receptions who has published widely on both film and television.

---

50 Case studies include early works such as The Caesars (1968), Eagle of the Ninth (1977), the perennial favourite I, Claudius (1979), and The Last Days of Pompeii (1984), as well as more recent works notably Rome and Spartacus, important texts for this project.
51 A recent work I have not had opportunity to read, Screening Divinity (Maurice, 2019), contains a section on Troy: Fall of a City (BBC, 2018); however, most of the chapters are still devoted to film. See also Davies, 2019 on the depiction of allegory and warfare in blockbusters set in antiquity. Gloyn’s 2019 wide-ranging study of classical monsters in popular culture offers a more promising balance between the two media, with two TV based chapters.
52 Ragalie; 2006; Locket, 2010; Elliott, 2013; Foka, 2015b.
53 duBois, 2016.
55 Simmons, 2011.
56 Elliott, 2011.

In none of the compilations cited above is there a chapter specifically devoted to slavery, although the topic appears on the margins of wider discussions around various subjects, including status, gender, class, sexuality and violence, some of

---

57 It does however explore a range of themes including sexuality, gender and the body, violence, spaces, class and - inevitably - the media reception of *Spartacus.*
58 Harrison, 2017; Magerstädt, 2019: 66-87.
59 These texts have attracted some interest. For instance, Goodman, 2012 on *Imperium*. Fotheringham, 2012 on Cicero and Futrell, 2008 on Caesar in *Empire*. O’Brien, 2014 discusses race in the 2004 *Spartacus*. Maurice, 2017 briefly explores the depiction of Rome in *Chelmsford* and contemporary political and social issues in *Plebs* in her useful overview of onscreen comedy. Until recently, Solomon, 2008 offered the most comprehensive historical overview of ancient world television prior to *Rome* and *Spartacus*, although its broad sweep means that it is inevitably short on analysis. It has since been superseded by Magerstädt’s 2019 book length study of antiquity on television cited above.
which this thesis builds upon and expands into hitherto unexplored avenues.

Margaret Toscano and Kirsten Day are the only two scholars to engage in any meaningful way with the depiction of slavery in Rome. In ‘Gowns and Gossip: Gender and Class Struggle in Rome’ and ‘Class, Chaos, and Control in Rome’, Toscano draws useful attention to the shadowy presence of slaves in Roman society, as well as the inter-dependent relationships between masters and slaves and the different ways that slave characters highlight notions of power and class.60 However, her analysis is limited by a wide-ranging, and inevitably superficial, focus which includes characters and themes other than slavery. Kirsten Day’s ‘Windows and Mirrors: Illuminating the Invisible Women’ on lower class women is probably the most useful of these chapter based contributions, since it gives the series’ most fleshed out slave characters Gaia and Eirene equal parity with their freeborn counterparts.61 For instance, she draws attention to the way slavery is used to highlight the fluidity and precariousness of social status within the Roman society depicted onscreen, an important theme in these onscreen portrayals of slavery, which I develop further in my own work. Otherwise, similar to Toscano’s study, the slavery sections, while insightful, are constrained by attempts to include as much detail on other, freeborn characters. There is no significant scholarship on slavery in series other than Rome and Spartacus besides very brief mentions.62

Given its subject matter, and the presence of several major slave characters, the literature on slavery in Spartacus is more extensive than on Rome. However, it is

60 Toscano, 2008: 157-161; 2015: 49.
still widely disseminated across a range of books and journal articles, and focuses on a narrow range of topics with considerable thematic overlap between and within the scholarship. Subsequent chapters of this thesis will engage in detail with most of the current work so I offer only a brief overview of the key themes here. Although the Cornelius and Augoustakis/Cyrino volumes cover a wide range of topics, there is surprisingly little directly concerned with slavery. The most important and widely studied theme is the depiction of gender and sexuality. These are also popular subjects in contemporary TV studies, which suggests that scholars working in modern popular culture have a wider interest in drawing out these particular themes. Nevertheless, the literature still offers only a partial view of sexuality as it relates to slavery in the series, and, while it provides direction, leaves questions unanswered that merit treatment at length and in detail. The most widely examined sub-theme (which I also identified independently in my own research) is the use of the naked and objectified slave body to symbolise slaves’ lack of status and sexual vulnerability. Much of the existing scholarly commentary is limited to the same narrow claims, notably around the series’ frequent (and comparatively unusual) use of full-frontal male nudity to underscore slaves’ disempowerment. However, although important, this focus marginalises other perspectives, for example the equally ubiquitous, but the much less studied female nudity, and what this means for the wider depiction of gender in slavery. There are many other unexplored issues relating to slave sexuality and the body, for instance identity, commodification and

63 Two recent publications on *Game of Thrones* explore the depiction of women and sexuality in the series Frankel, 2014; Schubart and Gjelsvik, 2016. Masculinity has been widely, almost obsessively studied in recent years, particularly in American television. Texts include Feasey, 2008; Lotz, 2014; O’Brien, 2014; Baker, 2015; Albrecht, 2015. For British period drama, see Taddeo, Leggott and Byrne, 2018. Lotz, 2006 is one of the few to look at women.

dehumanisation, as well as inconsistencies in series’ praised depiction of ‘equal’ male sexual relationships,\footnote{Cyrino, 2014: 626; Pierce, 2018: 155-158, 166-167.} which these prior studies on the sexualised body do not directly address.

Furthermore, while the sexualised body is an important signifier of the power imbalance which lies at the heart of the master/slave relationship, it is only one component of the series’ extensive depiction of the servile body. There is virtually nothing in the current literature on the physical slave body as a site for the expression of this power disparity, notably the use of collars, chains, branding, violence and other typical ‘servile’ motifs, and I explore these features at length as well as their role in the wider onscreen slave narrative tradition. There is some literature on the series’ ubiquitous use of sexual violence in the portrayal of slavery, and rape is discussed in two useful, certainly wide-ranging but inevitably superficial chapters.\footnote{Strong, 2013; 2016.} However, as with much of the scholarship, these studies tend to adopt a broad perspective, focusing on other characters as well as slaves, and also make several statements about the non-sexualised depiction of female slave rape that deserve to be challenged. These studies lack the depth that a detailed, comparative analysis of the depiction of rape (and its gendered nature) in onscreen slave narratives, and the many social and cultural factors driving the prominence of this motif in recent historical dramas, that my work brings.

There are several other relevant contributions to the scholarship worth highlighting. For instance, Meredith Prince claims that the multiracial slave cast is an important
feature of the Starz series, yet the depiction of racial slavery still receives limited attention and certainly deserves a more detailed analysis than the couple of paragraphs she devotes to the subject. Daniel O’Brien’s analysis is also comparatively brief, although he does attempt to contextualise the depiction of race in _Spartacus_ within modern popular culture, and I engage with his arguments in my own study of race in chapter six. Similarly, the narrow concentration on _Spartacus_ and his reception (and even here the focus is on his development as a character, rather than its determination by his servile status) overlooks the important role played by other slave characters in the series’ portrayal of slavery. Barry Baldwin insists that Crixus (and his co-leader Oenomaus) were far more important to the rebellion than the record suggests. The Starz production adopts a similar line, yet the narrative significance of these other central male characters, and the pivotal role played by the female slave characters, is not reflected in the scholarship, a gap that my work addresses. Finally, while graphic violence is central to the series’ reworking of Roman society, there is little examination of the use of violence by Romans in the treatment of slaves, or the ethical and cultural implications of slaves’ own use of violence against one another. What exists tends to focus on the

---

69 Futrell, 2016: 21-6 offers the fullest analysis of the reception of the other historical slave leaders, although the single page devoted to each character seriously underplays their narrative importance. Harrisson, 2017 devotes a chapter to Gannicus, although the dominant focus is his heroism in the final two seasons, and not his depiction as a slave. Other characters are briefly mentioned, notably Agron and Barca (Potter, 2016 and West, 2016: 146-56), but most of the discussion focuses on other aspects rather than their status as slaves, primarily their sexuality.
71 Strong, 2016 is the most extensive on the principal female slave Naevia, but primarily on sexuality given the focus of her chapters. Augoustakis, 2016 explores the contribution of non-elite women including slaves, but includes numerous characters in a relatively brief chapter, and, as with much else in the current scholarship, it is almost entirely devoted to their sexual relationships with men.
representation of gladiatorial violence *per se*, and the series’ fetishisation of combat violence.\textsuperscript{72}

Finally, if we look beyond Roman slavery to work on representations of American slavery in both film and television, the picture is even more skeletal. Aside from Natalie Davis’s useful but dated 2000 book length study of cinema, *Slaves On Screen*, most of the modest scholarship explores mainstream American films such as *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained.*\textsuperscript{73} With the exception of a few articles and references to the socio-political and cultural impact of the seminal 1977 TV series *Roots,*\textsuperscript{74} there has not yet been any detailed study of American television slave dramas,\textsuperscript{75} and certainly no attempt at the comparative research of onscreen slave narratives that is addressed in my work.

This selective overview of the most important literature on the depiction of slavery in ancient world television drama suggests three important shortcomings. Firstly, while there have been numerous short chapters, the analysis can only go so far under such constraints. Secondly, much of the prior research is slanted towards a few narrow, repetitive themes, notably the depiction of sexuality, men and the sexual body, nor has the scholarship on *Rome* and *Spartacus* had the theme of slavery as its primary focus. This means that many themes, notably race, gender, other, non-sexual


\textsuperscript{73} Speck, 2014 and Ball, 2015 on *Django*. There has been an illuminating spate of articles on *12 Years*, including Tillet, 2014 and Ernest, 2014. See Plath, 2018 on the last one hundred years of US slavery films refracted through the lens of America’s changing racial politics. Stokes, 2018 offers a broader study, encompassing both film and, towards the end, television.

\textsuperscript{74} Tucker and Shah, 1992; Leach, 2019.

\textsuperscript{75} Stevenson (2018) is the only literature I have found. Similar to many studies of the ancient world onscreen, this is also dominated by the study of film texts.
aspects of the physical body, resistance and identity are not given the attention they deserve. Thirdly, the existing literature does not attempt to locate the series’ depiction of slavery within the wider representation of slavery onscreen, or its modern cultural context. This level of detail is only possible within a book length study which allows space for proper analysis and reflection, and contextualisation of this nature is a central objective of this thesis.76

Methodology

This thesis’s study of Roman slavery in television drama is situated within the sub-discipline of classics known as classical receptions, broadly defined as ‘the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imagined and represented’.77 Lorna Hardwick and others have theorised that the study of classical receptions has the potential to ‘yield insights into the receiving society’, and by extension ‘focus critical attention back towards the ancient source’, thereby creating ‘new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalized or forgotten’.78 I concur with David Schaps that these modern works (he cites Monty Python’s Life of Brian but could be referring to any media text) exploit the classical world for their own aims and shed light primarily on the concerns and interests of the culture that produces them.79 However, in the absence of any slave testimony from antiquity, I argue that these series might also play a potentially important role in redirecting attention to forgotten

---

76 Significantly, there has also been renewed interest in comparative scholarly research into the ancient and US slave systems (Cameron and Lenski, 2018). Together with the 2018 edition of Orlando Patterson’s seminal work on comparative slavery, this suggests a renewed interest in classical slavery.
77 Hardwick and Stray, 2008:1.
79 Schaps, 2011: 364.
aspects of history and specifically the lived experience of non-elite characters whose perspectives were not recorded. Indeed, one of the reasons modern media texts such as Spartacus and Rome are worth studying is precisely because they have the space to shed light on these overlooked ‘blind alleys’ of classical history or neglected social groups such as women, plebeians and in this case, slaves. In the context of popular culture as a vehicle for exploring history’s voiceless groups, I make a small but significant point regarding terminology. Recently, there has been online debate over whether scholars and writers engaged in slavery studies should use ‘slave’ rather than ‘enslaved person’, particularly in the context of American slavery or ‘slaving’ as it is now frequently called. While this thesis is concerned with Roman servitude, which lacks the racial categorisation that was a defining feature of the American slave system, it compares and contrasts the representation of slavery with other onscreen slave narratives, including those set in the Antebellum South, and therefore takes account of these debates, particularly in discussions over identity (chapter four) and race (chapter six).

Secondly, although Starz’s Spartacus is the primary text, this thesis also seeks to situate the study of Roman slavery onscreen within the wider televisual tradition of representing slavery. I argue that Spartacus and other series cannot be understood or contextualised without reference to or comparison with other classical and non-classical slave narratives and their often very different interpretations of the institution. I therefore include these texts as part of my wider comparative methodology. Furthermore, as part of my comparativism/contextualisation, I also

---

81 For reasons of simplicity, when I directly quote from Sparz Spartacus or indeed any other TV series, I will use S (season) and episode number (01, 02, etc.). A full list of episode titles and major characters for the Starz series is in Appendix A.
situate my primary material into a wider political discourse, much of which is already drawing directly on and engaging closely with classical material; online academic journals, blogs, and discussion forums such as *Eidolon* and *Pharos* are useful sources for that and will be used in support of my arguments. Thirdly, while close readings and character analysis are at the core of most of the chapters, critical reviews and paratexts (DVD commentaries, featurettes, online interviews and blogposts) are important information sources that provide context for these close readings.

Fourthly, as part of this thesis’s wider study of the ‘chain’ of reception influences shaping the portrayal of slavery in these series,82 I also examine what ancient historical and literary sources can reveal about Roman social and cultural attitudes towards servitude, and how they are used in these modern media texts. We should not assume that the views expressed in the surviving plays of the Roman playwright Plautus, the letters of Pliny and Cicero, or the satirical works of Petronius, Martial and Juvenal, present an accurate picture of Roman attitudes towards slaves. The absence of slave testimony from antiquity also restricts their utility as evidence. A similarly circumspect view should be adopted when referencing the current slavery scholarship, which as McKeown usefully states, has ‘produced interpretations that generally fitted [their] wider ethical and social beliefs’.83 However, without reference to the original context, and the evidence for how slaves were regarded and treated, any analysis of the various influences driving the depiction of slavery in these series would be limited. In terms of citing these sources, the vast majority will come from

83 McKeown, 2008: 159-60.

Finally, I argue that the legacy of the 1960 Kubrick/Douglas film, although it is rarely cited in commentaries and interviews by the Starz writing and production team, has cast a long shadow over popular understanding of the Spartacus story, providing what one scholar calls ‘a genealogy of resistance to tyranny’. The scholarship on the film and its role in shaping the reception of Spartacus in modern popular culture is extensive and growing with each new publication on the Spartacus media legacy; even analyses of the Starz Spartacus foreground the film’s importance in shaping his popular reception. Since no analysis of slavery in the Starz series is possible without reference to the Kubrick film, and the ideas that underpin it, I therefore cite it (and less frequently the 2004 version) extensively in my analysis. Furthermore, although this thesis focuses on TV due to its neglected status in the current research, the cinematic context still plays a crucial role in shaping how TV represents slavery. The close, intertextual relationship between these two related media means that film is widely referenced throughout.

---

84 duBois, 2010: 130.
86 Cornelius, 2015: 1, 3; Rodrigues, 2016: 34-43 is the most extensive.
Excluding the introduction, this thesis comprises of seven chapters. In view of the importance of Spartacus to the series’ vision of slavery, it begins with an analysis of his depiction as resistance icon in the series, comparing him with his chief rival and ideological foil, Crixus, and exploring what this reveals about the series’ ‘problematisation’ of the slave ‘resistance’ narrative established in the 1960 film and Spartacus’s wider cultural legacy. Chapter three examines three large but crucial themes: how the series uses Roman commodification of slave sexuality to explore issues around the abuse of power and status; the prominent role played by sexual violence in the depiction of female (but not male) servitude and what this reveals about the way modern popular culture conceptualises the female slave experience; and the various uses of slave nudity to reinforce those core ideas around status. Chapter four is primarily about the body’s non-sexual aspects, although I recognise there is inevitably some overlap between the concerns of this and chapter three. It focuses on the many uses and abuses of the slave body to further underline these questions of status and power, namely as a tool or weapon in the service of their owners’ ambitions, and the prominence of familiar physical ‘slave’ motifs such as collars, chains, branding, whipping, crucifixion and even re-naming. Referencing current scholarship around the uses and purposes of violence onscreen, chapter five focuses on the potentially problematic depiction of servile violence, and what it tells us about the series’ particular vision of Roman slavery. Chapter six looks at the depiction of racial slavery in Starz’s Spartacus through the character of Oenomaus, examining whether or not race plays a role in his depiction and what this means for the wider portrayal of slavery in the media. Chapter seven focuses on two themes: how the Romans’ treatment of, and attitudes towards, slaves informs aspects of their characters, with a particular focus on Crassus, and secondly, how the descent of
certain Romans into slavery offers a valuable lens through which we can come to a better understanding of what slavery ‘means’ more broadly in these modern narratives. I then draw together the key themes, and summarise the principal findings from my research, before suggesting possible avenues for future research.
Chapter Two

‘I would rather be a rebel than a slave’: The Modern Slave Narrative and the Problematisation of Resistance.

Agron: One day Rome shall fade and crumble. Yet, you [Spartacus] shall always be remembered in the hearts of all who yearn for freedom (S0310).

Crixus: I accept my place here, I embrace it (S0105).

Nasir: I was a body slave to the dominus. I had position and respect! Spartacus: You were a slave, everything you possessed a mere fleeting illusion (S0202).

Although slave revolts in Roman antiquity were comparatively rare, the Spartacus-led rebellion or Third Servile War is today one of the most well-known events from antiquity. This is due in no small part to the 1960 film Spartacus, which, despite its troubled production history, and the fact that it was not the only interpretation of

87 From a speech by the militant British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, delivered at the London Pavilion on 14 July 1913 (Bastille Day). More recently the slogan has been used on T-shirts to promote the film Suffragette (2015).
88 We have details of only two other mass slave revolts from Roman antiquity, both originating in Sicily. The first (135-132 BC) was led by a former slave Eunus and Cleon and the second (104-100 BC) by Athenion and Tryphon. Similar to the Spartacus revolt, these uprisings were fuelled by ill-treatment, and eventually crushed by superior Roman forces. See Urbainczyk, 2008 for an analysis.
89 The writer Dalton Trumbo and the director Stanley Kubrick clashed over how Spartacus should be portrayed. Trumbo favoured Howard Fast’s utopian vision of slave solidarity and strong abolitionist agenda (the so-called ‘Large’ Spartacus). Kubrick’s reading of the classical sources encouraged him
the story,\textsuperscript{90} has arguably ‘eclipsed all versions before and since’.\textsuperscript{91} Consequently, despite there being numerous other kinds of slave narratives that could be represented,\textsuperscript{92} modern audiences are still likely to expect onscreen adaptations of Roman slavery to foreground notions of resistance and revolt. From the opening scenes at the mines where Spartacus hamstrings a guard for beating an exhausted slave, through to his defiant conduct at the \textit{ludus} and instigation of the rebellion, the 1960 film is remembered for championing resistance to the evils of slavery. Even as he faces death, Spartacus is unrepentant: ‘Just by fighting we won something. When just one man says ‘no, I won’t’ Rome begins to fear. There were tens of thousands who said ‘no’. Even though the revolt failed and slavery continued unaffected, as the film’s voiceover acknowledges, the idea of resistance as the correct response to slavery has endured.

The film has been instrumental in setting the ‘norm’ of a slave’s response to servitude in modern cinema and TV depictions of Roman slaves. This chapter explores the extent to which Starz’s \textit{Spartacus} challenges or reinforces that tradition in its portrayal of slavery. To frame my analysis, I have identified two major slave responses to servitude in the series. The first, and probably the most important, is

\textsuperscript{90} Prior to Howard Fast’s novel, on which the film was based, there were two less triumphant depictions of the rebellion: Lewis Grasson Gibbon’s \textit{Spartacus} (1933), and Arthur Koestler’s bleak allegory of failed revolutionary ideals, \textit{Gladiators} (1939), which represented Spartacus as weak and indecisive. A film version of \textit{Gladiators} was mooted in 1958 but the project was eventually shelved. Kubrick apparently wanted to incorporate features of this novel into the film, but was overruled (Cooper, 1991: 35).

\textsuperscript{91} Winkler, 2007: 9.

\textsuperscript{92} Notably comedy, although even here traditions differ.
resistance and rebellion. This is characterised by unequivocal moral and political opposition to slavery and is represented primarily through the character of Spartacus. However, Spartacus’s choice of defiance, insurrection and rebellion represents only one, extreme stage along a broad and complex spectrum. This leads me to the second, more complex and ambivalent narrative, ‘accommodation’, described by Keith Bradley as ‘a term commonly used to refer to forms of behaviour showing how slaves accepted or acquiesced in their enslavement’. While this is a historian’s interpretation of ancient slavery, it is also a useful tool for analysing its modern reception. While slaves may resent servitude, desire freedom, or resist in covert and personal ways, they do not openly defy their masters or seek to change their circumstances through revolt or insurrection. Behaviours range from unthinking indifference, pragmatic acceptance and fear of change, to collaboration and even, in rare cases, outright embrace of servitude. Although I reference other major slave characters, my primary ‘accommodation’ case study is Spartacus’s chief gladiatorial rival Crixus, a nuanced figure whose ‘accommodationist’ approach problematises this ‘resistance’ tradition.

**Resistance: Spartacus**

Despite being described as ‘as famous as Julius Caesar’, little is actually known about the real Spartacus and what exists derives from a handful of Roman and Greek sources. Born in Thrace (modern Bulgaria), Spartacus may have served in the Roman auxiliary army before being enslaved and sold to a gladiator school (*ludus*) in Capua, north of Naples. Following an uprising, apparently as a consequence of ill-

---

93 Bradley, 2011: 363.
94 Urbainczyk, 2004: 15.
95 See Winkler, 2007: 233-47 on the principal sources on Spartacus, which provide all the citations on Spartacus for this thesis. Baldwin (1967) offers an early study on Spartacus’s reception in antiquity.
treatment, he led an initially successful slave rebellion against Rome, repelling several legions between 73 and 71 BC before dying in battle. The surviving accounts of Spartacus’s character and leadership of the rebellion are surprisingly positive, if somewhat patronising (he was a slave after all) and he was widely praised for his military acumen. The Greek Plutarch is primarily responsible for constructing the image of Spartacus as icon of equality, justice and resistance present in modern popular culture, and was unique in his appraisal of Spartacus’s moral qualities (Crassus, 1-8). As a supporter of Crassus’s conduct Appian was the most hostile, describing the slaves as ‘riff-raff’, although he also acknowledged that the rebellion was ‘serious’ (The Civil Wars, 1.114-116). Florus admired Spartacus’s courage, while despising the slave army as ‘inferior’ (Epitome, 2.8; 3.20). Sallust, the only historian writing around the time of the rebellion, condemned the rebels’ plunder, but also acknowledged that Spartacus had tried to prevent the worst atrocities, a thread present in all these recent screen adaptations (The Histories, 3). It is arguable that this grudging respect for Spartacus’s martial skills, moral intelligence and courage, as well his determination to resist recapture, expressed in these brief accounts contain the seeds from which his modern reception has grown.

Although the 1960 film was important in establishing Spartacus as an icon of resistance to slavery, his name has been associated with various struggles against political oppression and tyranny since the late eighteenth century.96 Spartacus was a hero to the eighteenth-century French philosopher Voltaire, who hailed the servile

96 See Wyke, 1997: 34-72 for an excellent, comprehensive and widely cited examination of his political, social and cultural afterlife. Futrell, 2001: 83-90 is very good on his cultural legacy, particularly plays (notably Montgomery Bird’s 1831 The Gladiator) and novels. See also Bokina, 2001 for an overview of his reception in novels. Recent additions include Ben Kane’s Spartacus: The Gladiator (2011) and Spartacus: Rebellion (2012) which follow tradition with a strong resistance narrative. For a fuller analysis of his historical legacy, see the various contributions in Winkler, 2007.
rebellion as the ‘only just war in history,’ while Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian slave rebellion (the only successful slave revolt in history) was known as the ‘black Spartacus’. The political philosopher Karl Marx invoked Spartacus as one of his two greatest heroes, while the German communists Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg named their doomed 1914-19 political movement Spartakusbund in his honour. Spartacus was particularly revered in the Soviet Union, and in 1954 the soviet composer Aram Khachaturian wrote a celebrated ballet about Spartacus and his rebellion. Such is his universal appeal that he has even been embraced on the political right. Although he was probably working from the 1960 film rather than from a wider historical perspective, in his address to the British Parliament in 1982 American president Ronald Reagan praised Spartacus as a symbol of sacrifice in the struggle for liberty against totalitarianism.

It is from this rich and diverse reception history, with each generation projecting its hopes and aspirations onto this ancient (and conveniently distant) ‘template’ that Spartacus as the embodiment of rebellion and resistance has evolved. As Theresa Urbainczyk argues, by the early 20th century the name of Spartacus had become ‘synonymous with justified rebellion,’ and someone who ‘uniquely captures the essence of the underdog fighting back, the oppressed standing up to the

---

97 Hardwick, 2004: 40.
98 The first public reference was in 1784 by the Governor of Saint-Domingue, General Étienne Laveaux, ‘the negro, the Spartacus, foretold by Raynal, whose destiny it was to avenge the wrongs committed on his race.’ (Beard, 1853: 90). The term had become commonplace by 1805.
100 duBois, 2010: 123.
101 This appeal to both sides of the political spectrum was a particular feature of the 1960 film and widened its potential audience; the timeless desire for universal freedom, particularly in post-war American society, was a notion everyone could comfortably endorse. For a discussion of the film’s reception, see Davis, 2000: 33; Cooper, 2007a and 2007b.
oppressor’. Unsurprisingly, the scholarship on the Spartacus revolt itself is somewhat more circumspect. Most scholars agree that those ideas with which he is now indelibly associated bear little relation to the social, cultural and political realities of first century Rome BCE, or to the aims of the slave rebels themselves. As Bradley notes, the utopian notions of universal freedom and equality popularised in Fast’s novel and the 1960 film, ‘have little foundation in fact’. It is thought that his actions, and those of his fellow gladiators, were probably motivated by an immediate desire for release from the brutality of servitude (as Plutarch suggests in his sympathetic account), and the need to avoid recapture, rather than any grandiose ambitions to abolish slavery and destroy the Roman Republic. Maria Wyke speaks for many when she writes:

Several more recent analyses of the ancient evidence have concluded that Spartacus was not a revolutionary, that he did not proffer systematic opposition to the power and the rule of Rome…but probably had as his limited design the restoration of the largely foreign slaves to their respective homelands.

Whatever the truth of Spartacus’s real aims and character, the image of revolutionary freedom fighter and resistance icon is strongly embedded in modern popular culture. In some respects, he is no longer a man, but an idea, ‘a generic name common to all those who revolt’, his reputation and influence in popular culture spreading far

---

103 Urbainczyk, 2004: 11, 17.
105 Plutarch, *Crassus*, 8-11.
beyond the classical world to any and all representations of resistance, from *Braveheart* (1996) to *The Hunger Games* (2012-15). There are even unacknowledged traces of his legacy in the violent ‘robot’ rebellion of *Westworld* (2016-). Of subsequent English language intertexts, the 2004 TV miniseries presents a similarly hagiographic portrait of the eponymous hero as resistance icon, leader and military strategist. However, there are significant shifts in emphasis, particularly its rejection of the 1960 film’s superimposed message of Christian martyrdom, and Spartacus is more self-questioning than his predecessor. This reception history clearly places an enormous weight of expectation on the Starz Spartacus, and the remainder of this section examines his character’s relationship with that dominant ‘resistance’ tradition.

In many ways, the Starz Spartacus conforms to this ‘resistance’ ideal, although it portrays this process very differently. Having seized control of the gladiatorial ludus, the Starz Spartacus stands over the mutilated body of his master, Batiatus. Drenched in blood, he addresses the surviving slaves.

I have done this thing because it is *just*. Blood demands blood. We have lived and lost at the whims of our masters for too long. I would not have it so. I would not see the passing of a brother for the purpose of sport. I would not see another heart ripped from chest and forfeit for no cause. I know not all of

---

108 Maley, 1998 attributes the popularity of Braveheart to ‘its status as a slave narrative, an epic of the underdog in the tradition of Spartacus’ (73). *The Hunger Games* novel trilogy, about a reluctant heroine’s resistance to a totalitarian state, was also seen by its author as a ‘Spartacus’ story. Interview with Suzanne Collins in Blasingame, 2008.
you wished this, yet it is done, it is done. Your lives are your own, forge your own path or join with us and together we shall see Rome tremble!

(S0113).

This uncompromising defence of his actions underscores the fundamental importance of resistance to slavery which he has largely endorsed since his arrival at the ludus in episode two. It also seems to suggest an unbroken continuity with the dominant reception tradition of Spartacus as resistance hero and rebel outlined earlier. However, this valedictory statement does not give the full picture of Spartacus’s journey from freedom to servitude and then revolt, or the many difficulties and setbacks he encounters in promoting his resistance agenda within an often hostile and indifferent slave community.

Superficially at least, although the series does different things with his character and journey to and through servitude, Spartacus proves a worthy successor to the iconic 1960 Spartacus. His strong-mindedness, defiance, and love of liberty are immediately established in episode one of the first season. Eschewing the film’s representation of him as the grandson of a slave, the series invokes another thread in the sources by making him a volunteer in the Roman auxiliary.109 This works to underscore his fierce independence and makes his intrinsic resistance to servitude more plausible (i.e. he has no experience of enslavement so has not internalised its ideology). Having taken the lead in negotiations between his Thracian tribe and the Roman military, he convinces his men to ally with the Romans against their common foe, the Getae but only on the basis that their tribal independence will be

respected. When the Romans later renege, he encourages his men to desert rather than be forcibly subjected to Roman authority, actions which lead to his recapture and condemnation to gladiatorial servitude. Overt resistance comes naturally to him.

Purchased by Batiatus’s *ludus*, Spartacus immediately and instinctively chafes at sudden enslavement and shows open contempt and resentment towards his new circumstances. Whereas the other new arrivals bow their heads in submission, Spartacus scowls at their servility and looks on in derision and incomprehension as the experienced slaves enthusiastically chant Batiatus’s name (S0102). Like Maximus in *Gladiator*, he also initially refuses to fight, and even rejects *missio* (surrender) when defeated by Crixus, symbolically clenching his fist. Death seems preferable to a life of servitude. He later tells the trainer Doctore, ‘I need no lesson in submission’ (S0103). While the other slaves seem unconcerned with life beyond enslavement, the restoration of his liberty is rarely out of his thoughts, and he is the only slave at the *ludus* to consider, and later plan, an escape.

This defiance is underscored in other ways. Spartacus instinctively questions his master’s authority, refusing to perform tasks distasteful to him, regardless of the consequences. He argues and debates decisions rather than meekly accepting them as others do, including the senior slave trainer Doctore. He is also particularly sensitive to any undermining of his pre-slave Thracian identity. When ordered to play the part of a Roman general in a battle re-enactment for one of Batiatus’s patrons, he vehemently objects.

Batiatus: You do not understand, I do not ask, I command.

---

110 An example of the series’ engagement with national liberty.
Spartacus: I will not dress as a Roman and pretend to slaughter my own people
(S0107).

This shows that even the prospect of playing a Roman general is offensive to him since it compromises the freeborn, independent self or identity that he is desperate to keep alive (I explore this notion of identity in the construction of Spartacus’s character further in chapter four). Later, in conversation with his more cautious friend Varro, Spartacus reiterates the importance of his background and ethnicity, which he indirectly associates with liberty. It also shows an unequivocal rejection of a key attribute expected of slaves in these series: obedience.

Varro: You were a fool to refuse Batiatus.
Spartacus: He makes unreasonable demands.
Varro: He’s your master, his demands your duty unreasonable or otherwise.
Spartacus: I will not be forced to slaughter my countrymen.
Varro: You act as if you have free will in the matter. You are a gladiator.
Spartacus: I am a Thracian!

The Thracians were regarded as warlike and primitive but also fiercely independent.\textsuperscript{111} Tacitus describes them as ‘capricious’ and disobedient even to their own king (\textit{Annals}, 4. 44) and there are traces of this in Spartacus’s stubborn resistance to Batiatus’s attempts to control him.

For Spartacus, resistance is also as much a moral decision as a physical one. Indeed, in view of the considerable physical obstacles to escape, this moral objection to servitude becomes his principal means of expressing resistance. In scenes which seem to have been deliberately included in order to make Spartacus appear morally superior, but also resistant to the brutal ethos of the ludus, he eschews its harsh pecking order and treats his fellow slaves equally. For instance, he does not participate in the hazing of new arrivals, a custom he finds distasteful, and, indeed, ensures that they are fed when the other gladiators maliciously prevent the fair distribution of food (S0109). He also shares bread with his new friend the freeborn Roman Varro (S0102) and helps him to reconcile with his estranged wife Aurelia (S0103). Supportive friendships constitute a form of resistance, a bulwark against the base survivalist attitudes which pervade servile attitudes at the ludus (and which I explore below) and a small but not insignificant moral victory.  

This moral resistance is also manifested through compassion and concern for the vulnerable and weak slaves at the ludus. DeKnight himself particularly values this quality in Spartacus, deeming it ‘more important than a chiselled physique or fighting skills’. Two examples stand out. The first is his chivalrous defence of a female slave, Mira (S0110). He has never met her yet he instinctively comes to her rescue when she is attacked by a freeborn Roman guard, Hector, maiming him in the process and narrowly avoiding serious punishment. Harrisson attributes this defence of the ‘damsel in distress’ to his construction as a ‘modern hero’. But it also illustrates his instinctive willingness to defy the endemic brutality at the ludus.

112 It also has a strong dramatic purpose, setting up the tragedy of Spartacus having to kill Varro later in the season.
114 Harrisson, 2016: 59.
Furthermore, in contrast with the rough treatment meted out to female slave prostitutes by the men at the ludus, he does not rape Mira when she is later sent to ‘service’ him. When he says ‘I have no desire to lie with a woman who has been commanded to do so’, it not only illustrates his belief in the importance of free will. It also demonstrates a form of resistance to the corrupt and problematic sexual values of the ludus which encourage and condone misogyny, exploitation and abuse.

The second example is his concern for the vulnerable slave boy, Pietros, who is being bullied, beaten and raped by another slave following the disappearance of his lover and protector, the gladiator Barca (presumed manumitted, but in fact murdered). Trapped in a cycle of abuse, Pietros later commits suicide in one of the series’ most tragic and moving narrative arcs (S0106-07). His hopeless situation and death have been compared to contemporary issues around the bullying of minorities, and there are also echoes of prison dramas such as The Shawshank Redemption (1996) where the weak are preyed upon and abused by inmates seeking an outlet for their sexual frustrations. While I concur with arguments advanced elsewhere that Pietros’ treatment highlights the ‘the harsh realities of slave life in the ludus’, his brutal sexual exploitation, coupled with widespread indifference to his suffering, is also used to suggest that slavery corrupts masters and slaves alike. It is a testament to Spartacus’s character and defiance that he rejects the temptation to internalise this ideology, and even attempts to mitigate the abuse by offering to speak to the perpetrator. Admittedly, Spartacus’s extreme response to Pietros’ suicide (he

---

115 I examine the rape of slave prostitutes in more detail in chapter three.
116 Augoustakis, 2013: 162.
117 DeKnight has also compared the ludus to a ‘prison’ (DVD Commentary, S0202). I return to this later in my study of servile violence.
118 Augoustakis, 2013: 162. Also West, 2016: 149.
kills the abuser, Gnaeus) might be read as evidence that he has also been partly brutalised by his environment, and I explore his use of violence in more detail in chapter five. However, Spartacus’s solitary assertion of Pietros’s humanity - ‘He was a man, his life had worth’ (S0107) – still marks him as an exceptional individual, even if his reaction is questionable. Resistance does not necessarily entail weakness.

This moral resistance is also apparent in his conduct during the rebellion, indicating that resistance is not merely an instinctive reaction to his immediate circumstances but born of a deep moral and spiritual objection to servitude and its pernicious effects. For instance, when a newly liberated slave Tiberius laments the rebels’ murder of his master - ‘I had position and respect!’- and later attempts to assassinate Spartacus, Spartacus refuses to execute him: ‘What message will [taking his life] send to those who wish to join our cause?’ (S0202). Spartacus spares his life because he understands how prolonged slavery undermines the ability of its victims to resist: ‘He has known nothing but slavery, the strength of such a tether is not easily severed.’ Later, Spartacus forbids the mistreatment of Roman captives and shields Romans being attacked by marauding slaves. He justifies his actions in moral terms: ‘We are not Romans, nor shall we become them by acts of unnecessary cruelty’ (S0304). Although the circumstances are different, there are obvious parallels between this statement, and that of his 1960 counterpart:

What are we Crixus? What are we becoming? Romans? Have we learned nothing, what is happening to us?...We can’t just be a gang of drunken raiders.
This recurring motif, namely the importance of defining resistance and love of liberty through being non-Roman is a significant one, since it implies that rejecting resistance is to become Roman. The best indication of the series’ dominant representation of Spartacus as traditional resistance figure is found in the hero’s final words, where he offers an unequivocal validation of personal liberty gained through resistance and rebellion.

Do not shed tear. There is no greater victory than to fall from this world a free man.

(S0310).

However, Spartacus’s reception in the series is still somewhat more nuanced than this initial analysis suggests, suggesting a degree of problematisation of the resistance tradition. While he is instrumental in planning and instigating the final uprising against the ludus, Spartacus’s path towards the glorious vindication of revolt cited at the beginning of this section, is neither smooth nor easy. Unlike his cinematic counterpart, who glides seamlessly into his role as senior resistance figure, Spartacus’s servile journey is complicated and undermined by a series of obstacles, setbacks and difficulties; these render him a lonely and isolated figure within a slave community, which also fails to embrace his resistance agenda. Indeed, these examples of moral resistance, while admirable, contrast with the personal sufferings and frustrations that he is forced to endure.
One of the most significant differences in terms of slave behaviour from the 1960 film is that the vast majority of the slaves in Starz’s *Spartacus* have so completely internalised cultural and moral standards of their masters that they positively reject this troublesome new arrival. In the 1960 film the slaves bond over their shared hatred of Batiatus and his sadistic trainer Marcellus.\(^{119}\) By contrast the Starz *Spartacus’s* questioning of authority, and refusal to accept the discipline of the *ludus*, become a source of derision not admiration. This is illustrated through the humiliations he endures. After Spartacus objects to Doctore’s insulting remarks about Thrace as ‘a swamp of piss’ (and by extension questioning of his identity, about which he is openly proud for the reasons outlined earlier), Doctore responds by urinating on his feet and then orders him to kneel (S0103). When Spartacus refuses, he is forced to the ground. The watching gladiators laugh at Spartacus’s public humiliation, encouraging this brutal disciplining of a recalcitrant slave who refuses to submit to the ‘system’ as they have seemingly done.

Later, when Spartacus’s attempts to earn his freedom through victories in the arena go awry after his combat inadequacies are exposed and he is condemned to fight in the ‘dishonourable’ illegal underground arena or ‘pits’, none of his fellow slaves shows any sympathy for his plight, or that desire to earn his freedom which drove him to behave so recklessly (S0104). Barca swats away his food and drink, addressing him using the language of a master rather than a fellow slave: ‘Rise, dog!’ Others later ostracise and mock him when he returns from his ordeal, bloody and bruised. The ‘bully of the *ludus’* Crixus is particularly vicious.\(^{120}\) Flanked by his

---

\(^{119}\) They praise Spartacus’s refusal to give Marcellus the satisfaction of killing him.

\(^{120}\) DeKnight’s own description of Crixus (DVD Commentary, S0102).
acolytes, he cruelly mocks Spartacus’s ‘dream’ of liberty, maliciously drawing attention to the sexual abuse his wife Sura is probably suffering under her new master (S0102).

Spartacus’s difficulties are not confined to the slaves’ widespread distrust of, and indifference to, his resistance to servitude. He also suffers a series of personal losses which lead him to question his entire outlook. Before they can even be reconciled, Spartacus’s beloved wife Sura is murdered on Batiatus’s orders (S0105). This is probably influenced by the deaths of Maximus’s wife and child in Gladiator, and it has a similar narrative purpose, namely to fuel Spartacus’s personal revenge. However, it also plays into the series’ theme of slavery as a destroyer of kinship rights (I explore this further in the next chapter). Bereaved, Spartacus cuts a lonely figure for the rest of the series, unable to develop close relationships with other women. When asked much later by fellow slave leader Gannicus what motivates him in his struggle against the Romans now that he has successfully avenged his wife’s murder, Spartacus replies: ‘A thousand lives would not equal Sura’s’ (S0301). He claims that her loss inspires him to free other slaves from bondage and he directs his energies into the rebel cause, but his words are tinged with a deep sadness and regret that she cannot share this experience with him. This contrasts with the 1960 Spartacus whose wife Varinia provides crucial moral support to his resistance endeavours.

Spartacus must also bear the loss of close friends. In one of the series’ most moving story arcs, Spartacus is forced to kill Varro when an exhibition match for one of Batiatus’s Roman patrons goes wrong (S0110). According to DeKnight, Varro’s
death ‘was crafted to not only force Spartacus to reject the Roman way he had embraced, but also to highlight a complete and utter disregard for human life that permeated Roman culture at the time’;\(^{121}\) Varro dies because he is a slave and therefore worthless. It also exposes another, potentially bleaker feature of the series’ depiction of the slave system, namely the human costs of servitude.\(^{122}\) Spartacus must, and does, recover in time to initiate the uprising; indeed, the death of Varro and others is instrumental in his decision to orchestrate the revolt, as his statement ‘we have lived and lost at the whims of our masters’ that prefaces this section proves. However, his forced but complicit role in Varro’s death, and the murder of Sura, demonstrate that not even the resisting hero figure can avoid the emotional scars of servitude.

Significantly, this catalogue of setbacks and losses even leads into a temporary and fatalistic alignment with servitude, a radical departure from the reception tradition. By the middle of the season Spartacus has reached a crisis point: his wife is dead and he will soon lose his best friend. Succumbing to moral and emotional torpor, he is shown embracing the seductions of gladiatorial combat and has grown closer to his manipulative master, whom he seems content to address as ‘dominus’. This period could be read as an implicit questioning of the resistance agenda he had earlier embraced. Disillusionment over the increasing impossibility of escape, coupled with the death of a woman for whose sake he had originally sought freedom, may have dulled those instincts to rebel. This is shown in his discouraging attitude towards other new arrivals who dream of earning their freedom as he did. Employing words

\(^{121}\) DeKnight, 2010. He confirms that some viewers had threatened to stop watching the series if Varro was killed, but he wanted Varro’s death to act as ‘a wake-up call to Spartacus’.

\(^{122}\) I explore this use of Varro as a ‘tool’ in the schemes of others in chapter four.
almost identical to those of Crixus in their first encounter, he tells the new recruit Segovax: ‘Forsake any thoughts of freedom and a life you once had beyond these walls. Accept your fate or be destroyed by spectres of a past never to return’ (S0108). Subjugated by the system, Spartacus has become just another jaded pragmatist and passive victim of servitude. As Batiatus maliciously observes to his wife, Spartacus ‘the dog’ is now ‘house-broken’ (S0109).

If we look at the wider cultural context and compare the Starz series with other, recent portrayals of slavery and resistance, the picture is also mixed and seems to depend upon the purpose and narrative focus of the drama. Two earlier classical screen portrayals, *Julius Caesar* (2002) and *Empire* (2005) show slave characters as generally loyal to their masters because that suits the series’ sympathetic representation of Romans (as I explore in chapter seven). However, *Julius Caesar*’s chief slave character Apollonius has a more interesting trajectory, which plays into the theme of resistance popularised in the Spartacus reception tradition. Although he enjoys excellent relations with his master Caesar and his daughter Julia, he still decides to join the Spartacus rebellion and even elects to die alongside his slave ‘family’; it shows that even a gilded servitude cannot compensate for lack of freedom and agency.123 *Rome* features no overt resistance or slave uprising against slavery, so it is difficult to compare the series with *Spartacus* in this context.

Beyond the ancient world, things are also not entirely straightforward. Unsurprisingly, given contemporary cultural sensitivities around the painful racial legacy of American slavery, in the majority of antebellum texts, notably *Roots* and

---

123 I Explore Apollonius’s relationship with his owners further in chapter seven.
Underground, resistance is unequivocally privileged, even where the chances of escape are hopeless. However, there is some evidence, perhaps as part of a wider effort to introduce greater historical realism, that these series still engage with the notion that resistance, although worthwhile, still entails enormous personal costs. Of the seven slaves who escape from their plantation in Underground, four die, one is recaptured and only two (both female) make it to safety in the North; the child escapee loses both her parents when they sacrifice themselves to spare her.

Parallels can also be found in dystopian fiction. In the critically acclaimed dystopian drama series The Handmaid’s Tale about reproductive slavery under a futuristic totalitarian American theocracy, the heroine Offred/June suffers numerous setbacks and betrayals in her efforts to resist and retain her ‘pre-slave’ identity. In The Hunger Games, similar to Spartacus, upon whom her character is modelled, the rebel heroine Katniss Everdeen also soon discovers that justice and freedom are relative terms when her sister is killed by the very resistance movement she supports.124 Unlike Spartacus, she survives, yet the emotional and physical scars are never fully healed. These disparate texts tackle a range of genres and mix both fictional and historical contexts. Yet they all demonstrate an important theme. While modern slave narratives may be inspirational sites of human courage, they do not elide the human and emotional sacrifices of resistance and rebellion and this is arguably the nuanced cultural context that informs Starz’s Spartacus and its treatment of the theme, as opposed to the 1960 movie.

This analysis has shown that the Starz production largely conforms to the tradition of Spartacus as resistance hero and defender of human freedom, while also

problematising this message by forcing Spartacus to acknowledge and adapt to the limits of his resistance agenda. There are narrative reasons for these fractious relationships with fellow slaves, in foreshadowing the ideological differences that will later shape and even undermine the rebellion. Yet, I argue that these difficulties are also linked to the series’ nuancing of slave behaviour and attitudes to servitude, a theme which will reoccur at several stages in this thesis. If the mighty Spartacus struggles to promote the importance of resistance and liberty among downtrodden and brutalised slaves within a series which is not only ‘about’ but champions armed revolt, then the resistance tradition represented in the 1960 film and popular culture generally is surely being questioned, if not problematised. It also plays into the wider depiction of slavery as a bleak, brutal and dehumanising system which can oppress and even destroy the most resistant individuals.

‘Accommodation’: Crixus

As historical co-leader of the rebellion alongside Spartacus, and the second most important male slave character in the series, Crixus is central to the series’ vision of slavery. Firstly, although Spartacus remains the series’ primary protagonist, Crixus certainly rivals him in terms of screen time. He appears in every episode, including the prequel where Spartacus is absent, which means that we should pay as much attention to what he conveys about liberty and servitude as we do to Spartacus. Secondly, in contrast with the 1960 film (and the 2004 mini-series), it is Crixus, not Spartacus, who is given the most important romantic relationship in the series, with the slave girl Naevia, which further underscores his importance to the narrative. Thirdly, the often violent rivalry between Spartacus and Crixus, alongside their deep ideological differences over servitude, the uses of liberty and the purpose and
direction of the rebellion, is the linchpin upon which the series derives much of its
dramatic power.\footnote{Magerstädt draws some interesting parallels between the depiction of the gladiator school in The Last Days of Pompeii (1984) and the Starz version, particularly the inter-slave rivaries (2019: 124), even claiming that the earlier series influenced the latter.} As Jason Smith, one of the few scholars to consider his portrayal in any depth, writes, ‘the two characters [Crixus and Spartacus] are often dynamic and provide rich social interactions to observe’.\footnote{Smith, 2015: 121.} This section explores how Crixus’s endorsement of ‘accommodation’ to servitude potentially complicates and problematises the resistance tradition.

As with Spartacus, I begin my analysis with a brief examination of the historical evidence for Crixus. The sources attest to his decisive, arguably fatal role in the ultimate failure pf the servile war, yet we still know much less about him than Spartacus. The facts tell us little about his character. Lucius Annaeus Florus tells us that he was an ethnic Gaul who joined Spartacus and Oenomaus in their escape from Batiatus’ gladiator l\textit{udus} in Capua some time in 73 BCE.\footnote{Epitome of Roman History, 2.8 (320).} Splitting his army from Spartacus, he was defeated and killed in battle against the consul Gellius in 72 BCE.\footnote{Paulus Orosius, History Against the Pagans, 5.24.1-8; 18-19 There is another mention by Appian, The Civil Wars, 1.14.116; While Spartacus is mentioned much more frequently and in more favourable terms, Crixus’s status as co-leader with authority over the Gallic slave rebels is undisputed.} Regarding his character, his motives for deserting Spartacus or his wider personal or political aspirations, the sources tell us nothing, although Orosius at least acknowledged his courage, noting that he ‘fought back vigorously’ against Gellius. Inevitably, it is Spartacus, the leader of the rebellion, who emerges most clearly from the historical record.
Until the Starz production, Crixus was also completely overshadowed by Spartacus in popular culture. There are several obvious reasons for this. While there is no evidence to support Baldwin’s claim that Crixus was ‘a most unattractive figure’, he certainly does not emerge as a moral or heroic one either.\textsuperscript{129} Spartacus’s position as acknowledged leader of the rebellion, and oppressive post-classical eulogisation, have also conspired to undermine the historical significance of the other slave rebels, including Crixus. Koestler’s \textit{Gladiators} offers the most hostile cultural reception. A dissolute, fractious and extremely violent individual, largely responsible for the majority of the slave atrocities and diametrically opposed to Spartacus’s leadership (traces of which are present in the Starz version), he is one of the novel’s primary antagonists, although his rivalry with Spartacus provides much of the novel’s political power. In Fast’s novel Crixus is overshadowed by the fictional Jew David, a more sympathetic character loyal to Spartacus, and still disputatious and prone to violence. In Ben Kane’s Spartacus novels (\textit{Gladiator}, 2012 and \textit{Rebellion}, 2013), which implicitly ‘borrow’ from the Starz series (a debt the author openly acknowledges),\textsuperscript{130} Crixus’s deep rivalry with Spartacus is again foregrounded, although his courage and resistance to servitude are also acknowledged.

At least these novels give Crixus some narrative agency. Since the 1960 film invokes Spartacus as the sole symbol for the injustices of slavery, this left no room for other servile perspectives and experiences. After befriending Spartacus, Crixus enthusiastically joins him in the overthrow of the \textit{ludus} and submits to Spartacus’s unquestioned authority, resurfacing to die bravely in the final battle. It is true that he

\textsuperscript{129} Baldwin, 1967: 294.
\textsuperscript{130} Kane, 2012: 468-9.
plays the role of chief avenger against the masters but is quickly dissuaded by
Spartacus and dutifully falls in line. The attested military split, the crushing defeat by
Gellius, and the sacrifice of prisoners in his honour are all absent.\textsuperscript{131} The other Gallic
slave rebels (and co-leaders) Gannicus, Oenomaus and Castus, who all feature in the
classical sources, do not even make an appearance. Indeed, the film is much more
invested in Spartacus’s relationships with fictional characters, such as his wife
Varinia and the young poet Antoninus. Steadfast in his resistance to servitude (as he
is in the earlier receptions) and brave in battle, Crixus is bland and uncomplicated.

By contrast, presumably because it claims to be a more faithful adaptation of Fast’s
original novel than the Kubrick film, the 2004 mini-series resurrects the
Spartacus/Crixus rivalry. It also gives him more screen time and highlights his moral
complexity and ideological opposition to Spartacus. Despite unflattering
comparisons with the film, and ‘boring’ protagonist,\textsuperscript{132} this version should not be
dismissed as an unimportant contribution to the depiction of slavery and the slave
rebellion onscreen. Although Crixus remains subordinate to Spartacus, whose
relationship with Varinia and rivalry with Crassus still take precedence in the
narrative, he plays a much more prominent and complex role in the story than his
cinematic predecessor and is a distinct character in his own right. His behaviour is
also very different, reflecting the darker, potentially opportunistic side of the slave
character completely elided in the Kubrick film, but hinted at in Arthur Koestler’s
unscreened 1939 novel, and reiterated in the current Starz series. While Crixus
shares Spartacus’s instinctive resistance to servitude and participates in the initial

\textsuperscript{131} Appian, \textit{The Civil Wars}, 1.14.117.
\textsuperscript{132} Lowry, 2004.
uprising with violent enthusiasm, his brutishness, violence and misogyny also render him a polarising and negative figure, more interested in plunder and revenge than in building a slave movement founded upon the principles of equality and justice. Similar to the 1960 film, the series is constrained by a two-hour running time and fidelity to Fast’s particular vision of slavery, which idealises Spartacus and promotes unity over discord. However, it at least experiments with the story by foregrounding divisions with the slave movement. Most significantly, in his role as ideological and moral counterpoint to Spartacus’s idealism, the 2004 Crixus marks a significant tonal shift away from the tradition of slave unity established in the 1960 film, and towards his more ambivalent reincarnation in the Starz series.

Starz’s Spartacus offers television audiences a more complex and intriguing variation on these two earlier depictions of Crixus. Played by the New Zealand actor Manu Bennett, he is no longer a minor or peripheral character, but central to the series’ nuanced portrayal of slavery. Complex and morally ambivalent, with a worrying propensity for cruelty, violence, and indifference to the plight of the non-gladiatorial slave class, he is deeply flawed and in many ways the antithesis of Spartacus. A vicious bully, he can be pitiless towards those whom he regards as inferior, and lacks the capacity for compassion and altruism, major features of Spartacus’s reception in the series. He also expresses some ambivalent attitudes towards servitude and the gladiatorial code, as I analyse below. In many ways, he is the epitome of the anti-hero, broadly defined as a character ‘whose behaviour and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted or negative moral allegiance’. However, he is also brave, deeply loyal to those he loves and respects, and a superb warrior whose

\[133\] Mittell, 2015: 75.
intervention makes the difference between military success and disaster on several occasions. Furthermore, his genuine love for Naevia humanises him in ways that previous receptions have not. Crixus represents, above all, an essential corrective to the heroism of Spartacus as an idealised resistance figure and a symbol for a version of Roman slavery that is both bleaker, but arguably more representative of the wider servile experience where accommodation and acceptance were the norm.

This is illustrated in several ways. The audience’s first encounter with Crixus following Spartacus’s arrival at the ludus is key to establishing both his relationship with servitude, and why he defends and embraces his situation. In contrast with Spartacus, who is rebellious, disdainful and contemptuous of the gladiatorial profession, the champion of Capua Crixus revels in his comfortable and secure position. Arrogant, self-confident, and the strongest of the gladiators, Crixus behaves like the ‘star’ employee of a concern he unashamedly describes as ‘the greatest ludus in Capua’, rather than the place of his enslavement. Unlike Spartacus, who notes contemptuously ‘the Roman way, lives for coin’ (S0102), Crixus is unaware that he may be complicit in his own exploitation and commodification, while his demeanour suggests that he has wholeheartedly embraced the notion, expressed by Doctore, that their ‘pathetic lives’ are somehow validated by gladiatorial servitude. Indeed, he glows with childish pride when Doctore selects him from among the men to explain to the new recruits the reverence in which the arena training grounds are held: ‘sacred ground, Doctore, watered with the tears of blood!’ That the sand is soaked with the blood of the enslaved, and not free men or masters, is a point entirely lost on Crixus.
Secondly, he nurses a strong attachment to combat, glory and honour, values which he associates with gladiatorial servitude. Indeed, this enthusiasm shapes his entire outlook and is fundamental to understanding Crixus’s behaviour in season one. He particularly relishes the epithet ‘the god of blood and sand’ bestowed on him by Batiatus, before whom he behaves with almost puppyish reverence and servility, again in sharp contrast with Spartacus. When Crixus leads the other gladiators in chanting Batiatus’ name in exultation at the latter’s exhortation to ‘prove yourselves more than a common slave, prove yourselves more than a man!’ , viewed from Spartacus’s perspective it offers an unsettling reminder of how profoundly these slaves have accepted their situation. On the other hand, singled out for favour by both master and trainer, Crixus has good reason to be satisfied with his situation. Flashbacks to his near condemnation to the mines under a previous master (GoTA03), show that he would clearly have a lot to lose and little to gain by revolt or flight, even if it were possible.

This acceptance runs deep. Not merely comfortable with this value system, he seeks to impose it on others and takes it as a personal affront that Spartacus does not share this exalted view of the gladiatorial profession. This tense first encounter goes to the nub of their ideological differences over slavery and liberty, and the series’ problematisation of resistance.

Crixus: ‘I fight to honour these walls, you fight to leave them.’

Spartacus: ‘You fight because you are a slave, like me.’

Crixus: ‘No not like you. I accept my place here, I embrace it. But you, you still dream of a life beyond the arena. That is all it is Spartacus, a dream. And
one day soon you will waken to the truth. You will never leave this place’.

(S0105).

Thirdly, he seems to derive personal satisfaction and a sense of purpose and belonging he derives from his preeminent place at the *ludus* and the adulation of his supporters. While it runs counter to the imperative to resist embodied in Spartacus, it has some basis in the scholarship on slavery. Even Keith Bradley, a vocal proponent of the view that Roman slaves were innately inclined to resist, grudgingly accepts that through labour ‘it may well have been possible for slaves to find some compensation for the human toll of slavery’.\(^\text{134}\) Furthermore, gladiators occupied a special if ambiguous place in Roman society generally, surrounded by an aura of raw sensuality and brutal violence.\(^\text{135}\) Although socially despised as slaves, criminals and *infames*, classed alongside prostitutes, pimps, slave traders and even *lanistae*,\(^\text{136}\) their courage, desire for victory, keen fighting skills and assumed ability to face death ‘with honour’ meant that they were also admired and envied by many, a contradiction that the TV series taps into as part of its complication of slavery. This included members of the political elite who, while critical of the bloodlust of the games, still perceived the best of them as living embodiments of that ‘quintessential’ Roman value *virtus*,\(^\text{137}\) variously translated as ‘virtue’, ‘courage’ or ‘manliness’.\(^\text{138}\)

---

\(^{134}\) Bradley, 1994: 80.
\(^{135}\) Given the centrality of gladiators to the study of slavery in popular culture, there is a large corpus of scholarship on the role of gladiators in Roman social, cultural and political life, and their complex, even contradictory reception. This is a selective list of recent scholarship. Dunkle (2008) is the most comprehensive and includes a useful final chapter on gladiators in film as well as an unrivalled collection of sources. See also Coleman (1990); Wiedemann (1992); Barton (1993); Plass (1995: 29-45); Futrell (1997) and especially, 2006 for an excellent compendium of historical sources on the games; Kyle, 1998; Fagan, 2011: 189-229.
\(^{136}\) For source evidence, see Futrell, 2006: 130-2.
\(^{137}\) Galinsky, 1996: 84.
Pliny the Younger was particularly enthused by the spectacle - ‘even in the bodies of slaves and criminals was seen a love of glory and lust to win’ - while Cicero wrote:

Gladiators, whether ruined men or barbarians, what wounds they endure! See how the well-trained prefer to accept a wound rather than disgracefully avoid it!...a gladiatorial spectacle usually appears cruel and inhuman to some and I am inclined to agree, as they are now staged. But when condemned men fight with swords, there can be no sturdier training for the eye against pain and death.\(^{139}\)

Of course, we do not know if gladiators felt the same way about being forced to die ‘honourably’ for the moral edification of the Roman elite. There are recorded instances of men committing suicide rather than fight in the arena,\(^ {140}\) a current that the TV series’ glorification of combat obviously does not explore. The most skilled among them may, however, have found some dignity, purpose and satisfaction in their popularity, for which there is some epigraphic evidence.\(^ {141}\) As Futrell notes, the ‘sexual glamour that surrounded winning performers’ may have been a ‘fringe benefit’ for winning gladiators.\(^ {142}\) Like modern sports stars, Crixus and others are shown basking in the approving roar of the arena crowd, oblivious to the implications of cheerleading their own possible demise. Some of this is understandable in a context where escape seems impossible. Yet, there is an insidious side to this seemingly absolute indoctrination which has required him to

\(^{139}\) Pliny, *Panegyricus* 33.1-4; Cicero, *Disputationes Tusculanae*, 2.41. See Fagan, 2011: 287-324 for a comprehensive list of sources on Roman perceptions of gladiators, both positive and negative.


\(^{141}\) Futrell, 2006: 146.

\(^{142}\) Ibid.
internalise the cultural, moral and ideological standards of his Roman owners; he sees no irony in his defence and embrace of a system that enslaves, brutalises and exploits.

Where other versions might have implicitly condemned Crixus’s attachment to gladiatorial servitude, the series is more nuanced and seems to hint at possible explanations or even mitigating circumstances. One is his own journey towards slavery. Unlike Spartacus, Crixus has little experience of actual freedom after being uprooted from his native lands and enslaved in early boyhood (GoTA04). For an orphan deprived of all familial and tribal connections, the ludus offers a surrogate home and a sense of purpose. Furthermore, the slaves’ revered ‘brotherhood’, with its connotations of modern urban gangs, may be brutal and pitiless towards outsiders and sceptics such as Spartacus. Yet its clan mentality also has emotional and ideological validity for its deracinated slave members, a theme to which I return in chapters four and five.

It could even be argued that membership of this elite group of slaves offers a kind of spiritual if not actual freedom. In a masculinist reading of the gladiatorial ‘brotherhood’ and the arena as a site of male slave agency, Michael Cornelius convincingly argues that these slaves, who are denied autonomy and exploited by a system which benefits others, instead invest significance in spaces they can ‘control’, in this case the sands or their cells.\(^{143}\) Extending Cornelius’ argument, I would also suggest that the gladiators’ perceived control over these ‘sacred’ places allows them to see beyond their prescribed place in the world, and experience fleeting

\(^ {143} \) Cornelius, 2015b: 141.
psychological, if not physical, release from bondage. The idea that single combat might offer a modicum of self-fulfilment goes some way towards understanding why Crixus so consistently eulogises it, even if it problematises the idea that self-respecting slave characters must intrinsically resist servitude. As he proudly announces to Spartacus on their first encounter in the cells, the ludus is a place where ‘men are forged into gods!’ (S0102). The cheering of the other slaves shows that this is a widely endorsed view.

The male slaves’ apparently unquestioning and enthusiastic embrace of violent gladiatorial servitude, and the notions of honour and glory they associate with it, is certainly one of the most intriguing differences between the Starz and 1960 film versions, at least in the context of the latter’s ‘normalisation’ of resistance. Cornelius makes a valid point when he argues that freedom from combat is associated with personal liberty and dignity in the film, whereas Crixus and the other gladiators derive pleasure from serving a system which denies them freedom and instructs them to kill fellow slaves. Finally, although we have little knowledge of what Roman gladiators really thought about their lives beyond a few brief inscriptions (usually set up by friends and families post-mortem), the opportunity to earn the money to purchase one’s freedom might have made a gladiatorial career more bearable, and this could also play a role in shaping the TV Crixus’s attitudes. It may also have made him more compliant, a factor acknowledged by Bradley in his scholarship on historical slavery. For instance, Barca consciously works hard and serves his master loyally in order to acquire the means to purchase his freedom (S0107).

---

144 Futrell, 2006: 149-153.
146 Bradley, 1989: xii.
Throughout, slavery is portrayed as a humiliating and commodified existence, and Crixus himself is still subjected to the same oppressive and exploitative conditions (lack of freedom, movement, or kinship rights) as any other of these ‘social non-persons’. Yet, for much of season one a powerful conviction that he is important to the well-being and prestige of the ludus is central to Crixus’ entire value system, and shapes his acceptance of servitude.

It could be argued that Crixus is uniquely accepting of his status because of the need to create dramatic tension between him and the resistance figure Spartacus. Yet he is not the only character to adopt a pragmatic approach, although there are subtle differences. The future slave leader Gannicus remains indifferent to, even sceptical of, notions of resistance and revolt almost until the very end. Juliette Harrisson attributes this nonchalance to a ‘self-destructive’ streak in his character. I concur, but also argue that it is partly shaped by circumstances, specifically his internalisation of Roman cultural ideology which encourages him to consider violent combat (for the profit of others) in positive terms. Note the fatalistic language he uses to his friends Oenomaus (later Doctore) and Melitta as they plan a future together as a couple:

Both always fretting at what tomorrow may bring. We are slaves, the burden of choice and conscience equally removed. We are truly free when we fight!

Or when we fuck...

(GoTA03).

---

147 Patterson, 1982: 5.
148 Harrisson, 2016: 61.
Such as his passivity he even interprets choice, something modern audiences (and
certainly Spartacus) might value as fundamental to notions of freedom, as a liability.
Melitta, a victim of sexual commodification (see chapter three), also accepts this as a
fundamental feature of being enslaved, while Oenomaus talks of having to bear these
‘burdens’ (GoTA05). These examples suggest that Spartacus’s impulse towards
resistance is not widely endorsed by other slave characters, many of whom seem to
believe that a positive change in the circumstances of their enslavement lies beyond
their control or even imagination. It is not Spartacus’s isolated acts of heroism which
characterise slave attitudes at the ludus, but pragmatism and acceptance.
Furthermore, Gannicus’s struggle to adapt to life post-slavery and references to the
limits of freedom (‘no man is entirely free’, S0205) imply that the liberty so desired
by Spartacus is not necessarily an unalloyed blessing.\footnote{This ambivalence towards freedom is not confined to the Starz series. This suggests a nuancing, if not necessarily a questioning of, the primacy of liberty in some modern slave narratives. In Game of Thrones Daenerys Targaryn liberates the slaves of all the cities she conquers because she regards liberty as a basic human right. However, her idealism is dented when she is forced to recognise the social and economic realities of sudden freedom after an ex-slave requests re-enslavement (S0410).}

On the other hand, accommodating to and accepting slavery also carries personal
costs. Both the defiant and the compliant must confront the same ethos of human
commodification which lies at the heart of the series’ depiction of slavery, where
slaves, however ‘valued’, are never permitted to forget their inferior status. For
Crixus, this is conveyed in two ways. Firstly, throughout season one Crixus is forced
to submit to the unwanted sexual advances of his domina Lucretia, and the
objectification of her female guests. Crixus’s sexual commodification by Lucretia
(she uses him to beget an heir) could be seen as the price of his elevated status.
Although Lucretia seems to derive pleasure from their secret trysts, it is still an unequal arrangement based upon the exploitation, emasculation and disempowerment of the slave partner. Indeed, such is his reliance on her good will that when his preeminent status at the *ludus* is undermined by injury and concomitant failure to ‘perform’, even his slave lover Naevia begs him to find a way of retaining Lucretia’s patronage to ensure he is not sold (S0108).

In a related scene, the fallout from these injuries is also used to highlight Crixus’s dispensability and the fallacy of loyalty when, despite faithful service, it becomes brutally clear that every slave’s true value to the *ludus* is purely transactional. Informed of Batiatus’s plans to sell him, Crixus bitterly laments: ‘the *glory* I have earned this *ludus*, this is my fucking reward.’ (S0108). And when Lucretia later attempts to intercede for him by claiming ‘he’s part of the family’, Batiatus callously replies ‘he’s a fucking slave! This house, this family is a *business*’. Predictably (and necessarily – he is needed for the uprising), Crixus makes a swift recovery, regains his former strength and goes on to further triumphs in the arena. However, the incident is noteworthy within the wider depiction of slavery in the series because it highlights the costs and limits of Crixus’s accommodation. Status, position and favour are in the gift of the master and just as they can be granted, they can also be withdrawn.

**Resistance ‘privileged’**

This focus on the limits of Crixus’s strategy of accommodation to slavery brings me to the crux of my arguments concerning why these contrasting narratives – resistance versus accommodation – are so central to the nuanced depiction of slavery in the
series. *Spartacus* is a story of slave rebellion with a strong, if sometimes conflicted, resistance figure at its heart. This therefore requires that the ‘accommodationist’ culture, while a complicating factor in the depiction of slavery, must be ultimately discredited. In the same way that Spartacus is forced to confront the limits of his resistance agenda under slavery, so Crixus’s loyalty to the *ludus* and self-identification through gladiatorial servitude, are also deliberately undermined.

The failure of accommodation is illustrated primarily through the destruction of illusions around slave power, privilege and agency. Initially, as with Crixus, the slaves’ choices make sense in the context of their own environment. Many of those who accommodate to, accept or embrace their circumstances, such as Ashur, Crixus and Oenomaus at the Batiatus *ludus* or Marcus Crassus’s lover Kore, accrue benefits or enhanced status. These range from private quarters, favourable working conditions, authority over other slaves, financial gain, sexual favours, or even the *prospect* of manumission however remote (its rarity further attests to the series’ predominantly bleak portrayal of slavery). Gradually the slaves are forced to recognise that such privileges are illusory, and that rebellion is the only honourable course for slaves depicted in the series.

Take for instance, the experiences of the slave ‘collaborator’ Ashur, one of the most interesting and morally complex characters in the series, who stands at the extreme end of the ‘accommodation’ spectrum. Described by James Klima as ‘an exile among the brotherhood’ and ‘more Roman than rebel’ on account of his treachery,

150 this failed but ruthlessly ambitious Syrian gladiator sees his future firmly in the

150 Klima, 2015: 54.
Roman world. An amoral opportunist, he exploits and betrays his fellow slaves at the *ludus* while building strong relationships with his Roman masters and patrons, accruing favourable treatment, status and material wealth in the process.\(^{151}\)

However, despite his loyalty and willingness to perform any tasks required of him, including the murder and torture of other slaves, he is never really accepted, merely tolerated. His new patron Glaber consistently refers to him as ‘slave’ rather than by name, regularly doubts his honesty - ‘why should I believe the word of a slave?’ (S0205) - and uses him as an expendable shield for his own corrupt activities. Once his usefulness expires, Glaber nonchalantly hands him over for gruesome (and deserved) retribution at the hands of the slave rebels, his ‘deepest wish’ (freedom) denied by a Roman patron in whom he erroneously placed his trust (S0210).

Numerous other scenes in *Spartacus* illustrate the failure and futility of accommodation and acceptance. For instance, the ferocity of Roman reprisals (crucifixions, stonings and torture) against the remaining slave population following the slave uprising, where slaves are singled out for punishment as a generic group regardless of their prior loyalty, docility or obedience. All of these incidents reinforce an essential message: accommodating to slavery is pointless since Romans will always regard slaves as expendable, social and moral inferiors, as instruments rather than humans, however loyal, submissive or accommodating they may appear. This attitude infuses the treatment of slaves across the series and is returned to regularly in this thesis.

\(^{151}\) He engineers Barca’s murder and is therefore indirectly responsible for Pietros’s abuse and suicide.
Conclusion

Let us return to Spartacus and his role in the series. Even the few surviving historical sources tell us that there were many players in this complex drama of slavery and rebellion, none of whom could be classed as the inspirational moral crusaders, martyrs or abolitionists that previous receptions - primarily the 1960 film - would have us believe. It has been my principal contention that a key feature of the Starz series’ representation of slavery is to correct, or at least question, some of those idealistic assumptions by featuring other, alternate slave narratives which reject defiance and resistance in favour of accommodation to slavery.

The resistance narrative is also, to an extent, problematised through the deliberate foregrounding of Spartacus’s personal losses and struggles, and a narrative shift towards the experiences, behaviours and motivations of these other slave characters. Furthermore, even if it inevitably has to give way, the series at least gains a thicker texture from including the accommodationist perspective and exploring the circumstances under which slaves might even internalise the ideology of slavery, the traces of which cannot be entirely erased.  

However, since Spartacus is the unequivocal moral hero of a story about slave rebellion, his view of servitude must ultimately be prioritised. So, while I have argued that accommodation, and the practical reasons for following it, receive a fair ‘hearing’ in the text, I still maintain that it is, on balance, negatively perceived.

Nor is it unknown in recent slave narratives. In The Handmaid’s Tale, cited earlier, the new sex ‘slaves’ are told: ‘this may not seem ordinary to you right now, but after a time it will’ (S0101).
Indeed, the many betrayals suffered by the principal slave protagonists, and the treatment to which they are subjected whether they choose to rebel or not, merely reinforces the importance of revolt as the only valid response to the manifest injustices of slavery.
Chapter Three

The Uses and Abuses of Slave Sexuality

Did she not breathe? Did her heart not beat like any other woman’s? You did not see a woman, did you? You just saw something to be used and discarded. You just saw a fucking slave. (Crixus to his lover’s former master, S0202).

‘We’ve managed to get our sex and violence in within the first sixty seconds of this episode so we’re on track’. ¹⁵³

Lacking any rights over their own bodies, all Roman slaves of both sexes were potentially open to unrestricted sexual exploitation by their owners, and sexual slavery has been described by one scholar as ‘the dehumanizing device par excellence’. ¹⁵⁴ Indeed, alongside physical assaults, it is regarded as a defining principle of servitude. ¹⁵⁵ This is also widely reflected onscreen, where the scantily clad slave girl as sexual object for the lust of her master and his guests is a common staple in many (but not all) of the classical films and TV shows from which Spartacus and other television receptions draw inspiration. In some, notably The Sign of the Cross (1932), I Claudius (1976) and Caligula (1979), the slave women rarely rise above the status of either minor characters or, more often, sexually titillating and anonymised objects of the audience’s voyeuristic gaze. Others, notably Quo Vadis? (1951; 1985), Spartacus (1960; 2004), The Last Days of Pompeii (1984),

¹⁵³ Brent Fletcher, Director of GoTA05. DVD Audio Commentary.
¹⁵⁵ Walters, 1997: 40.
Rome (2005-7), and Ben-Hur (2010) at least acknowledge the presence of sexual exploitation in the lives of female slave characters, while also perpetuating the objectification of those female bodies by continuing to display them on screen for (male) audience ‘enjoyment’.

This chapter investigates the representation of the slave as a sexual being in Spartacus, and how it informs the series’ depiction of slavery. It examines three main (but by no means exhaustive) themes: the commodification and control of slave sexuality by their owners, as well as slave resistance; rape; and the depiction of the sexual body, specifically nudity. In order to determine the significance of these themes within the wider discourses around media representations of servitude, I contextualise my findings through a comparative analysis of other recent classical and non-classical slave narratives. Given the prominence of studies into onscreen male sexual slavery (or rather the sexually objectified gladiatorial slave) in the current literature, and the comparative lack of attention to the arguably more ubiquitous sexualisation of female slaves in Spartacus, I focus primarily on the experiences of women. I also examine the problematic discrepancies between the depiction of male and female slave sexuality onscreen, and what it reveals about the series’ engagement with contemporary sexual and gender politics.

Before commencing this analysis, it is worth highlighting the absolute centrality of sex in the Starz series’ portrayal of Roman antiquity, which may go some way towards explaining the popularity of this topic in the scholarship reviewed in the

---

156 Cyrino, 2005: 110-11 sees a strong association between Varinia’s slave status and her sexuality.
introduction. There is nothing new to this. In some ways, the series is merely building upon an established tradition in popular culture of conflating sex and sexual freedom with antiquity,\textsuperscript{158} where it is assumed that Roman sexual practice was ‘characterised by excess and depravity’ (even though Roman sexual mores were historically more nuanced).\textsuperscript{159} However, \textit{Spartacus} foregrounds the portrayal of sex much more extensively than any prior media text, devoting several minutes of virtually every episode to scenes of explicit sexual content. Some of it is passionate and consensual, but much of it is demeaning and exploitative with slaves the principal victims. I argue that, while the totality of ancient slavery clearly encompassed much more than sex,\textsuperscript{160} the series takes the issue of sexual labour as a key lens through which to represent the institution and the way it permeates the lives of all the slave characters. For the central antagonists Lucretia and Batiatus, it is sex, and the random and uncontrolled exercise of sexual power, which essentially defines relationships with their slaves.

While these popular assumptions around Roman sexual depravity help to explain the importance of sexuality in modern receptions of Roman slavery, the increasingly prominent role played by sex in our contemporary media culture is also a factor, as scholars have noted. In their multi-authored study of sex and television, Glynn, Aston and Johnson ascribe to modern television drama a crucial role in reflecting and even shaping the discourse around contemporary representations of sex, and

\textsuperscript{158} Blanshard, 2010: xi.
\textsuperscript{159} Romans were deeply concerned about sexuality morality, as Langlands (2006) convincingly argues in her lengthy study of \textit{pudicitia}, defined as ‘a moral virtue …that pertains to the regulation of behaviour (either of oneself or of other people) specifically associated with sex’ (31). Yet she also acknowledges the role of popular culture in perpetuating stereotypes about Roman sexual perversity and semi-nudity (9).
argue strongly for a greater appreciation of the political, social and cultural significance of these depictions and what they reveal about the commercial priorities of the medium.\textsuperscript{161} Although he does not discuss \textit{Spartacus} or \textit{Rome}, Glynn suggests that the ‘sexing up’ of historical drama series is driven by an American cable TV culture where ‘graphic depictions of sex and violence’ are the norm.\textsuperscript{162} Feona Attwood also argues that we are witnessing a ‘sexualisation of culture’,\textsuperscript{163} that has begun to permeate ‘every aspect of our existence’.\textsuperscript{164} Any wider analysis of sexuality in the representation of slavery in \textit{Spartacus} must also be examined within these historical, cultural and industrial contexts.

The Commodification of Slave Sexuality

From the anonymised slave attendants regularly required to act as ‘live marital aids’ for their Roman owners,\textsuperscript{165} to the sale of their bodies to potential patrons, slaves’ sexuality is universally exploited in the Starz series. This section explores the representation of slave sex as a valuable commodity or tool in advancing the social, economic and political ambitions of their masters through a series of character studies: Diona and Melitta, who appear in the prequel, and Naevia and Mira from season one. Anise Strong has examined how Diona’s story relates to the visual representation of rape in modern television drama, but her character’s role in highlighting the commodification of slave sexuality in the series has not been

\textsuperscript{161} Glynn, Aston and Johnson, 2012.
\textsuperscript{162} Glynn, 2012: 170.
\textsuperscript{163} Attwood, 2006.
\textsuperscript{164} Attwood, 2009: xiii-xiv. Phillips, 2013 explores how the ubiquity of rape narratives in popular culture, including television, open up spaces for discussions around sexual violence in society. Scholarly analysis of the popular TV series \textit{Game of Thrones} is also dominated by examinations of its explicit portrayal of sex and what it reveals about the sexual and gender politics of contemporary television drama (Frankel, 2014; Genz, 2016; Larsson, 2016). More recently, Taddeo (2019) has also examined the proliferation of rape storylines in recent period in period dramas, specifically within the context of the #metoo movement.
\textsuperscript{165} Cyrino, 2014: 626.
sufficiently studied. The narrative contributions of Melitta and Mira have also been little researched, while Naevia’s status as the most important and complex female slave character in the series offers a number of unexplored opportunities for extended analysis of her identity as sexual slave. I conclude with an examination of the sexual commodification of male slaves, notably Spartacus and Crixus.

Of the four case studies, the young slave girl Diona’s descent into sexual slavery is probably the bleakest and most tragic of the various slave character trajectories featured in the series. After a humiliating public physical ‘inspection’ to ascertain her virginity (slave chastity is a prized and valuable asset), Diona is prostituted to a wealthy Roman client Cossutius in exchange for his hiring of Batiatus’s gladiators for his forthcoming games (GoTA03). Having purchased her virginity, he forces her to copulate with the ugliest gladiator in the ludus and then sodomises her. As damaged ‘goods’ Diona’s sexual violation diminishes her value, and Lucretia later commodifies Diona’s sexuality to lure wealthy guests to the villa, forcing her to have public sex with a series of gladiators for her guests’ sexual pleasure (GoTA02-6). Diona can be used and abused in this way because her status as sub-human ‘property’ prevents them from regarding her sexuality as anything other than an asset to be traded for political or economic gain. Her helplessness, and subsequent execution following a failed escape attempt, expose the unbridgeable power disparity between slaves and free which is central to the series’ depiction of slavery. It also plays into the recurring theme, explored in chapter two, of slavery’s human costs.

166 Strong, 2013; 2016: 139-142. I revisit her claims later in this chapter in my examination of rape.
Another prominent victim of the commodified sexual culture at the *ludus* is the slave girl Mira (and future slave rebel). Ordered by Lucretia to help another commodified slave, the widowed Spartacus to ‘hone his [sexual] skills’ in preparation for being pimped out to a wealthy client whose patronage the household is keen to secure, she presents herself naked in his cell (S0109). When Mira fails to arouse Spartacus’s interest (still grieving for his wife, he finds her proposition ‘insulting’), she is blamed and subjected to a brutal physical examination by Lucretia which underscores her commodified status: ‘Arse, tits and cunt all appear to be without disease or deformity’. She is sent back with the ominous words ‘I expect his cock in you, or you’ll find a sword in its place’. 167 Mira disappoints her owners not through any lack of obedience or attention to her duties, but because she has failed in her primary function as a sexual tool or commodity. Although her humiliation is not as public as that of Diona, she is still nothing more than an object to be penetrated, whether sexually or violently. More egregiously, Mira is also fully aware of the transactional nature of her sexuality, yet can do nothing, highlighting slaves’ absolute lack of choice. Unfairly and rather hypocritically shamed by Spartacus for pleasuring one of Batiatus’s henchmen Autus, the man responsible for his wife’s death, she retorts: ‘I was ordered to attend to his [Autus’s] needs. He means nothing to me’ (S0111).

Similar to many other slave women at the *ludus*, Diona and Mira are women of comparatively low status whose sexuality can be easily exploited. However, in order to reinforce the series’ representation of slavery as unremittingly bleak, even the

167 To spare her from retribution Spartacus obliges, playing into his reception in the series as a man of honour and compassion.
sexuality of trusted and valued body slaves, the most important female slave characters in the early seasons, is shown being sacrificed to their owners’ ambitions. Take Lucretia’s body slave Melitta, wife to the trainer Oenomaus. Although, as in *Rome*, mistress/slave boundaries are strictly observed (I explore the dynamics of these relations further in chapter seven), early scenes indicate the existence of a comparatively close relationship between Melitta and Lucretia and, in a limited sense (unusually for the series) Lucretia seems to acknowledge Melitta’s humanity over her status as property or ‘thing’. 

168 She includes her slave in conversations, compliments Oenomaus’s combat skills and even expresses gratitude for her loyalty (usually it is merely expected). Unfortunately, Melitta’s prominence also brings her to the attention of one of the couple’s potential patrons, the wealthy Roman Varus, who, as a slave owner himself, automatically assumes (as do all the Romans in the series) that all female slaves are potential sexual objects. And it is here that Lucretia’s primary instincts prevail: where her own interests are concerned, *all* slaves regardless of their value or status are exploitable assets.

Varus: Have him [Gannicus] fuck this one [Melitta] and I will watch.

Lucretia: Apologies.

Varus: For what? Is she not a slave?

Batiatus: She is and will do as commanded.

*(GoTA02)*

---

168 See Toscano (2008) on the close, but submissive relationships Merula, Eleni and Charmian have with their respective mistresses. They share intimacies but the social chasm between them is always foregrounded.

169 This accords with the legal position which humanised slaves while also commodifying them (Watson, 1987: 46-66).
Lucretia’s lukewarm opposition underscores how shallow her apparent intimacy with Melitta really is; indeed, she later exploits the scene to blackmail her into securing Oenomaus’s support. This sexual commodification of Melitta is also given extra dramatic piquancy when contrasted with Batiatus’s earlier promotion of her husband to the privileged position of ‘Doctore’, in recognition of ‘the most loyal and honourable of men’. That Batiatus is able to promote and praise the husband, while simultaneously pimping his wife, is an effective way of illustrating his utter disregard for his slaves’ sexual rights, and the kinship privileges he has bestowed. Melitta’s subsequent resignation and acceptance, ‘Some acts cannot be avoided when stripped of choice’ (GoTA03) highlight the sexual vulnerability and disempowerment of all female slaves at the ludus, regardless of their status.

Melitta is inadvertently killed during a convoluted plot to poison Lucretia’s father in law Titus, and is succeeded as body slave by Naevia, whose chastity (unlike that of her unfortunate friend Diona) Lucretia now promises to protect (GoTA06). However, Naevia also quickly discovers that her ‘value’ is ultimately defined by her sexuality and usefulness when the slave Ashur asks for her as a ‘reward’ for his assistance in bringing down Batiatus’s chief business rival (S0112). Again, Batiatus agrees because he routinely and unthinkingly abuses his own slave women, and regards her chastity in the same way. Lucretia’s response to Naevia’s treatment is also significant. She does not object in principle to the notion of Naevia’s sexuality being exploited. Rather, she is displeased because of the undeserving status of the recipient: ‘Naevia has been my most trusted slave. It’s betrayal, Quintus.’

170 Her death is necessary for explaining Oenomaus’s character in season one; unbeknown to him, she actually died in Gannicus’s bed. Although it informs the subsequent Gannicus/Oenomaus rivalry, it has little bearing on the slave narrative.
betrayal is not of Naevia, whose sexual rights are not deemed important, but of Lucretia’s personal and social standing since Batiatus’s decision to prostitute Naevia over her objections undermines Lucretia’s assumed ownership of Naevia’s sexuality. This ‘betrayal’ not only obliges her to forego the return on a potentially valuable ‘asset’, but also to cede absolute authority over her slave’s sexual rights, tying into wider issues around the discourse of authority which encompasses not just the slave-free dynamic, but the male-female one.171

The sexual commodification of these two body slaves illustrates two important ideas in the series’ portrayal of sexuality. Firstly, that all master/slave relations are invariably characterised by abuse, betrayal and exploitation. Secondly, the absolute disregard for the human dignity of all slaves in the series. For the ‘socially dead’ slave, however loyal and obedient, sexual commodification is so normalised that status, trust or loyalty offer no security or immunity.172 This is mirrored elsewhere, notably in the treatment of Kore, favoured slave or ‘concubine’ to the Roman general Marcus Crassus and the highest status slave character in the series. Invited to bathe and take advantage of Crassus’s ‘hospitality’ (which includes two semi-naked slave women), Caesar unthinkingly takes sexual advantage of Kore on the casual understanding that her solicitous attention to his needs will include sex (S0301).173 In terms of the series’ wider slave story, this normalised sexualisation validates, the series’ overarching revolt narrative; slaves must be thoroughly degraded if the rebellion is to have any moral justification and authority.

171 I return to this dynamic in chapter seven.
172 The notion of ‘social death’ was first mooted by the historian Orlando Patterson (1982; 2018) and has become commonplace in slavery studies. It refers to the totality of the masters’ control over every aspect of the slaves’ life which denied them any independent existence, rendering relations ‘precarious, provisional and tenuous’ (2018: x).
173 I explore Kore’s relationship with Crassus in greater detail in chapter seven.
This section has focused mainly on female characters in *Spartacus* because sexual commodification dominates their representation. However, although less pronounced, male slaves are also sexually commodified, and for similar reasons.\textsuperscript{174} Building upon the sexual glamour that surrounded gladiators in the ancient world,\textsuperscript{175} at events to promote the *ludus* Batiatus parades his best gladiators, inviting male and female guests to ‘feel’ the ‘wares’ and ‘place orders’ for them as if they were menu items at a restaurant, with sex an additional ‘extra’ (S0103). One of them, Spartacus’s Roman friend Varro, is forced to have public sex with an unknown female slave to ensure the patronage of Lucretia’s lascivious friend, the senator’s daughter Illythia. The gladiators are also prostituted for their perceived sexual potency, and subjected to ‘stud’ like animals. Even Spartacus’s blood is forcibly extracted for its aphrodisiac and healing properties (S0109). Similar to the female slaves, no one is immune from sexual exploitation, even the most prominent gladiators. Indeed, their success makes them prime candidates for these lucrative ‘services’.

As the strongest gladiator at the *ludus* Crixus’s fertility is a particularly valuable commodity. To ensure the continuance of the house of Batiatus, he is forced into sexual relations with Lucretia, and reduced to sub-human breeding stock. While her initial distaste for Crixus arguably gives way to genuine affection (although, as with other long-term master/slave relationships in the series, it is still based on notions of ‘ownership’), her principal aim in sleeping with him is reproduction. That Batiatus

\textsuperscript{174} I do not refer here to the sexual objectification of the male body by Roman women referenced in the literature in chapter one, but the use of their sexuality for profit; I recognise, however, that they are related.

\textsuperscript{175} As evidenced by some of the graffiti found in Pompeii. See Futrell, 2006: 146-7 for examples.
even colludes in this arrangement further illustrates his absolute disregard for all his slaves’ sexual integrity; he does not even see them as ‘competition’: ‘I tolerated it because it made you happy and gave me no thought’ (S0112). While, by Roman standards he is remarkably tolerant of her relations with a slave (it serves the modern tone of the narrative to portray Lucretia and Batiatus as sexual equals), Batiatus’s disinterest is important because it highlights Crixus’s lowly status as an expendable sexual commodity in the service of his master’s dynastic as well as economic and political ambitions.  

Closely related to the theme of commodification is the way female slave sexuality is used as a ‘control mechanism[s],’ or vehicle for rewarding and placating male slaves, usually as wives or prostitutes. The utility of encouraging slave unions to discourage flight, ensure loyalty and foster obedience, or using slave women to ease sexual tensions, was recognised by Roman slave owners. It is used in a similar way in the series. When Crixus does well in the arena, Batiatus tells Lucretia to give him a ‘woman’ (no names, reinforcing their commodified status) as ‘motivation to the others that success brings decoration in many forms’ (S0102). The most prominent form of sexual control is the use of slave prostitutes as a morale boosters or rewards. The enthusiasm of the men for these sexual rewards contrasts with the 

176 The double standards of Roman sexual morality disapproved of sexual relations between freeborn women and slaves (Edwards, 1993: 52). These women could be divorced for adultery (Williams, 2010: 52).  
178 It is assumed that the vast majority of Roman prostitutes were slaves, ex-slaves or women existing at the level of slavery (McGinn,1998: 266), so I include these women in my analysis.  
179 Varro (De Agricultura, 1.17.4) and Columella (Res Rusticae, 1, 8.4). Cato the Elder also used female slaves to control the sexual appetites of his male slaves, to make them less ‘troublesome’ (Plutarch, Life of Cato, 21.2). For an analysis of methods employed to control slaves and ensure their loyalty, including sex, see Bradley, 1989: 21–45 and Joshel, 2012:123-126. On the use of slave women as sexual ‘bait’ in the Antebellum South see Genovese, 175: 475. Similar ‘rewards’ were given to Greek soldiers in The Iliad. The stories of these captured and enslaved women are dramatised in Pat Barker’s recent novel The Silence of the Girls (Penguin Books, 2018).
1960 film Spartacus’s rejection of Varinia (‘I am not an animal!’), and implies that slave sex is cheap, plentiful and poorly regarded. This underscores both the widespread abuse of slave women (the primary ‘objects’) in the series, but also an underlying climate of sexual brutality and misogyny at the ludus which, in turn, plays into the moral ambivalence of slave characters explored in chapter two. It is true that the 1960 film also showed this (Varinia is allocated to Spartacus), yet it lacks the violence of the Starz series. In one scene, Ashur tells the rough gladiator Raskos ‘I expect to see her ass returned absent blood’ (S0106). Slaves’ sexuality can be commodified and abused by both slave and free.

Slave wives play a less prominent role, given the restricted living arrangements (the men are kept in prison like conditions, to underscore their subhuman status). However, the basic human desire for kinship, and the sexual autonomy that such relations bring, are important drivers in the wider narrative; the loss of his wife precipitates Spartacus’s decision to rebel, as does Crixus’s loss of Naevia. Valued and successful slaves such as Doctore and later Spartacus are among the few permitted to keep wives, although, in order to underscore the slaves’ lack of genuine sexual rights, access to these women is strictly controlled. When Batiatus grants Doctore an additional night with his wife ‘in gratitude’ for offering honest opinions beyond the weekly visit (GoTA01), it reveals the shallow nature of Doctore’s ‘authority’ at the ludus, and the fact that the privileges and kinship rights which accrue from his favoured position on the servile hierarchy, are still contingent upon pleasing his master and can technically be withdrawn at any time and for any reason.

180 See Raucci, 2016 on the way spaces are used to highlight the series’ master/slave power dynamic.
Spartacus’s desire for a reunion with his beloved wife, Sura, a key driver in the ‘resistance’ narrative, is also cynically manipulated by Batiatus to secure his loyalty and compliance (and thereby continue the commodification of his talents for financial gain). As Batiatus slyly reminds him, ‘her fate is attached to these walls. If they collapse around me, how are we to help her from beneath the rubble?’ (S0105). When Lucretia suggests that reunion with his wife might encourage Spartacus to revert ‘to his Thracian ways and thoughts of defiance’ (linking back to the idea of Thracians as inherently rebellious), Batiatus arranges for Sura to be murdered (S0106). Sura’s killing is crucial since it lays the foundations for Spartacus’s decision to overthrow the ludus when he later (and inevitably) learns of Batiatus’s treachery. However, it also shows that female sexuality is a useful tool in the armoury of slave owners by which to bind, manipulate and control their human ‘property’ within the unequal power dynamic that shapes the series’ depiction of slavery.

Significantly, exploiting slave sexuality is a recurring theme in other ancient world dramas, and is also used to illustrate the same idea, namely slaves’ lack of sexual rights. And again, in most cases, women bear the brunt. In The Last Days of Pompeii (1984), the brothel owner tries to sexually exploit the virginal flower seller Nydia, and she is only saved from sexual shame by the ‘good’ Glaucus. In Quo Vadis (1985) (as in the original 1895 novel and the 1951 film), the favoured slave girl Eunice is unthinkingly given to Petronius’s friend Marcus (despite the fact that Petronius is portrayed as a relatively kind master).\(^\text{181}\) In Rome, the patrician Atia may shrink from sexual relations with slaves herself, yet she still regards all her female

\(^{181}\) I return to Petronius as an exemplar of the ‘good’ Roman in chapter seven. 
slaves as sexual commodities and has no objections to using them for either pleasure or business, summoning an anonymous slave girl - ‘the German slut’ - from her kitchens to have sex with her libidinous lover Mark Antony on the morning of Caesar’s funeral (S0201). She also proudly boasts to her sexually reluctant son Octavian that ‘no slave girl was safe’ when his father was alive (S0106). While less important than in Spartacus (consistent with the series’ dominant focus on the sexual lives of the Roman characters, Atia is more inclined to use her own body to get what she wants), slave women are still often represented primarily through their sexuality. Perhaps inevitably, several recent antebellum slave texts, notably Roots and Underground, also portray this aspect of slavery, using the enslaved as commodities to secure business or political patronage, or as ‘breeders’ to replenish slave ‘stock’. These examples suggest that sexualisation is central to the depiction of enslaved women in recent TV dramas.

Slave Sexual Agency and Resistance

In chapter two I argued that viewers are still meant to read Spartacus as a story of resistance. The depiction of slave sexuality also feeds into this theme by showing how slaves attempt to seize control of their sexual rights. This is conveyed primarily through the clandestine sexual relationship between Crixus and Naevia, whose liaison allows this couple to briefly transcend their enslavement by carving out a small, private and pleasurable space of sexual, if not, personal freedom. It also helps to ‘humanise’ Crixus, and detracts from the sordid nature of his liaison with Lucretia. Furthermore, in a conscious rejection of Lucretia’s plans to commodify her

182 Notably Roots (2016) and also Underground; in the latter, the plantation owner is so keen to secure political support that he is willing to prostitute his own illegitimate daughter, the slave girl Rosilee. 183 See Augoustakis, 2013 on the way slave relationships in Spartacus are generally more affectionate, long-lasting and trusting than those of the Roman characters.
chastity, by choosing Crixus (a fellow slave whose sexuality ‘belongs’ to her mistress, further sharpening their resistance), Naevia asserts ownership over the only thing she can feasibly (and partly) control - her sexuality. Their willingness to take these risks is also testament to the importance of sexual autonomy as a symbol of human liberty in the series, even if that freedom is only exercised in secret; the impossibility of physical freedom in the short term is compensated for by something more attainable, sexual agency. Emboldened by love, Naevia, an ostensibly meek and compliant young slave, also exploits her sexuality (this time for her own advantage) with the guard Hector, whose sexual interest she encourages in order to steal a key to the gladiatorial cells, and thus facilitate her liaisons with Crixus (S0108).

The slaves’ sexual resistance in the Starz series also shows the influence of the 1960 film, where Spartacus is unwilling to sleep with Varinia in front of Batiatus, and rejects attempts to use his (virginal) sexuality for the base voyeuristic pleasures of his owners. When he declares to Batiatus, who is watching from the roof of his cell, ‘I’m not an animal!’ it is an implicit affirmation of sexual agency and personal privacy, buttressed by Varinia’s equally robust and defiant response ‘nor am I’ (Naevia’s determination has echoes of this). Although the scene is primarily about emphasising Spartacus’s steadfast resistance to his new owner’s attempts to dehumanise him, it also implies a rejection of sexual servitude by the more exploited partner, Varinia.  

There are other, later cases. Varinia fights off Batiatus in Spartacus (2004) and Athene, the Greek slave in Ben-Hur (2010) grows genuinely attached to Judah when she is told by her venal master to sleep with him in exchange for information. Gaia in Rome also turns these situations to her advantage, as I examine below.
Although the affair must be exposed for dramatic and narrative reasons, and there is an undeniably bleak side to Naevia’s reminder to Crixus that they were living ‘in a dream’,\(^{185}\) the fact that Naevia is primarily faithful to her own sexual desires rather than those of her masters, and is also willing to pursue them, displays a streak of resistance which contrasts with the overt defiance of Spartacus, but is no less powerful. So, when Lucretia finally discovers the affair and physically assaults her, Naevia does not beg cravenly for mercy but once again finds the same inner courage which led her to pursue the relationship with Crixus and retorts: ‘Crixus never loved you, he only did as commanded’ (S0112). Slaves also see sexual integrity and the freedom to choose their partners as a key feature of their re-humanisation during the rebellion phase. When challenged over the reasons for her relationship with Spartacus (assumed protection from the other slaves), Mira hotly replies ‘he would not be so enslaved’ (S0202), implying that sex and freedom are entwined and central to their new-found liberty, and also playing into DeKnight’s claim that love and the freedom to love is a key theme in the series.\(^{186}\)

In the brutal world of slavery depicted onscreen, women are the chief victims of sexual servitude, yet they are also capable of resistance to a role that slavery (and the Starz TV series) has assigned to them. Slave sexuality could be seen as constituting a key battleground between the masters’ attempts at complete control of all aspects of servile life, and limited efforts to resist them.

\(^{185}\) Naevia’s sale and his punishment precipitate Crixus’s decision to join the uprising, setting in motion the slave rebellion (S0112).
\(^{186}\) McGee, 2012.
‘Hey TV: Stop Raping Women!’

Related to the theme of sexual commodification is the series’ prominent use of rape in the portrayal of sexual servitude. While antiquity is replete with accounts of abductions and violations of women (two rapes - those of the Sabine women and Lucretia - are foundational stories in the formation of the Roman Republic, and rape was also a major theme in Ovid), there is also a compelling historical justification for the inclusion of rape in the representation of sexual servitude in retellings of the Roman world. Rape was a part of the slave society that the characters lived in, and in many ways could be seen as symbolising the absolute legal authority exercised by masters over the bodies of their slaves. Classical scholars also note that sexual access to enslaved women, whether consensual or not, was assumed, and regarded as neither shameful nor wrong.

Unsurprisingly therefore, slave rape has routinely been alluded to, in some form, in ancient world cinema and television. The 1960 film *Spartacus* openly references the prostitution of female slaves in the scene where the heroine Varinia is ‘allocated’ to Spartacus. Denied her company after refusing to be observed by the voyeur Batiatus, he later asks Varinia whether the other gladiator to whom she was sent ‘hurt’ her, implying the presence of sexual violence in the lives of female slaves. However, the audience never actually sees or hears the rape take place, the abuse suggested but never made explicit. Nor does it have any adverse impact on the slaves’ mental state.

---

188 I concur with Anise Strong that all sex with slaves is by definition rape but is distinguished by the use of force/violence (Strong, 2016: 137).
189 Livy, 1.9 and 57-60. See Joshel, 1993 on the significance of the violation of Lucretia. See Johnson and Ryan, 2005: 136-152 for a selective list of literary sources.
or their relationships; once liberated, Spartacus and Varinia continue their lives together, unaffected. Physical evidence of violence, nudity or shows of force are also often elided. Even in the 2004 television adaptation of Spartacus, the attempted rape of the fully-clothed Varinia is swiftly aborted when she fights back, although her bruised face (she is beaten off camera) at least hints at the consequences of defiance.

What has changed is the explicitness of these rape scenes, and their importance to the narrative. In Spartacus the victims are frequently naked and/or physically brutalised and humiliated, violence is common, with the emphasis on the victims’ humiliation, powerlessness and vulnerability. Starz Spartacus also utilises the rape device extensively, to the point that it largely defines the female slave experience and even seeps into the lives of the freeborn characters. As Anise Strong has cogently argued, the primary purpose of sexual violence in Spartacus is to highlight the power differential between slaves and Romans, and this also plays into some of the ‘commodification’ themes explored earlier (primarily in the treatment of Diona).¹⁹² As in other contemporary series with an embedded slave narrative, for instance Game of Thrones, and the recent TV adaptation of Margaret Attwood’s dystopian novel about sexual and reproductive servitude, The Handmaid’s Tale, rape also draws audience attention to the importance of bodily autonomy, and how indiscriminately and casually this integrity can be violated under slavery, or indeed any tyrannical system where abuse of the powerless and socially vulnerable is commonplace.¹⁹³

---

¹⁹² 2013: 179; 2016: 139-140.
¹⁹³ As Stephanie Genz has argued in her study of sexuality and violence in Game of Thrones (2016: 253).
While important, power is just one aspect. Rape drives multiple sub-plots and impacts on the lives of every single major slave character in the series, male and female, victim and perpetrator. As in other TV dramas, rape plays a central role in several male revenge narratives, where rape is coded as an unforgiveable act which not only debases and violates the victim’s sense of personhood, but impugns the masculinity of those she loves and must be avenged.\textsuperscript{194} It even motivates Spartacus. In contrast with the 1960 film, which promotes a more overt political and social justice agenda, in Starz he uses the uprising to avenge the rape and murder of his wife, and only belatedly politicises the rebellion. Conversely, abusers (both slave and Roman) use rape as tool of revenge against real or perceived slights by other characters, a practice Susan Brownmiller calls ‘retaliatory rape’, namely ‘men getting even with men through the convenient vehicle of a woman’s body’.\textsuperscript{195} This is shown in the vicious rape of a young Roman woman by the embittered and brutalised slave Nemetes (S0304), and the violation of the slave girl Kore by Crassus’s son Tiberius (S0304).\textsuperscript{196} The rape device also has an established role in modern media narratives to delineate between ‘good’, and merely ‘bad’ (or anti-heroic) and irredeemably ‘evil’ characters.\textsuperscript{197} As the television scholar Jason Mittell observes, rape is ‘a more taboo, and emotionally volatile, crime to portray on screen than murder’.\textsuperscript{198} It works in a similar way in \textit{Spartacus}. Male slaves can be violent, misogynistic and corrupt, with few demonstrable virtues, but never rape, while rapists, be they slave or free, are summarily dealt with.\textsuperscript{199} 

\textsuperscript{194} Cuklanz argues how prime time TV cop shows often used rape storylines to heroise the ‘good’ male officers, rather than examinations of attitudes to sexual violence in society (2000: 62-98).
\textsuperscript{195} Brownmiller, 2010: 153.
\textsuperscript{196} I explore these scenes in more detail in chapter five.
\textsuperscript{197} Vaage, 2015: 120-149.
\textsuperscript{198} Quoted in Bennett, 2010.
\textsuperscript{199} I discuss this and what how it plays into the series’ problematisation of slave behaviour in more detail in chapter five.
Rape also plays a key role in the rebellion phase. I explore this in more detail in chapter five under the problematisation of servile behaviour, but the trauma of sexual violence is a driving force in the portrayal of the rape victim Naevia’s character in season three. Additionally, rape acts as a kind of brutal social leveller, to which all women, regardless of prior position are potentially vulnerable, underscoring both the patriarchal nature of the Roman society depicted onscreen (which affects both slaves and free) and the precariousness of social status. As her status shifts, so does a woman’s vulnerability to rape. Another important function is the way freedom from rape signals the fugitives’ repossessions or assertion of their sexual integrity, as explored earlier.

This selective survey shows that rape in the series is key to the series’ depiction of slavery. However, since these are visual media texts, we cannot fully understand the portrayal of rape, its reception, and what it reveals about slave sexuality in the series, without exploring aspects of its physical representation and how it compares with other onscreen slave narratives. While there are several scenes of female slave rape, most of it centring around the sexual ‘servicing’ of Lucretia and Batiatus, I focus on the depiction of the multiple public rapes of the slave girl Diona, whose sexual commodification has already been examined.

Anise Strong claims that rape in the Starz series ‘is never glamorized or eroticized’, or portrayed ‘for the shock and titillation of the viewers’. While I concur with her reading of Diona’s rapes as symbolic of ‘the evils of slavery’ and

200 Strong, 2016: 142 raises this in her analysis of the rape of Lucretia.  
201 I explore the purpose of rape in female Romans’ ‘role reversal’ in more detail in chapter seven.  
202 Strong, 2016: 140.  
203 2013: 178.
Roman corruption,\textsuperscript{204} the scenes themselves are open to contrasting interpretations. In many ways, they are brutally effective in conveying the horror and degradation of slave sexual violence. The positioning, with sex from behind, often used to represent ‘degrading, primitive, or abusive sex and rape’,\textsuperscript{205} maximises her humiliation and the lack of agency one would expect from a sexual slave. She is also clearly distressed by the abuse, and her subsequent self-harming, self-hatred (‘friendship is undeserving of a whore’, \textit{GoTA}04), and thoughts of suicide, indicate an attempt to engage with the psychological consequences of sexual violence,\textsuperscript{206} a point also made in Strong’s analysis.\textsuperscript{207} This concern with the emotional aftermath, regarded as an essential feature of ‘good’ depictions of rape,\textsuperscript{208} is noticeably missing in other contemporary TV series depicting sexual violence, notably \textit{Game of Thrones}.\textsuperscript{209} Furthermore, unlike the questionable rape of the slave girl Gaia in \textit{Rome} (S0207),\textsuperscript{210} Diona is never shown enjoying or soliciting the abuse. The disempowerment, humiliation and pain we might expect a slave to suffer in these circumstances are always evident to the viewer, and this accords with other recent depictions of rape in non-Roman slave narratives.\textsuperscript{211}

However, Diona’s rapes could be seen in a less positive light. It has been suggested that rape in contemporary TV drama has been made ‘sexy’ with the women depicted

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{205} Larsson, 2016: 24. Projansky notes this is the most common method of depicting female rape in film and television dramas since it heightens the abuse of power and humiliation central to the trope (2001:125-35).
\textsuperscript{206} Smith, Kouros and Meuret, 2014.
\textsuperscript{207} Strong, 2016: 136.
\textsuperscript{208} Yuan, 2015.
\textsuperscript{209} See Hughes, 2014; Saraiya, 2015; Rosenberg, 2014 and 2016.
\textsuperscript{210} This ‘sado-masochistic’ rape scene was widely criticised as trivialising the master/slave power imbalance. Peers, 2009: 45; Jones, 2014.
\textsuperscript{211} In \textit{12 Years a Slave} the rape of Patsy by her master Epps also foregrounds the humiliation, and, like Diona, she also contemplates suicide out of despair and shame.
\end{flushleft}
as ‘implicit turn-ons’. Others argue that ‘voyeuristic tendencies’ are ‘the hallmark of traditional film images of sexual violence’, where the woman’s body is still the object, despite what is being done to her. Dion’s shapely, naked figure could be seen as an example of sexual objectification, even potentially titillation, recalling Laura Mulvey’s theories around the female body as the passive object of the viewer’s active (invariably male) gaze. The public nature of the rapes and her prominent nudity is also highly unusual outside clearly pornographic films such as *Caligula*. Turning her sexuality into a form of spectacle feeds into the series’ wider portrayal of the abuse of power through slavery, but this does not mean that the viewer necessarily sees this deeper significance. As Maria Larsson has observed of the controversial rapes in *Game of Thrones*, ‘representations of sexual violence can, indeed, be sex…[and] evoke sexual feelings in the viewer, regardless of whether the viewer wishes to engage in such actions in reality’.

Dion’s dual rape by the Roman Cossutius and another slave, described earlier, is also potentially problematic. It is true that the series shows her emerging from the room ‘bruised and distraught’. The use of slaves to abuse other slaves (usually women) could also symbolise Roman corruption of the slave class, a theme present in other recent slave narratives. However, while the focus on Cossutius’s face at the expense of the victim (she does not speak) may indeed convey the power

212 Zimmerman, 2014.
214 Mulvey, 1975: 750.
215 Naked slave rape does not occur in these antebellum slave narratives.
216 Larsson, 2016: 18.
218 In *12 Years a Slave* (2013) Solomon Northrup is forced to whip Patsy, a scene taken from his memoirs, although there is no rape of slaves by slaves. We might assume that deploying slaves to punish each other was also used to divide and demoralise the enslaved in the Roman world.
imbalance between them and emphasise his sexual deviancy, as has been argued, the use of two abusers is more troubling. Of course, sexual depravity against slave women must have occurred in the ancient world, yet is a double rape really necessary to convey Diona’s degradation and lack of status? And at what stage does a genuine attempt to portray sexual violence against slaves become an exercise in cheap titillation that panders to audience voyeurism and stereotypical perceptions of Roman sexual depravity? Such scenes suggest that the series wants its ‘cake and eat it’ and is just as interested in representing the kind of ‘decadent and debauched’ sexuality that the classical world epitomises in the popular imagination, than depicting the horrors of sexual slavery.

This is particularly apparent when we compare Diona’s rape with similar scenes in recent American slave films and TV series. While rape is a dominant feature, it is much less graphic and explicit, while the sadism is also significantly absent. In 12 Years a Slave the rape of Patsy by her master Epps is psychologically disturbing but it is not voyeuristic, and nor is she stripped naked for the viewer’s gaze. Similarly in the TV series Roots (2016) we see the enslaved woman being dragged into the ship captain’s cabin, but the rape is not shown and her resistance is emphasised, as in other series, notably Underground. This may be explained by the fact that antebellum slavery is much more recent, and therefore more painful, and requires a different approach to the portrayal of sexual slavery, namely emphasising its victims’ resistance. It may also reflect heightened racial sensitivities around the depiction of

---

219 Foka, 2015: 193.
220 Blashard, 2010: 3.
221 Admittedly the film does not carry ‘18’ rating like the Starz production, but 15 for ‘strong violence, injury detail, sex, nudity and racist terms’: https://bbfc.co.uk/releases/12-years-slave-2013); however, there is nudity in the auction scenes.
rape in popular culture, since no black slave is shown being raped in Starz either, a subject to which I return in chapter six.222

This analysis has demonstrated that rape in retellings of Roman slavery can be a powerful, and narratively justifiable, vehicle for conveying the power imbalance, denial of bodily agency and sexual commodification which lie at the heart of all slave systems, and which the Starz series emphasises. There are also strong cultural and historical imperatives for featuring rape in slave narratives given slavery’s historical legitimisation of sexual assaults. Nevertheless, this does not fully explain the ubiquity of rape in the lives of these women. The proliferation of rape stories in modern television drama series set in the past is also surely a factor. Rapes on television are not new. Sarah Projansky’s work on 1990s crime series led her to conclude that, not only is it deeply ‘embedded’ but ‘even a moderate consumer of mass media would have difficulty spending a week without coming across the subject’; she also recognised its ‘versatility’ and timelessness.223 However, there has been a marked increase in the number of rape storylines (and its graphic depiction) over the last decade. As one commentator notes, as TV channels - particularly the uncensored cable variety - have proliferated, so rape has morphed ‘from a delicate topic to practically de rigueur’.224

---

222 Moorti, 2001: 133-148 explores the connection between race, gender and rape in 1980s/90s television genres, although her main focus is on prime-time cop shows not historical drama. I explore race and sexuality in Spartacus further in chapter six.
223 Projansky, 2003: 3. Cuklanz, 2000, came to similar conclusions, drawing attention to its importance to ‘the study of relationships between television programming and social change’ (2).
224 Saraiya, 2015. She admits that it is difficult to explain why, suggesting that the increasing popularity of the cable industry has made it ‘easier’ to depict rape. She also cites theories raised in Cuklanz’s 2000 work, cited above, that rape is used to redeem masculinity. Both of these are valid.
Rape is particularly common in mainstream historical or historically inspired dramas, where it is used to underscore the idea that the past, with its misogynistic patriarchal structure and social and gender inequalities, was a dangerous place for women (while also providing a pretext for the kind of explicit sexual content that audiences seem to expect from contemporary TV dramas). Alongside Spartacus, rape storylines feature prominently in Deadwood (2003-5), Game of Thrones (2011-19) (described by on reviewer as ‘by far the rapiest show on TV, possibly ever’),225 Camelot (2011), Black Sails (2014-17) and Outlander (2015-), The Tudors, (2007-10) and Vikings (2013-). Indeed, it would be difficult to find any recent TV series set in the past which did not feature often graphic sexual violence against women (and occasionally men, see Outlander). More justifiably, as stated earlier, rape scenes are also common in TV series set during the period of antebellum American slavery. Avoiding sexual slavery is a major motivation for resistance and escape in both Roots and Underground; in The Book of Negroes, the female slave protagonist becomes the primary object of her master’s lust, and the reason for his sustained humiliation of her.

This has provoked some disquiet,226 and many media commentators regard these representations as gratuitous and sensational, eroticising and trivialising a profoundly traumatic experience for entertainment and rating purposes.227 As Genz convincingly argues in her analysis of sex in Game of Thrones, rape is partly popular because it satiates ‘audiences’ voyeuristic viewing pleasure as they delight in the

225 Yuan, 2015.
226 I could cite dozens of references. Itzkoff, 2014; Hudson, 2014; Rense, 2016.
227 Rosenberg, 2014; Zimmerman, 2014. Strong argues that these representations show little concern for the ‘lasting impact on the characters’ psyches or the narrative arc’ (2016: 134).
spectacle of violence and sex’. 228 Others welcome ‘this alleged ‘‘rape glut’’ as more reflective of the contemporary world, where sexual violence is both endemic and often goes unpunished. 229 However it is interpreted, there is no denying that rape’s versatility and notoriety make it a useful narrative device and ratings boost. 230 So, while there are clear historical precedents for its use in Spartacus, but it would be naïve to discount the role of these contemporary cultural and commercial influences.

The Sexual Body: Nudity

Another ubiquitous feature of the portrayal of slave sexuality which resonates with trends in contemporary media culture, is the widespread use of servile nudity. Widely (although not universally) condemned by the critics as gratuitous and distracting, 231 slave nudity in Spartacus, particularly of women, undeniably borders on the fetishistic. Numerous, seemingly random shots of nameless bare breasted or even fully naked, and attractive female attendants are casually inserted into the background of almost every scene. If they are ‘lucky’, some might be ‘permitted’ to wear a diaphanous breast band, which in itself does little to conceal their modesty. For others, one or both breasts are on permanent display, while in some cases women are shown walking around fully naked.

The series also seems to deliberately feature places where nudity can be narratively justified, playing into suspicions that slavery is merely a convenient cover for the kind of titillating nudity increasingly common in many cable TV series, and likely to

---

228 Genz, 2016: 243.
229 McNamara, 2015.
230 Gjelsvik sees sexualised violence in certain cable providers, notably HBO, as a ‘vital’ marketing strategy (2016: 59).
appeal to the series’ assumed male audience. As in many other, recent TV series, the brothel is strongly represented. Roman prostitutes were usually slaves, and parading semi-naked to attract custom was a common practice, so there is some historical basis for including nudity here. The orgy is also, predictably, recycled (one woman’s body is even used to serve food). Although there is no evidence that Romans never engaged in sexual orgies, they are an accepted, even anticipated feature of cinematic and televisual receptions of antiquity, so their presence in Spartacus is also not surprising. Other examples include a variation on the famed ‘sexposition’, defined as ‘keeping viewers hooked by combining complex plot exposition with explicit sexual goings-on’. It is even alleged that sex workers were employed as extras. In Spartacus, it is usually Batiatus and Lucretia discussing business and the slave women are not having sex, but the effect is the same: titillation. Kristina Lopez speaks for many when she states that ‘where a bare breast was once considered taboo, now audiences barely bat an eye at female nudity. It’s expected, anticipated, demanded. All of this nudity also led one generally positive critic to quip that the series should have been renamed ‘Spartacus: Blood and F***ing Tits’.

---

232 The Sopranos, Game of Thrones, Black Sails and Boardwalk Empire all feature brothels as a locus for much of the action, thus justifying the presence of female ‘eye candy’.
235 Raucci, 2013 is correct that the orgy is not used extensively in the series, although the series makes the most of these scenes with extended and graphic nudity. She does not focus on the presumed slave status of the participants.
236 Blanshard, 2010: 50, 55. Other recent receptions such as Empire and Rome also feature them.
237 Berwick, 2012. The term was originally coined by blogger and critic Myles McNutt (2011) in relation to the HBO series Game of Thrones which used sex scenes as a backdrop to (usually male) exposition. See also McGee (2012a) on the trope in Spartacus.
238 Lucy Lawless, DVD Audio Commentary, GoTA04.
239 In the prequel, a powerful ‘mafia’ figure Tullius is shown discussing business with Batiatus while slave sex workers have sex in the background (GoTA01). Game of Thrones is an obvious influence.
240 Lopez, 2018. She cites compelling statistics to shows that there exists a pronounced double standard around male and female nudity.
We could dismiss this nudity as just another cynical marketing ploy to satisfy the voyeuristic gaze of the series’ male audience. Nudity is a crude and arguably overused visual device in modern popular culture which disproportionately targets women, and which the Starz series implicitly exploits. However, it is not necessarily gratuitous or random and, in the context of slavery, it could be seen as having a valid underlying purpose. Furthermore, there is some historical justification for servile nudity, although it can be read in contrasting ways. If clothing denoted status in Roman society, as Michele George claims, then its removal could signal slaves’ inferior status. The historical evidence for slave nudity is admittedly tenuous and we might struggle to explain all of it, but it should not be disregarded. Although slave clothing is poorly documented, it is assumed that while it was certainly different (usually of rougher material), it was probably similar in appearance to that worn by freeborn Romans. Indeed well-dressed slaves reflected well on the owners’ tastes. On the other hand, slaves’ presumed lack of dignity and honour compared to their freeborn Roman owners meant that they were not regarded as capable of the same feelings of bodily shame. Furthermore, public nakedness was even linked to slavery. To be stripped naked is to depersonalise, anonymise and dehumanise, as Brent Shaw argues was the intention behind the Romans’ public denuding of female Christian martyrs. Tiberius also had naked slave women serve him at banquets, although admittedly, this probably tells us more

Some complain about the disparity regarding male and female full frontal nudity in contemporary film and television (McNamara, 2011; Adewunmi, 2013).

George, 2002: 42.


Olson, 2008: 104-5.


Shaw, 1993: 8, 9,18
about his reputation for sexual depravity than the frequency of servile nudity.\footnote{Suëtonius, 42, 2.}
The extent of the nudity is unlikely, but it is not ahistorical, and keys into Roman ideas about status in the treatment of the body.\footnote{Kyle, 1998: 160 on the disposal and treatment of gladiators’ bodies shows that Romans did not recognise slave bodily dignity.}

These characters are also slaves whose status is defined by lack of bodily and sexual autonomy which nudity could be seen as symbolising.\footnote{Perry, 2014: 1-20.} As noted in the previous section, status dictates how characters are treated, to what uses their bodies are subjected, and whether they are commodified, or able to commodify and exploit others. Building upon Monica Cyrino’s claim that nudity and sex are used to ‘underline abusive power relationships’, I contend that that the naked slave body plays a key role not only in underlining slaves’ absolute sexual availability, but also their debased status vis-à-vis their freeborn counterparts.\footnote{Cyrino, 2014: 626. This is not an unusual observation. Mariah Larsson makes a similar claim in her study of female nudity in Game of Thrones (2015: 28).} Nudity also helps to underscore the system’s dehumanisation of its victims and absolute disregard for slaves’ bodily and sexual rights.

Nudity is commonplace among all characters in the series. Roman women Lucretia and Illythia, wife to the powerful Roman praetor Glaber and a woman of status and wealth, are frequently shown naked when making love to their husband or lovers. Yet because their freeborn status grants them unquestioned authority over where and how their bodies are exposed, these encounters take place in private, on their own terms and for their own sexual pleasure. Nor is any slave permitted to objectify their bodies the way they do to favoured gladiators. By contrast, the nude or semi-naked
slave is constantly on public display, objectified, disempowered, and spectacularised, easy targets for random sexual abuse by their owners or their patrons. Their nakedness illuminates and foregrounds that inferior, sexualised status, particularly when standing alongside or behind their fully clothed and empowered owners (as highlighted in the images above). Illythia’s attendant Besela wears a very short tunic and the diaphanous band cited earlier, exposing her breasts. By contrast, Illythia appears fully clothed in long, luxurious outfits which preserve her personal dignity and advertise her superior status. It is argued that dress was ‘crucial’ ‘in the construction and maintenance of social status and identity, in particular elite identity, at Rome,’ and the contrast between Illythia’s and her slaves’ clothing (or lack of it) articulates this.253

*Rome* also features extensive nudity in its portrayal of Roman sexual behaviour. This is perhaps unsurprising since HBO is regarded as one of the worst offenders for gratuitous onscreen nudity.254 However, although it is also used to underscore differences in status, it works in a reverse sense to *Spartacus* with the Romans shown naked rather than the slaves. In the first episode Atia has sex with her retainer Timon in front of her slaves, yet this underscores her social superiority not because she is naked and they are fully clothed, but because she controls the gaze. Still, similar to her freeborn counterparts in *Spartacus*, her nudity is still driven by choice, not compulsion. Nudity is also used to humiliate other freeborn characters through its association with slavery when Atia has her rival Servilia assaulted and stripped

---

253 George, 2002: 42. See also Bonfante and Sebesta (1994) on the biographical importance of dress in the Roman world.
254 McNamara, 2011; Siede, 2015. Actresses who appeared in *Game of Thrones* have since come forward expressing their discomfort at the series’ expectations around female nudity (Wiseman, 2019 and Destra, 2019). Some defend its output, claiming that the company has never sought to avoid the prurient (Defino, 2013: 218; Edgerton and Jones, 2008: 325).
naked in the street (S0105). Because public nudity denoted lack of control over one’s body and was historically linked to slavery,\(^\text{255}\) this reduces her to the status of a slave, and the deep shame it causes is instrumental in elevating their rivalry from one of mutual dislike to deadly hatred. Therefore, while the series uses the exposed female body to degrade, humiliate and draw attention to slaves’ perceived lack of bodily and social agency and status, it is not used in the context of slavery or through the slave bodies themselves.

A significant feature not given much attention is the fact that not all the named female slave characters in *Spartacus* are depicted naked, which one might expect if the series were *only* interested in pandering to audience voyeurism. Larsson argues that in *Game of Thrones*, status dictates nudity, with women of lower social or legal status, ‘sex workers, slaves, servants, and minor characters… shown naked far more often’.\(^\text{256}\) This status ‘hierarchy’ also shapes the use of slave nudity in *Spartacus* with more ‘powerful’ slave characters exercising more control. Kore for instance, favoured slave concubine to the most powerful Roman character in the series, Crassus, covers her body and reveals it willingly for her master. The named characters, usually body slaves, are also permitted to cover their breasts. By contrast, those of lesser status, usually anonymised slave extras, present in orgy or brothel scenes or lurking silently in the shadows of scenes, are given little protection from their owners’ objectifying gaze. Their conspicuous nudity marks them as lacking any shred of value or dignity, potentially making them more open to exploitation than the named characters. This is shown in the random way that Batiatus indiscriminately

\(^{255}\text{Blanshard, 2010: 21.}\)

\(^{256}\text{Larsson, 2016: 28.}\)
seizes his slave women for sexual gratification By contrast, the Naevia or Kore are more prized, so their status and value are reflected in their clothing and consequent protection from indiscriminate molestation.

This differentiation may have something to do with the fact that portraying all these major characters as naked would be needlessly distracting, and expose the series to accusations of pornography (a label DeKnight has vehemently rejected as ‘ridiculous’). However, it is notable that when these high-value slaves are forced to strip it is actually more effective, and plays into recurring themes around hierarchy. When the principal female slave of the series, Naevia, is stripped by Ashur, after she is ‘gifted’ to him as reward for his services (see earlier), not only does it convey Naevia’s powerlessness and sudden loss of status as her mistress’s chief body slave (Ashur had coveted her precisely because she was beyond his reach), but also signifies Ashur’s implied ‘ownership’. Her body belongs to him because he decides how it is displayed. Similar to the commodification of her sexuality, this denuding also destroys any illusions of favouritism or status in the relentlessly brutal, and dehumanising world of Roman servitude recreated onscreen.

**Male Slave Nudity**

So far I have concentrated my analysis primarily on the depiction of female slave nudity because, consistent with the concept of the ‘male gaze’ in film narratives which represent women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer, female bodies are still disproportionately objectified. Yet the depiction of male slave

---

257 Radish, 2011. He called the nudity ‘kind of tame’.
nudity is still important for underscoring these recurring themes around the master/slave power disparity and status and needs to be examined. In many gladiatorial films the male slave body is often the object of female sexual desire, and there is a strong tradition in classical cinema of foregrounding ‘the muscular male body as the object of spectatorial desire and identification’. It is also an important theme in the 1960 film, where Spartacus and the others are selected for combat primarily on the basis of their sexuality. The victorious gladiator was also a sexually attractive figure in the Roman world, with his main weapon the gladus (sword) slang for penis. Building upon earlier work which discusses the series’ examination of ‘phallic power’, I argue that the ‘unprecedented’ use of full frontal nudity, is the principal expression of this disparity. In Spartacus extensive display of the penis, ‘the last great taboo in our (American) culture’, is comparatively commonplace, although it has different narrative functions. The gladiators are frequently shown bathing or scraping down in their cells, with clear homoerotic undertones. In the scenes at the mines male slaves work naked, presumably to underscore their worthlessness (S0103).

Similar to the 1960 film, they are also objectified by admiring freeborn Roman women, most notably by Lucretia’s powerful patron Illythia who is obsessed with Crixus. She also demands to see the naked bodies of new arrivals. Cornelius and Dickson argue that the exposed penis reflects the slaves’ ‘bound’ and disempowered

---

259 Aside from Spartacus, Messalina falls for the muscular hero in Demetrius and the Gladiator (1954). This adoration of the male body is also replicated in Gladiator and Pompeii.
260 Rushing, 2016: 2.
263 Mueller, 2018: 140.
264 Cornelius and Dickson, 2015: 170.
status, a favoured reading in the current scholarship,\textsuperscript{266} although I would add that it is also selective since the hero Spartacus is never exposed in this way. However, while these arguments have validity, the treatment of Crixus’s nudity invites potentially more empowering readings, particularly when compared to their female counterparts. Whereas female slaves are invariably degraded by the contemptuous male gaze, when Crixus is summoned for objectification by Illythia (S0205), he could be seen as exercising a degree of sexual authority over the three women present (Naevia, Lucretia and Illythia herself), all of whom desire him.\textsuperscript{267} Crixus’s posture also recalls the defiance of the 1960 Spartacus who returns the objectifying gaze of the Roman women selecting him for the games. His face immobile, he stares directly ahead, refusing to make eye contact; nor does he flinch or even respond to Illythia’s caresses. This suggests that displaying the penis need not always undermine its phallic power since that power is still contingent upon the authority and/or status of the owner, and how that is exercised. As Stacie Raucci asserts when contrasting the empowering full frontal nudity of Mark Antony and the emasculating nudity of a male slave in \textit{Rome}, ‘it is not the mere state of being nude which makes one vulnerable, but rather the social status of each man’.\textsuperscript{268} True, Crixus is a slave, but he derives a degree of authority from the women’s desire, a privilege not afforded to female slave characters, as I argue below in discussions around the gendering of sexuality.

\textsuperscript{266} Cornelius and Dickson, 2015: 182. Others concur. Mueller, 2018: 141; Strong, 2013: 172-4; Cornelius and Dickson, 2015. Lehman, 2007: 118 notes how the ‘awe’ of phallic power can only be preserved when it is concealed.

\textsuperscript{267} He sleeps with both Naevia and Lucretia; Illythia pays for a tryst.

\textsuperscript{268} Raucci, 2013: 169.
This status issue is also underlined through the use of nudity by freeborn men, or those liberated from slavery, where the right to conceal or display sexual organs symbolises agency, and free will. As Cornelia has argued, the Roman *legatus* Glaber can disrobe and make love to his wife or lovers under the ‘gaze’ of his slaves and not suffer emasculation because he initiates, and controls, the circumstances of those encounters; he is always the ‘active’ partner.\(^{269}\) It is equally telling that the slave rebels conspicuously conceal their bodies after seizing freedom, even in consensual love making scenes. This highlights the importance they attach to control over the use of their own sexual organs, and how they are displayed, playing into the theme of sexuality as a form of resistance explored earlier.

**Slave Auctions: ‘good’ nudity?**

Although most of the servile nudity examined so far occurs within Roman households, or during visits to the arena, another significant use outside these venues is during the slave auction. Due to its ability to convey the inhumanity of chattel slavery in strong visual terms, slave markets are among the most evocative tropes in onscreen slave narratives, and have frequently appeared in classical films and television, from serious drama to comedy. They have been portrayed differently, depending upon the texts’ cultural and industrial contexts, as well as the purpose of the scene. In early films such as *The Robe* (1953) and *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), or TV series such as *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1984) and the 2004 *Spartacus*, censorship meant they had to focus primarily on the emotional trauma of the experience and its dehumanising context, rather than the physical indignities.

---

\(^{269}\) Roman sexual practice distinguished between the active (penetrator) and the passive (penetrated) partners. As long as the freeborn male was the active partner, the gender of the other was immaterial (Parker, 1992: 99).
This was usually shown by foregrounding the inhumane transactional nature of the process, through the callous sales language and animalisation of the victims.\textsuperscript{270} Slaves are still covered up and, if shown, inspections tend to be perfunctory (teeth, bones, stature) rather than anything sexually or physically intrusive, even though it was likely that in Roman slave markets ‘nearly every part of the body [would have] merited consideration’.\textsuperscript{271} Even in cases of sexual slave purchases, there is no nudity. In the 2004 miniseries, although Batiatus insists on viewing Varinia’s naked body, it is not shown to the audience. Since these are network TV productions and subject to restrictions regarding permissible content, such reticence is understandable. Significantly, HBO’s \textit{Rome}, which devotes more space to slave markets than \textit{Spartacus} and portrays a greater variety of slave ‘types’ beyond the familiar whores and gladiators, also eschews nudity (S0102). Since the series largely subscribes to an HBO model that Marc Leverette has provocatively, but correctly, entitled ‘cocksuckers, motherfuckers, tits’, not exploiting its cable platform to enable nudity in the portrayal of slavery is telling (and contrasts with the full frontal nudity of Roman characters, including Antony and Atia). It might indicate a reluctance to exploit the institution for the purposes of titillation, although the presence of child slaves is probably the most likely factor (\textit{Spartacus} never features child slavery). Recent films and television series set in the Antebellum South are more explicit about the sexually intrusive nature of the inspections than earlier films. \textit{12 Years} features naked women being inspected by fully dressed buyers in a private sale, and it is clear that the nudity is designed to underscore their dehumanised status. That said, the earlier \textit{Roots} (1977) also (somewhat controversially) displayed bare

\textsuperscript{270} There is no mass slave sale in \textit{Spartacus} 1960 – Batiatus buys Spartacus directly from the mine owner, although he does the teeth and bone inspections.

\textsuperscript{271} Joshel, 2010: 103.
breasted female slaves. Yet these texts still privilege the inhumanity of the process over its more physical aspects and may be an attempt to orient audience sympathy towards the slaves’ mental anguish rather than their bodies. Whatever the reasons, *Spartacus* marks a radical shift by deploying explicit nudity in its representation of the slave auction.

In the main auction scene, five naked female slaves are depicted tethered together and lined up against a wall in a Capuan street, while their owner negotiates a price with a potential male buyer (*GoTA01*). It is one of several instances of female full frontal nudity in the series. Superficially, it looks like a deliberately titillating image of gratuitous female nudity, consistent with the series’ narrow focus on sexualised female enslavement (there is no equivalent male scene). However, upon closer inspection, things are less clear. While all the women are certainly young and slim, they are also of variable ‘quality’, unkempt and dirty, not the usually luscious and well-fed specimens featured in Roman homes. Furthermore, although none show signs of malnutrition or abuse it is debatable whether these drab, shabby and worn looking specimens could be included in the director Brent Fletcher’s description of the (presumably main) cast as ‘insanely attractive’.

Secondly, the way the scene is shot also undermines a predominantly prurient reading. Rather than objectifying the women by lingering on their naked bodies, as one might expect, the camera follows the main subject of the scene, the conversation between the *lanista* Batiatus, Lucretia and their friend Solonius. The slaves’ bodies

---

272 Creeber argues that the focus on female sexual slavery (which *Spartacus* and to an extent *Rome* also privilege) was deliberate, helping to keep the drama ‘spiced up with a healthy balance of sex and violence’ (2004: 25).

273 Brent Fletcher, Director. DVD Audio Commentary, S0112.
come into view as Batiatus turns the corner but are only fleetingly displayed and instead form part of the ‘background’, similar to the public slave floggings and tethered slaves they had walked past earlier. Thirdly, their nudity impedes any personification or individualisation of the women, as a set of clothing or other adornments might have done, further underscoring the elimination of individuality inherent to the slave system represented onscreen. Denuded, marginalised and beneath the notice of the main protagonists, the scene is a metaphor not only for Roman slaves’ inherently dishonoured status, but their own marginalisation in the sources.

There are also historical justifications for the nudity in these types of scenes. Just because earlier receptions chose not to (or could not) show naked bodies it does not mean that it did not happen. Indeed, it is arguably more authentic, since, as noted earlier, Romans associated displays of public nudity with slaves, criminals and poverty. Admittedly, we have no lengthy descriptions of Roman slave markets beyond a few clues about how traders prepared slaves for sale, and the only known material evidence of a slave auction from a funerary statue (currently housed in the Museum of Campania in Capua) depicts a male placed on a raised platform and stripped to the waist, a loincloth covering his genitals. However, most scholars agree that slave bodies would have been thoroughly stripped and every part of the body inspected prior to purchase. Seneca had no doubt that inspections were

---

275 Pliny the Elder claims slave traders used tree resin to loosen the skin of emaciated slaves to enable them to absorb food (Natural History, 24.35).
276 It dates from 50 BCE and belongs to the familia of former slaves named Publilii. Hughes, 2006, in her study of the iconography of this image acknowledged its status as a rare visual example of a Roman slave sale, identifying the slave’s loincloth as his only form of clothing.
277 On the sale of slaves see Joshel, 2010: 79-81, 89-90, and 103. Her chapter is probably the most comprehensive examination of the transportation, auctioning, conditions of purchase/return and
degrading and dehumanising: ‘When you buy a horse, you order its blanket to be removed; you pull off the garments from slaves that are up for sale, so that no bodily flaws may escape your notice’ (Letters, 80.9). Since under the better documented American slave system the enslaved were also stripped during sales, we can assume that some form of nudity was a given in Roman slave markets.\(^{278}\)

That said, I do not discount the presence of a prurient sexual element in the use of nudity here. It could still have what Mulvey calls an ‘erotic impact’ because the scene frames the woman as spectacle rather than as active agents in the narrative.\(^{279}\)

On the other hand these women \textit{are} passive precisely because they are slaves, and the nudity could be seen as reinforcing that status. The industrial context and Starz’s status as a premium cable channel must also be considered. Operating outside the purview of the Federal Communications Commission, which governs the network model, premium cable companies have the freedom to create provocative (meaning graphic) story worlds featuring ‘profane language, detailed sex scenes, and acute violence’.\(^{280}\) HBO is viewed as one of the key movers in this ‘fragmented, post-network environment,\(^{281}\) and as Marc Leverette argues, that the company uses ‘explicit content as a way to position itself’.\(^{282}\) Starz and Showtime have followed suit by appealing ‘to the baser emotions and bodies of its viewers’.\(^{283}\)

\[^{278}\text{Genovese, 1975: 471; Stampp, 1984 (1956): 260.}\]
\[^{279}\text{Mulvey, 1975: 750.}\]
\[^{280}\text{Smith, 2018: 60. He argues - compellingly - that these differences between the advertiser-dependent networks (and the need to attract large, mainstream audiences) and the niche focus of subscriber-based cable companies, have a fundamental impact on the types of narratives and content featured. Elliott, 2015: 105-9 makes similar arguments.}\]
\[^{281}\text{Hendershot, 2015: 204.}\]
\[^{282}\text{Leverette, 2008: 125. Lotz makes a similar point about HBO’s focus on sex and violence (2007: 219).}\]
\[^{283}\text{West, 2015.}\]
that Starz’s other ‘historical’ series *Camelot* (2011) and *Outlander* (2015-) also feature extensive, sometimes full frontal nudity. This might suggest that the series features extensive nudity but because it appeals to the prized male, professional, 18-34 demographic that ‘like[s] things fresh, unpredictable, and uncensored’. It also fits with the kind of explicit content, namely ‘the breasts, profanity and violence’, which subscribers have come to expect from the cable model.

On the whole, all these examples of servile nudity steer a fine line between an effective visualisation of the physical humiliation of servitude, and cynical audience voyeurism. Even DeKnight admits to a ‘voyeuristic element’ in his vision of Rome, while (inevitably) stressing its validity to story and character. Nevertheless, nudity in the depiction of slavery is still broadly justified. Slaves were ‘instruments of their owners’ who were ‘not considered fully human’, and the selective use of nudity provides a useful visual vehicle for expressing that social and legal inferiority.

**‘Gendering’ Sexuality**

This final section examines some of the wider cultural and gender implications of the series’ portrayal of slave sexuality. While this chapter has shown that even the most powerful male slaves encounter sexual commodification and exploitation, there is still a marked discrepancy in the way the sexuality of male and female slaves is portrayed. For example, there are no male bisexual relations, forced or otherwise, and, more significantly in view of the ubiquity of rape in the lives of enslaved women, male slave rape is virtually absent. This is despite the fact that the sexual use

---

284 Rose, 2004. Cable channel watchers tend to be male, professional and of the 18-34 age group.
285 Leverette, 2008: 140.
286 McGrath, 2010.
of all slaves was an ‘unquestioned Roman tradition’ and dictated by power and status, not preference. 288

Male slave rape by Romans is not totally omitted. A very minor character, Dragan, is invited to ‘service’ a middle aged male Roman guest at one of Batiatus’s sleazy parties (GoTA04). 289 But it still happens off screen, whereas the anal rape of the female slave Diona is graphically portrayed. Similarly, while Naevia and other women are required to masturbate their female Roman owners as part of their normal ‘duties’ (S0102), no male slaves are shown providing these services to male Romans. Indeed, where rape does occur, as in the case of the vulnerable slave boy Pietros, the abuser is a slave, not a Roman. Yes, as discussed in chapter two, those rapes are used to underscore the inherent brutality of servile life at the ludus, but they are still not shown. Furthermore, although Pietros is a young and attractive youth in the style of Antoninus in the 1960 film, the target of Crassus’s sexual desire, no lascivious male Roman seems to notice him. Nor is the depraved Batiatus ever shown randomly assaulting any of the attractive male slaves who populate his villa, only female ones. Why is it deemed acceptable to show the routine and even graphic sexual abuse of enslaved women, but not men, in a series which uses sexuality as a key vehicle for representing the institution?

This is partly explained by the tradition of representing gladiators onscreen as the epitome of heterosexual attractiveness, with which the assumed male audience can unproblematically identify. Despite the de facto sexual availability of all slaves in

288 Williams, 2010: 37. See pages 30-61 for analysis of the normalised sexual use of male and female slaves by Roman males. Also Edwards, 1993: 70-75 on Roman sexual morality.
289 We have no evidence of lanistae commercialising the sexuality of their gladiators. However, since the possession of slaves for sexual use was commonplace, it must have occurred.
the series, *Spartacus* posits a representation of masculinity as strong, courageous and staunchly heterosexual. It also coincides with other recent representations of gladiatorial slavery where the heroes are only propositioned and sexually desired by women.\(^{290}\) The only major character to be threatened is Gannicus, the prequel’s unequivocally heterosexual heartthrob, whom Batiatus informs: ‘if Varus asks you to suck his cock dry, you will do it.’ (*GoTA02*). Yet the threat is immediately and, unsurprisingly, neutralised when he is instead paired with a beautiful female slave, Melitta, whom he secretly loves. Essentially, these ‘gods of the arena’ can be subjected to the lascivious gaze of beautiful women who desire them, as in the case of Crixus and Spartacus, but not that of a male Roman.

Instead, the series displaces sexual violence onto the female slaves because it is deemed more ‘palatable’ given the prevalence, acceptance and even marketability of female rape stories in modern popular culture generally, as explored earlier. In these TV dramas it is much rarer for men, especially heroes, to be subjected to sexual assaults, presumably since the depiction of anal rape is so disempowering that could potentially alienate both male and female audiences. Starz’s *Outlander* (2015-) is a notable exception and portrays one of the most shocking rape scenes involving either sex in modern TV history.\(^{291}\) Yet the victim – the heartthrob Jamie – is not a slave, and he reluctantly submits to the ordeal to save the life of his wife. In *Spartacus*, preserving the sexual integrity of these hypermasculine slave heroes seems to be more important than historical authenticity, or even gender equality in the treatment of male and female characters.

\(^{290}\) Maximus in *Gladiator* and Milo in *Pompeii*

\(^{291}\) It involves rape, fellatio, torture and sexual humiliation.
The sexual commodification of the male characters is also portrayed differently, and for similar reasons. Crixus takes limited control of his sexuality in his relations with Lucretia, an opportunity denied to most of the female slaves. As noted in chapter two, he may be obliged to perform the role of ardent lover for self-preservation, but it is ultimately her growing sexual obsession with him that increasingly defines their relationship. At one stage he takes the initiative by throwing her onto the bed and engaging in rough sex, an experience she clearly enjoys (S0111). Spartacus is also spared sexual humiliation when put out to ‘stud’ with the attractive Roman matron Licinia (actually Illythia following a switch of partners) (S0109). The way the scene is shot emphasises their sexual equality, not domination of a slave by the freeborn partner. A more powerful (and potentially realistic) scenario would have been to pair Spartacus with an older and less attractive Roman matron or, more radically, a portly male client. Yet he endures neither indignity because preserving his sexual integrity is paramount. By contrast, young Mira is shown providing sexual services to one of Batiatus’s ugly middle-aged retainers (S0112), and Naevia is given to the failed gladiator Ashur (masculinity is equated with power and strength in the series).

Bisexual relations (forced or consensual) are also conspicuously absent. While there are several consensual homosexual relationships between slaves (Barca/Auctus/Pietros, Agron/Nasir), these gay gladiators are never forced to perform demeaning sexual acts with Roman guests. This is despite the master being fully aware of his slaves’ sexual orientation, and the fact that Romans were relaxed about male-male relationships provided that the power differential of active (Roman
male) vs. passive (slave, female) was observed. For a text which seems to make a virtue out of the explicitness of its sexual content, and has been praised for its ‘remarkable’ portrayal of male homosexuality compared to other mainstream depictions, thus removing the link between deviance and same sex desire in the historical representation, this is a significant omission. Gay men have consensual sex with each other, not their Roman masters. And it is not as if there is no precedent. The implied sexual use of male slaves features in classical films, while popular historical fiction regularly refers to the practice and ‘the unquestioned assumption that men are capable of being attracted to both male and female bodies’.

One could argue that it is not bisexuality in itself that is abhorrent for modern heroes, but the circumstances of these trysts. The recent Troy: Fall of a City (2018) featured Achilles having a threesome with Patroclus and Briseis on the beach (all played by handsome actors). The difference is that Achilles is a freeborn male and therefore makes his own sexual choices, whereas the slave Spartacus cannot, so the series makes them for him. Indeed, the failure of Oliver Stone’s Alexander (2004), has been partly attributed to its portrayal of the Macedonian king’s relationship with Hephastas, because modern audiences were confused by his sexual status. This may also explain the absence of bisexuality in the depiction of male slavery in Spartacus.

---

293 Mueller, 2018: 142. Also Foka, 2015; Gardner and Potter, 2016: 171; Pierce, 2018
294 West, 2016: 156.
296 Williams, 2015:177-93. In Koestler’s novel, the disillusioned fugitive slave Kleon returns to his Roman master and is immediately sexually assaulted.
297 Cyrino, 2010: 176.
298 Whereas the sexy rebel slave Saxa has sexual relations with both men and women.
This disavowal of bisexual tastes also marks an important regression from the 1960 film. Blanshard and Shahabudin argue that the portrayal of Crassus’s attempted seduction of the slave boy Antoninus was ahead of its time because it acknowledged ‘the more complex sexual protocols of the Roman world’. In many ways, it still is with the Starz Crassus depicted as staunchly heterosexual and uninterested in molesting his young male slaves, even to the extent of being given a beautiful slave lover. Starz could have portrayed Spartacus as a sexual slave preyed upon by both sexes, highlighting for audiences the absolute physical and sexual degradation of slavery. Instead, like rape, any ‘deviant’ sexual abuse is displaced onto women (such as Diona) because it is more acceptable to mainstream audiences than the sight of the hero Spartacus being sodomised or forced to have joyless sex with aging or ugly Roman matrons. Additionally, if Spartacus’s sexuality were undermined, this might adversely affect how audiences perceive his future leadership abilities, strength and moral authority.

When it comes to antiquity, the tradition of the muscled and determinedly heterosexual male figure (usually a gladiator or fighter) is simply too entrenched to challenge. Whereas the women are obliged to have sex with anyone required, the males are able to retain the sexual dignity which is crucial to these heroes’ depiction as ‘staunchly heterosexual’ and avoid complicating their unproblematic, mainstream appeal to male and female viewers. Despite notable exceptions such as Outlander,

---

299 2011: 98.
300 In 300 Greek pederasty is also demonised for similar reasons, to emphasise the normalcy of Leonides’ heterosexual relationship with his wife (Boyle and Combe, 2013: 92).
301 Glynn (2012: 172). He also argues that the gay gladiators tend to be ‘weaker’. I would dispute this. Barca, Auctus and Agron are as physically strong as their heterosexual counterparts, even if they have less narrative agency.
this ‘protection’ of male sexual integrity is also the norm in other contemporary TV series which explore unequal sexual power relations. Although infamous for its portrayal of female rape, there are no male rapes in *Game of Thrones*; antebellum slave texts also avoid showing it. All of this could be seen as undermining hopes that the depiction of sex on television, as Glynn suggests, has become more ‘progressive, inclusive and democratic’. 302

**Conclusion**

This long chapter has shown that sexuality plays an absolutely central role in the representation of slavery in *Spartacus*, particularly the portrayal of the essential power disparity between slaves and free. The denial of sexual autonomy and treating sex as a commodity is used to demean the slave characters, while highlighting slavery’s relentlessly degrading, exploitative and dehumanising nature. It also shows that rape, a highly versatile and popular device in modern popular culture, has numerous narrative uses. When used sensitively it can symbolise slaves’ sexual availability and powerlessness, particularly for women. Additionally, the series also uses sexuality to reinforce aspects of the underlying resistance narrative, where the ability to choose sexual partners (if not access to one’s body) constitutes a limited form of agency.

Nevertheless, all this sex raises questions about the disproportionate gendering of sexuality in *Spartacus*, and some of the problematic features of the series’ male-centred narrative. This is apparent in the absence of male slave rape which seems to be motivated by a desire to protect the sexual integrity and masculinity of the male

---

Glynn, Aston and Johnson, 2012: xi.
characters rather than to explore the indiscriminating sexual brutality of the Roman world. Nor should we discount the cultural and industrial factors driving the focus on sex and nudity in the depiction of slaves’ everyday lives. The ubiquitous breast shots in the portrayal of slaves, nicely described as ‘the universal bloodtype’ of the screen, could be seen as a consequence of the need to give audiences a typically ‘Roman’ (i.e. sexed up) experience. However, this nudity is not completely random and could be seen as reinforcing key ideas around status and rights. On balance, the omnipresent focus on slave sexuality plays a justifiable role in highlighting and underscoring key themes in the series’ representation of slavery, namely the slaves’ dehumanisation, commodification and disempowerment.

---

303 As Boyle notes in her analysis of male rape revenge films, heroism is incompatible with sexual objectification (2005: 142).
304 Adewunmi, 2013. She attributes this to the fact that ‘TV is still largely the domain of straight men making content for other straight men’.
Chapter Four

The Slave Body: Shaming, Naming and Maiming

Batiatus to Spartacus: If the *toga virilis* were not tomorrow, I would have you lashed until the flesh peeled from your back (S0110).

Laeta: I mistreated none within my house, when I was yet called domina.

Spartacus: Yet you held them as possessions. Things to be bought and traded (S0308).

Atia to Octavian’s body slave Andros: If anything happens to my son, I will use the eyes of your children as beads.

*Rome*

(S0102).

Although the Roman slave codes implicitly recognised slaves’ humanity (ar at least acknowledged the legal complexities inherent to their status as human beings), as fungible property they still lacked any rights over the use of their own bodies and could be exchanged, bred, raped, maimed, tortured and killed with impunity.

---


Slaves are in the *potestas* of their masters. This *potestas* rests on universal law, for it is observable in all peoples alike that masters have the power of life and death over their slaves (Gaius *Institutes*, 1, 48).

The slave body is arguably the most visually powerful symbol of the injustices and disempowerment of slavery. It was even assumed in the Roman world that the body was a key signifier of both social and moral status, with freeborn bodies deemed naturally superior to those of their servile counterparts.\(^\text{307}\) Consequently, images of slave bodies being branded like livestock, chained and collared, tortured and abused, are regular features of most onscreen slave narratives, including Starz’s *Spartacus*. Much of the current scholarship on the representation of the slave body in classical reception texts has tended to be drawn towards the strong and muscular male slave.\(^\text{308}\) What has not been adequately studied however, is how their bodies are used as narrative components in the wider portrayal of slavery. I argue that the slave body in *Spartacus* and elsewhere is worthy of special consideration because it becomes a vivid canvas or vehicle for representing the evils of Roman slavery. It also highlights key themes around the series’ depiction of servitude as a fundamentally dehumanising and disempowering institution.

This chapter considers four overarching (but by no means exhaustive) themes in the series’ depiction of the non-sexual slave body.\(^\text{309}\) Firstly, linking to the commodification of slave sexuality explored in the previous chapter, how the body is instrumentalised as a ‘tool’ to serve the ambitions of their Roman owners. Secondly,

\footnotesize
\(^{307}\) George, 2002: 45.
\(^{308}\) Hark, 1993; Wyke, 2000; Hunt, 1993; Rushing, 2016; Pierce, 2018.
\(^{309}\) As noted in the summary in chapter one, this chapter is primarily about the non-sexual aspects of the body, but I recognise that there is inevitably some overlap between their concerns.
the denial of bodily autonomy through their treatment as ‘items’. Thirdly, how the bodies of the enslaved are de-individualised, othered and stigmatised through the use of physical motifs such as collars, brands and tattoos. And fourthly, the use of physical violence to punish, maim and intimidate.

**The Slave Body as Tool**

The notion of slaves as ‘tools’ is an important one in the historiography of ancient slavery. While his views on ‘natural’ slavery are not always regarded as consistent,\(^{310}\) Aristotle’s widely used description of slaves as tools - ‘he is of someone else when, while being human, he is a piece of property; and a piece of property is a tool for action separate from its owner.’ (Pol. 1254b, 16-21) - has proven enduring.\(^{311}\) Another influential source is the scholar Marcus Varro who refers to slaves as an *instrumentum vocale* or ‘speaking tool’ to differentiate them from livestock (*Res Rusticae*, 1.17). Whether or not Varro really meant this (and it has recently been argued that ‘tool’ is in fact a generic term which refers to everything needed to run a farm, including human labour),\(^{312}\) most classical scholars regard it as compelling evidence that Romans equated slave bodies with other forms of functional equipment.\(^{313}\) Although the Roman characters in *Spartacus* do not specifically refer to their slaves as ‘tools’, the idea that slave bodies exist exclusively as human appendages to serve their owners’ desires (or even, in extreme cases, to die for them),\(^{314}\) is still reflected in their usage and treatment of them.

---


\(^{311}\) Aristotle’s work was also widely used to justify black enslavement in America (Monoson, 2011: 247).

\(^{312}\) Lewis, 2013. Lewis’s study is well argued and illustrates how readily historians (and by extension TV programme makers) subscribe to the narrative of Roman slave owners as instinctively callous.


\(^{314}\) Although I do not explore slave suicide alongside their masters - arguably the most extreme form of dehumanisation - it is a feature of slavery in *Rome*, reflecting that series’ much more subservient servile class compared to the rebellious one of *Spartacus*.  

121
A key feature of the series’ instrumentalisation of the slave body is the way it is used to advance the personal, political and business ambitions of their Roman owners and patrons. Since the slave body has no status, power or agency, it can also be used and then discarded with impunity, making it a useful tool for owners either unable to strike directly at social equals, or seeking to distance themselves from the consequences of their actions. This is most evident in the use of slaves’ bodies as instruments of violence, a practice which has some historical basis, particularly gladiators. The gladiator Barca is frequently called upon to murder his master’s opponents, women and children included. In order to ensure deniability, Batiatus’s chief business rival, the lanista Solonius, also uses slaves in a failed attempt to assassinate Batiatus (S0104). Unfortunately, the ruse fails because ownership of these slaves, like faulty goods, can be traced back to him through their tattoos. This illustrates not only the expendability of slave bodies, but also how easily they can be de-individualised through bodily markings, the significance of which in the portrayal of slavery I explore later in this chapter.

One of the most violent women in any of these televisual receptions, Illythia, is particularly adept at using slave bodies to advance her personal agendas or to settle scores, and this disregard for the human consequences of her actions is a key feature of her (and by extension the Romans’) villainy. Aggrieved at the damage caused by Spartacus to her husband Glaber’s political career, she spends much of season one

---

316 See Foka, 2015: 197-199 on the new ruthlessness of Roman women (she singles out Illythia as a ‘cruel premeditating killer’) in these modern receptions, although Neroni has shown that the phenomenon of the violent woman has been a staple of American cinema since the 1980s (2005: 15-40).
plotting his downfall.\textsuperscript{317} Thwarted in attempts to engineer his defeat in the arena, she turns to more indirect methods by cynically manipulating her sponsored gladiator Segovax into murdering Spartacus in exchange for his freedom (S0110). Her behaviour is particularly egregious because she corrupts an ostensibly sympathetic figure by forcing Segovax into actions he abhors (he admires Spartacus and asks forgiveness) to free himself from the horrors of servitude. Aware that, as a freeborn Roman of consequence she can treat slave bodies with impunity, she later watches with cold indifference, even contempt as he is punished by public castration and crucifixion, expressing neither gratitude for his sacrifice nor recognition for his seemingly inexplicable (but certainly courageous) silence over her complicity. Segovax’s horrific physical mutilation not only highlights the depiction of the slave body as an extension of its owner with no independent or intrinsic value, it is also a salutary reminder of the consequences of being a servile tool in the games of the Romans.

Although chastened by Segovax’s failure,\textsuperscript{318} Illythia continues to make use of slave bodies as proxies in her war against Spartacus. In one of the series’ most moving and important storylines, Illythia is also behind Spartacus having to kill his best friend Varro (as described in chapter two). Unable to strike directly at Spartacus because of his position as champion, Illythia instead seeks to undermine his psychological and spiritual well-being by forcing him to destroy the body of his only friend. It has been argued that Varro exercises a degree of agency by choosing to die (or dictating the

\textsuperscript{317} Glaber failed in his campaign against Mithridates because Spartacus encouraged the Thracians to desert (S0101). This ‘treachery’ lies at the root of their animosity, and drives the revenge narrative in season two.

\textsuperscript{318} After killing the Roman woman Licinia in Lucretia’s home, she is blackmailed into patronising the ludus.
manner of his death), since he plunges Spartacus’s sword into his own neck after extracting a promise to take care of his family. However, the destruction of the slave body to settle personal scores could also be seen as exposing the absolute lack of choice that lies at the heart of the slave system projected onscreen. Enslavement has placed these friends in an impossible and unwinnable position, and Spartacus has no defence against this malicious use of his friend’s body against him.

This instrumentalisation also has wider uses when Illythia later finds that others can manipulate slave bodies to assert control over her. Furious at Illythia’s threat to divorce him, yet unable to strike directly at his wife due to her social position, her husband Glaber ‘punishes’ her by proxy through the public crucifixion of her body slave, Besela (S0207). Ostensibly (and wrongfully) executed for expressing sympathy with Spartacus’s rebellion, her body becomes the vehicle by which her mistress is belittled and humiliated. This shows that the weaponised slave body can be used both for and against their owners’ interests, but it is always the slave who pays the price.

There are numerous other examples of the ‘weaponisation’ of the slave body which demonstrate the significance of this theme to the series’ wider depiction of slavery. Similar to Illythia’s displacement of her hatred for Spartacus onto Varro, Crassus’s fictional son Tiberius compensates for his father’s literal untouchability as the most powerful in the Roman in the series by violating the treasured slave body of his father’s slave lover Kore (S0305). The scene is not only useful for signifying

320 She becomes a proxy for the mutilated body of Tiberius’s freeborn friend killed in Crassus’s decimation.
slaves’ vulnerability to rape, as explored in the previous chapter, but also how their bodies constitute just another expendable, brutalised tool in the power struggles of their owners. As Tiberius says in justification for his actions, ‘he has taken something from me, so I will take something from him’. Similar to the use of Briseis as object in the feud between Agamemnon and Achilles in the Iliad or Lucretia in Livy’s account of the birth of the Roman Republic, Kore’s slave body becomes the vehicle by which these men inflict pain and suffering upon each other, without a single blow or word exchanged. As noted in the previous chapter, since acts of rape do not go unpunished in the series, an empowered Kore later joins the rebellion and kills Tiberius. However, consistent with the series’ bleak moral universe where ‘no one… has a happy ending’, Crassus still has her crucified as a rebel slave, callously sacrificing this once treasured body to further his own political ambitions (S0310).

This use of the slave body as proxy for inter-Roman disputes and rivalries is not unique to Spartacus, pointing to the theme’s wider importance in these slave narratives. In Rome, the patrician Atia vents her frustration at Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon (and its potentially adverse consequences for her own family’s political prospects) by whipping the body of her chief slave Castor in the presence of her Roman guests, including Brutus (S0103). In some ways, Castor’s treatment mirrors Tiberius’s assault on Kore; his body becomes a vehicle by which Atia can vicariously ‘punish’ the inviolable body of Caesar, whose status as paterfamilias in the deeply patriarchal society depicted onscreen (and her own gender inferiority)

---

321 DeKnight, DVD audio commentary, GoTA06.
322 I explore their relationship in the context of discussions around Roman attitudes to slavery in greater detail in chapter seven.
renders him untouchable.\footnote{323 Although contested (Saller, 1986: 7), the lifelong\ patria potestas or absolute authority of the oldest living male over his family is acknowledged in Roman law, and technically gave him the unquestioned right to disinhere, imprison, decide marriages and even kill his wife and children, although it is unlikely that the more draconian features of the law were ever enacted for practical reasons (Gaius Institutes 1. 55). On the legal definitions of the patria potestas see Crook, 1967: 107-9. Both Rome and Spartacus borrow liberally from aspects of this legal custom in their portrayal of family relationships.} This is admittedly different from some of the other examples. Hurting Castor isn’t hurting Caesar and this use of a slave body is primarily about venting anger. However, it still illustrates how the slave body functions as a physical means of expressing conflict within Roman relationships where the real target (like Crassus for Tiberius) is of superior status.

Finally, consistent with the series’ nuanced depiction of slavery, slave bodies can also assist the servile cause. Cornered by Crassus’s superior Roman forces in the mountains and slowly starving to death, Spartacus expertly facilitates the escape of his followers through a bridge constructed from the frostbitten corpses of dead slaves (S0308). This scene, for which there is a historical basis (although a ditch was filled with the bodies of slaughtered captives and cattle, not slaves),\footnote{324 Frontinus, Strategies, 1.5.20.} shows Spartacus’s genius for military strategy and how slave bodies can be deployed to benefit them. However, it also hints darkly at the slaves’ own internalisation of the dominant ideology of the slave body as a tool, while reinforcing visually the enormous human cost of slavery and revolt.

**Denial of bodily autonomy**

This section extends these discussions around slave bodies as tools or proxies through an examination of the related theme of the denial of bodily autonomy. This involves slaves surrendering control over their bodies in ways which strip them of...
any vestiges of human dignity and agency. In a scene found in other onscreen slave narratives, \(^{325}\) *Rome* shows the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy using a slave as a footstool (S0109, while Cleopatra employs a slave dressed as a deer for target practice (S0209). In another example, possibly taken from Petronius’s story of the freedman Trimalchio in the *Satyricon*, \(^{326}\) Batiatus in *Spartacus* wipes his hands on the back of his body slave Santos after urinating in the villa pool (S0103). Santos’s reduction to the status of a human ‘towel’ not only underscores Batiatus’s pushy middle-class vulgarity (as it did Trimalchio’s), but also disrespect for his slave’s humanity. The extent to which we can take the *Satyricon* (or indeed any literary texts) as representative of Roman attitudes to slaves is questionable; it is satirical after all. \(^{327}\) However, regardless of its origins, there is no denying this and other scenes’ utility and visual power for conveying slaves’ lack of bodily autonomy.

Another important component of this is slaves’ use as physical ‘prestige’ items.

Again, there is a strong foundation in the sources. As the Roman Republic expanded overseas, enslaved captives flooded the market and the possession of a large slave population (regardless of its contribution to the household economy) came to be seen as an essential accoutrement in the homes of the rich and powerful, leading to accusations of extravagance. \(^{328}\) As Michele George writes, ‘as property, slaves were in themselves a status marker, a kind of luxury good put on exhibition along with expensive *objets d’art* and lavish domestic decoration’. \(^{329}\) This notion of slaves as

\(^{325}\) In the film *Mandingo* (1976) a plantation owner uses a slave boy as a footrest, while in *12 Years a Slave* Epps casually rests his arm on a slave’s head as he converses with another.

\(^{326}\) *Satyricon*, 27.

\(^{327}\) I have found no reference to the *Satyricon* or indeed any major classical work (aside from Plutarch’s biography of Crassus) in the many interviews and commentaries studied for this thesis.

\(^{328}\) Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 33.6.

\(^{329}\) George, 2002: 44.
signifiers of wealth and status, regardless of their function (indeed, the less they do the richer the family), is visualised through the presence of numerous slaves lining the walls of the various Roman residences in these series. The more slaves, the greater the household’s prestige and status.

Possession of slaves also constitutes an important way of underscoring Roman class distinctions in these series. The wealthy patricians Atia, Servilia and Caesar possess scores of slaves as befits their position, and their social inferiors imitate this practice. Despite their often straitened financial circumstances, Lucretia still keeps a large retinue of slaves, presumably because this denotes her social pretensions. In *Rome*, one of Niobe’s first acts after her centurion husband Vorenus is elected magistrate is to ‘hire’ two rather worn female door slaves to greet guests at their humble Suburra apartment, signalling to the outside world her newly elevated status as the wife of a rising politician (S0111). Similar to modern societies, where having the latest luxury car or yacht advertises their wealth and status and, by implication their class, appearances matter, particularly for these series’ ambitious, but insecure middle class and plebeian characters. The presence of slave bodies plays an important social and political role in creating and maintaining this façade, regardless of their ‘quality’, condition or even usefulness.

**De-individualisation: The visual marks of slavery**

In his widely cited comparative study of historical slave systems, Orlando Patterson states that ‘in every slave holding society we find visible marks of servitude, some pointed, some more subtle’. These include specific bodily motifs such as chains,
collars, brands/tattoos and even renaming. Although not strictly a physical feature, naming works in a similar way by de-individualising the slaves and is therefore included under this analysis. These ‘markings’ are crucial for showing how slavery ‘others’ its victims and deprives them of their humanity and individuality, placing them in the same category as livestock to be controlled and exploited like other tradeable and expendable commodities.

**Collars**

Collars were widely used against slaves in the ancient world to stigmatise, degrade and prevent flight, or in the Christian era where facial or bodily tattooing was discouraged or outlawed, as a form of identification. Numerous examples survive, made mostly of lead, copper and bronze, with the names and details of the owners inscribed. One such reads:

> Catch me because I have fled and summon me back to the house of Elpidius v.c. Bonoso in the Caelimontian quarter.

Another:

> I have fled, hold me; when you have recovered me you receive a solidus [gold coin] from my master Zoninus.

---

331 Othering is ‘the perception or representation of a person or group of people as fundamentally alien from another, frequently more powerful, group’ (*OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2019. Web. August 22nd, 2019). It is a particularly useful term when examining the representation of slavery.


335 Glancy, 2002: 88. See Trimble, 2016 for a full description and its importance for illuminating the experiences of urban slaves.

These types of collars were so common that only a simple abbreviation TMQF became necessary and people knew what it stood for: *Tene me quia fugio* (‘hold on to me since I flee’).\(^{336}\) In the absence of written accounts of slave life, these unearthed metal collars provide some of the most evocative material and cultural evidence of the everyday indignities and brutalities of Roman slavery,\(^{337}\) and may explain their versatility as a convenient visual shorthand for denoting servile status across the onscreen slave genre.\(^{338}\)

All the slaves of *Spartacus* wear either a leather ‘dog’ collar, or one with a tag similar to the Zoninus find (although not the gladiators since it is likely to interfere in their training; branding denotes their status as I explore below). Indeed, their presence is often the only visual confirmation that audiences are looking at a slave body, and immediately marginalises them. The collar also highlights other themes, notably the recurring idea around the slipperiness of slave/free status (which I

---

\(^{336}\) Joshel, 2010: 120.  
\(^{337}\) Thurmond, 1994: 493; Joshel (2010: 119-121) who draws upon material and literary evidence to explain the use of slave collars to denote status and ownership and to punish runaways.  
\(^{338}\) I have not found a single slave screen text which does not use them.
When the impoverished Roman woman Aurelia enters servitude to pay off the debts of her deceased husband Varro, this is immediately denoted by the donning of this servile ‘uniform’. It signals to the audience that her former free identity, and the bodily and sexual rights that accompanied it, are now lost; she now officially ‘belongs’ to Batiatus. They are also used as physical props to underscore slaves’ lack of sexual autonomy. Batiatus’s rape of a young girl as he clings to her collar for support has rightly been cited as a compelling example of the normalisation of the sexual abuse of slaves in the series (S0107).\(^{339}\) Yet the symbolism of the collar is also important. Not merely a reminder of her owned status, it is also used to assist in her master’s oppression; in a rare instance of the series’ privileging the perspective of one of the series’ anonymised female rape victims, she is shown choking under the strain.

Although common symbols of slavery in these series, collars are not all the same type, and, significantly, who is required to wear one varies from text to text. For instance, many slave characters in Rome do not wear them. This may merely be an inconsistency (some of the anonymous slave extras do wear collars), but it could be due to the different roles played by slaves in each series. In Rome, slaves are very close to their owners and have strong relationships with them (Gaia and Eirene have love affairs with Pullo and Eleni dies at her mistress’s side); they are not rebels. The absence of collars could also denote slaves’ relatively elevated status, since Crassus’s favoured mistress Kore in Spartacus is also spared this indignity (it is part of his reluctance to ‘treat’ her as a slave, as I explore in chapter seven). By contrast,

\(^{339}\) Pierce, 2018: 166.
the often distant, antagonistic relations between masters and slaves in *Spartacus* are a necessary feature of the revolt narrative, so slaves *need* to be overtly othered and dehumanised in order to make the uprising and subsequent rebellion more plausible and, crucially, justifiable. The collar motif is a useful way of showing that.

As a consequence of its symbolic power in the visualisation of servitude, the removal of the collar or ‘leash’ also takes on a special significance in the rebellion phase. Just as it signalled servility and powerlessness, its absence signifies freedom and agency. When Spartacus rips the collar from the neck of the former body slave Nasir he both symbolically and literally frees him: ‘The bonds of slavery have been struck. Never again will you feel them tighten around your neck, robbing you of breath and life’ (S0202). Later Nasir reminds his lover Agron, in response to his controlling behaviour: ‘Commanded? The collar that once *burned* my neck is but a distant memory. Do not think that I will slip it around my neck again for you!’ (S0305). The collar is literally associated with pain. Similarly, in the film *Agora* (2008), Hypatia liberates her male slave Davos merely by removing the collar that has been a prominent feature of his servile appearance; no other action is necessary.

This use of the collar as symbol of both enslavement and liberation is not confined to depictions of the classical world, signalling their central importance to these onscreen slave portrayals. *Game of Thrones*, which features a prominent slave sub-narrative that draws visual and narrative inspiration from the Roman world onscreen, also exploits this association between collars and servitude. In order to incite a slave rebellion, the ‘liberator’ Daenerys Targaryn shoots barrels containing

---

340 I reference some of these later, particularly the use of crucifixion.
the discarded collars of previously liberated slaves over the walls of the city Meeren (S0403). The inhabitants, and probably the audience, expect the ‘bombs’ to explode, which makes this use of collars as ‘weapons’, rather than constraints, all the more effective and, indeed inspirational. The former collars of liberated slaves remind the enslaved population of their own degradation, but also the hope of liberty.341

Chains

Unsurprisingly, chains and shackles are also prominent features of the onscreen slave narrative, and their utility as bodily restraints as well as visual symbols of slavery is obvious. There is plenty of evidence that they were used extensively under all slave systems,342 and indeed, in Roman times chains were specifically associated with slaves.343 Consequently, in Spartacus and other TV series, chains figure widely, used to transport or to tether slaves, as well to contain. As one Roman citizen remarks in justification for harsher reprisals against slaves, ‘Shackles alone no longer offer fair deterrent’ (S0302). A set of shackles also hangs ominously above the ludus training ground as a visual reminder of Batiatus’s power over his gladiators’ bodies. Similar to collars, chains also have a symbolic purpose in the slave narrative. The re-enslavement of the rebellious slave Kore, whose lack of chains and collar attested to the affection in which she was held by her master/lover Crassus, is signified by the chains she is now forced to wear; they visualise her master’s displeasure at her perceived ‘betrayal’ (S0310).

341 Collars are hugely symbolic in the series’ slave narrative. In an earlier scene, Daenerys had the collars of crucified children removed before burial, to re-humanise them (S0401). The collar of Missandei, Daenerys’s executed friend and advisor, is the only thing that connects her to her former slave status and is symbolically burned by her bereaved lover Grey Worm (S0805).
342 Rural slave gangs were permanently shackled, and provide our best evidence (Wiedemann, 1994: 136). See Thompson (1993) for a comprehensive study of the key material finds and images. For their use in punishing and controlling slaves in the antebellum period, see Stampp, 1956: 176.
343 Free men were prevented by law from being permanently shackled (George, 2013: 164).
Kore also uses chains as a metaphor for the constraints Tiberius has placed her under by his rape and intimidation:

Tiberius: You were never placed in chains.

Kore: You forged them with your own hands, forcing me from the arms of your father
(S0309).

This symbolism has a wider appeal across the slave genre. In the TV film *Ben-Hur* (2010) the hero Judah, unable to free a fellow galley slave when their ship comes under attack, kills him because the entrapped slave does not wish to die in Roman chains. Similar to Nasir’s spirited rejection of Agron’s attempts to ‘re-collar’ him, even a death free from these visual trappings of servitude can constitute a form of resistance. In *Roots* (2016), the enslaved African hero Kunte teaches his daughter his native language, helping her to resist internalising the ideology of slavery: ‘They can put the chains on your body. Never let them put the chains on your mind’.

**Branding and tattooing**

Another of Patterson’s ‘visible marks of servitude’ by which slaves are de-individualised in the series is the branding and tattooing of the slave body. Both practices were common under Roman slavery, and it seems that branding is still being used to stigmatised and assert ownership over victims of modern slave trafficking. In antiquity, branding was more widely used to punish and stigmatisate

---

344 See Solomon, 2015: 849-851 for an analysis of this and other scenes from the film.
345 Sidner, 2017.
runaway or recalcitrant slaves, usually on the forehead to cause maximum humiliation, but also, alongside collars, a visual means of identification to discourage further flight.\textsuperscript{346} In one of the most evocative and widely cited descriptions of the horrors of Roman slavery branding is prominent:

Great heavens, what poor specimens of humanity the men were! Their entire bodies formed a pattern of livid bruises. Their backs, which bore the marks of the whip, were not so much covered as shaded by torn shirts of patchwork cloth…They had letters branded on their foreheads, half-shaved heads, and chains around their ankles.\textsuperscript{347}

Tattooing was also associated with degradation, and, like many of the most painful and humiliating practices, customarily reserved for slaves and criminals.\textsuperscript{348} In some ways, these markings are much more traumatic for the victims than the wearing of collars, chains or inferior clothing. As Gustafson writes, ‘the tattooed person is stigmatized, subjectified, marginalized, degraded, stripped of self-esteem’.\textsuperscript{349} Furthermore, not only are they more painful, they have a dramatic visible permanence that forever stigmatises the slave as ‘other’, and this may explain their popularity in many slave narratives.\textsuperscript{350}

\textsuperscript{346} Jones, 1987: 143-146.  
\textsuperscript{348} Gustafson, 2000: 86.  
\textsuperscript{349} Gustafson, 2000: 91.  
\textsuperscript{350} In the 1960 film Spartacus is branded – see below for a comparison between this and the Starz series.
Branding seems to have a particular resonance in antebellum texts. In *Django Unchained* (2013) recaptured runaways Django and Hildy are both branded with the letter ‘r’ on the face. Pearl, the field hand in the television series *Underground* (S0105) is also punished by this method after a failed escape attempt, while the overseer Cato deliberately burns his face to conceal the numerous brandings he has received for the same offence. This suggests that branding, while punitive in intent and deeply humiliating (particularly for the women, whose disfigurement is likely to elicit greater audience sympathy), can also denote dogged resistance to slavery.  

In *Spartacus*, branding and tattooing are used primarily to punish and control, and to underscore slaves’ inferior status. Recaptured after the slave uprising, Varro’s widow Aurelia, has ‘FVO’ cut into her forehead. The new gladiator Kerza also has *fugitivus* (runaway) prominently tattooed on his forehead. While this follows ancient practice in naming the crime, it is also a visual reminder of his rebellious nature and ‘a permanent noticeboard of guilt’. DeKnight claims that the disfiguring tattoo on Kerza’s face was necessary to identify him after his death in a subsequent fight scene when his face (and by implication his identity) is removed *post-mortem* and ‘worn’ by another gladiator. Yet, the tattoo’s prominence and location, where concealment is impossible and the gaze of the onlooker ‘inescapable’, still highlights the humiliating physical consequences of seeking escape from servitude, while underscoring both the importance, but also the costs, of resistance.

---

354 DeKnight, DVD audio commentary, S0102.  
In most cases, the tattooing is not punitive, but used to denote ownership. Body slaves Melitta and Naevia in *Spartacus* are both tattooed with the insignia of their mistress Lucretia as a means of identification, the latter in a painful operation to ensure her obedience as Lucretia sets out the expectations of her new ‘role’ (*GoTA06*). Later, it is Naevia’s distinctive shoulder tattoo, rather than her name, which forms part of her physical description during Crixus’s attempts to re-locate her, a possible allusion to the notorious dehumanisation of Nazi concentration camp victims where individual names were replaced by the numbers tattooed on their forearms (this is also alluded to in the ‘numbering’ of Judah in *Ben-Hur*, 2010). Indeed, such is its importance for visualising slave status, even favoured slaves are tattooed. Kore’s sexual body may be coveted by Crassus, yet, despite his protestations that he ‘treated her as if word of slave had no meaning’ (S0308) his name is prominently inscribed onto her forearm. This visible acknowledgement of Kore’s owned status somewhat undermines Gregory Daugherty’s claim that Crassus and Kore enjoy ‘genuine tenderness and love’.356

In *Rome*, the tattoo is not used for all slaves. Whereas Pompey’s slave (a minor character) bears his owner’s name prominently on his bald head (as in the case of Kerza, it is a convenient means of identifying him later when he is beheaded), no markings are visible on the bodies of Merula, Eleni or Posca. Similar to the lack of collars, it may be an indication of their status as personal slaves or advisors to elite characters, but since tattooing does occur, its absence is more likely due to the fact we never see them undressed and alluding to it does not come up in the story.

---

356 Daugherty, 2016: 76. I examine his arguments further in chapter seven.
When it comes to the branding of slave bodies, *Spartacus* takes a rather different approach and there seems to be a gendering of the practice, or at least in terms of how it is perceived by the slaves. For female slaves, it is unequivocally shaming. When the Roman noblewoman Laeta is sold to the pirate Heraclio - her body is the ‘price’ for his aiding Crassus - she is branded with the letter ‘H’, a painful and degrading procedure which confirms Heraclio’s assumed ownership over her body and sexuality (S0307). She is later reconciled to the mark and recognises that it was an important, if humiliating, stage in her acceptance that the slave system she once tolerated is immoral. The brand also, perversely, constitutes a ‘passport’ into the rebel camp when Laeta shows it to a suspicious Spartacus. However, it is always regarded as a dehumanising sign of servility and inferiority.357

By contrast, the male slave heroes embrace this intrusive body marking. New gladiators who pass the ‘test’ against more seasoned colleagues recite the historical oath of allegiance - another instance of slaves surrendering their bodies ‘to be burned, bound, beaten, and killed by the sword’ - and are then branded on the forearm with the letter ‘B’ to formalise their ownership by the Batiatus *ludus*.358 It is also the size of a cattle brand, potentially alluding to their status as human livestock (although DeKnight admits that he chose it primarily because ‘it looked damn cool’359). Importantly, rather than perceiving this as a shameful loss of identity and individuality, they take pride in the ‘mark’ and the sense of belonging it bestows. Indeed, the branding ‘ceremony’ is a cause of celebration, and not, as in the 1960 film, one of pain and humiliation. This difference may be explained by the film’s

---

357 The attempting branding of Briseis in *Troy* (2004) also indicates her new status as sex slave.
358 A variation on the oath quoted by Seneca ‘to endure branding, chains, flogging or death by the sword (*Letters*, 37).
359 Audio commentary S0103.
unequivocal rejection of the world of the gladiator and the corrupt values it represents. The branding is unwelcome, not only because it reduces them to the status of animals, a recurring motif in the film’s portrayal of slavery, but also because it strips the men of their individuality and reminds them of their degraded status.

In the Starz series, the initiation process seems to be connected to masculinity narratives – i.e. ‘real’ men bear pain – while the branding itself is viewed as a rite of passage into the only community (the ‘brotherhood’) available to these enslaved men. As Robert Rushing suggests, this ‘proves their [gladiators] status as part of an elite brotherhood – those worthy of fighting in the arena’. This glorification of the brand is nevertheless problematic. Attachment to a marker which both commodifies them and signifies the deprivation of individual identity associated with servitude in the series, seems perverse. It is difficult to imagine any black American slave character taking such pride in the mark of ownership, where, as noted earlier, it is always represented as shameful. Furthermore, while this attachment to the brand could be viewed as another example of the slaves’ misplaced loyalty and indoctrination into Roman values (as I explored under ‘accommodation’ in chapter two) it continues to be a source of pride long after those values have been rejected. For instance, the failed gladiator Ashur suffers a lingering sense of shame that he never properly ‘earned’ the brand (he did not prevail in combat) and compensates for this sense of inadequacy by attempting to undermine or destroy the lives of its more successful recipients, specifically Crixus and Oenomaus/Doctore. Crixus also

360 Rushing, 2016: 118.
361 In Freedom (2014) the branding of newly arrived slaves who have survived the transatlantic middle passage marks the moment of realisation that their bodies no longer belong to them.
unfavourably compares the martial skills of ‘ordinary’ rebel slaves with gladiators because they ‘do not bear the mark’, implicitly rejecting Spartacus’s belief in the intrinsic equality of all slaves (S0202).

The most obvious explanation for this complex attitude is the brand’s role in forging that sense of belonging and identity I explored in chapter two. Deracinated and separated from their natal culture, these men see in gladiatorial combat purpose, meaning and direction. The brand embodies those values, and this diminishes its servile connotations. Essentially, it is a motif that crosses over between slavery and masculinity narratives, and it functions somewhat differently in the two narratives. By forging bonds and subscribing to a set of common values represented through the brotherhood, even if they are brutal, exclusionary and imposed by their master, the men feel temporarily empowered, and therefore do not reject the brand as shameful.

**Re-Naming**

The final motif I examine in this section is the forced re-naming of slaves. Names matter hugely in slave culture, as studies of more recent and better documented slave systems have shown.362 Alongside these visible markers, Patterson also ascribes major importance to the naming process within the ritual of enslavement, and the way it deprives slaves of their individuality: ‘A man’s name is…more than simply a way of calling him. It is the verbal signal of his whole identity, his being in the world

---

362 Slave naming rituals in the New World were various. Pompous slave owners ‘ransacked classical literature’ with Cato and Caesar both popular (Burnard, 2001: 326, 335, 349), usually to highlight their own classical education, but also to justify enslavement through the appropriation of names associated with ancient slaves systems (Williamson, 2017: 121-22). Regarded as evidence of white owners’ contempt, these imposed names were usually rejected upon emancipation (Genovese, 1976: 447-8; Burnard, 2001: 349).
as a distinct person’. While naming practices for slaves in antiquity is comparatively under-researched, the evidence - gleaned primarily from the better documented privileged slave class and epigraphic remains - indicates that it often depended upon status and personal circumstances. The choice of names was driven by a number of factors, for instance the slaves’ ethnicity, slave dealers’ preferences, desired character traits or even social pretensions with Greek gods particularly popular. Clive Cheeseman suggests that they were also occasionally given their masters’ names together with the suffix –por, a practice Mommsen described as ‘labelling’ rather than naming, and which certainly resonates with slaves’ status as property. We have no idea what the slaves themselves thought of this practice or whether they used names associated with their own culture among themselves. However, like livestock, slaves received only one name - unlike the three granted to Roman citizens - which would have further underscored their inferior status.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, names also carry symbolic weight in most contemporary slave narratives and are invariably represented as crucial to the survival of slaves’ pre-slave identity or sense of individuality. This is particularly evident in screen texts which privilege slave resistance. In Gladiator the hero’s various name changes mirror his progression from anonymous slave via triumph in the arena through to military leader of the republican resistance against Commodus. As his fellow slave Juba notes ‘you have a great name. He must kill your name before he kills you’.

363 Patterson, 2018: 54.
364 Wilson, 2000: 25-30. More recently, Bruun has examined the naming of verna - slaves born and bred in the owners’ household - and the proportion of Greek to Latin names (2013: 19-42). Gladiators were sometimes given names designed to reflect either their specialism or hoped for traits in the arena such as Pugnax, Celadus (lion’s roar) and Spiculus (javelin).
365 Cheeseman, 2009: 511-531. Citation for Mommsen, page 511.
Other texts, including *Pompeii* (2014), *Ben-Hur* (2010; 2016), and *Rome* (2005-7), also highlight the importance of names. In the antebellum onscreen tradition, retaining or choosing one’s own name is particularly strongly associated with bodily rights and identity, while *Game of Thrones* uses names to illustrate the transition between slavery and freedom.

One might also expect the TV series *Spartacus* to feature re-naming as a theme in its depiction of slavery. However, it is somewhat nuanced. On the one hand, the gladiators and other domestic slaves at the *ludus* seem unconcerned with names and retain those they were born with, or at least never refer to any others. In other ways, names are important in underscoring identity. Combined with the removal of his collar, the newly liberated Syrian slave Nasir swiftly abandons his Romanised slave name, Tiberius; this ‘rebirth’ completes his subsequent embrace of the rebel cause. Indeed, in his sole intervention on the subject, DeKnight confirms that Nasir’s attachment to his pre-slave name is deliberately coded as a conscious rejection of his servile past and a reclamation of his humanity. There are other subtle ways that naming is associated with slavery and identity. When the sexually abused Naevia is rescued from the mines, she rationalises her trauma through a process of re-identification as violent avenger which entails rejecting a name ‘that holds no meaning’ (S0206). Regaining one’s name to mark the transition from slavery to

---

366 Gaia refuses to disclose her birth name, a sign of resistance (and consistent with her strong character), while Vorenus orders his daughters not to name his surviving slave property, a little boy, because it ‘humanises’ him (they disobey, calling him after a pet bird, which is not exactly empowering either) (S0105).

367 Examples include *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and TV series *Roots* (1977; 2016) and *The Long Song* (2018).

368 Grey Worm elects to retain his slave name to commemorate his liberation. In the recent *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the sexual slaves are referred to by the man who ‘owns’ their bodies, i.e. *Of*Fred. Reclaiming and using those names among themselves becomes a form of spiritual resistance.

369 Audio Commentary, S0202.
freedom also applies to the *ludus* trainer, ‘Doctore’, whose manumission (and gradual rejection of the Romanised values of the *ludus* he had once endorsed) coincides with the revelation of his true identity, the future rebel leader, Oenomaus (S0112). As an enslaved man he was identified primarily through the ‘job’ title given to him, not his ‘real’ liberated self.

When it comes to the main protagonist, *Spartacus* does something rather different with the trope. The name of ‘Spartacus’ still matters to the eponymous hero, but not for the reasons one might expect. This is important given the enormous iconic significance of Spartacus’s name in popular culture and classical slavery generally, most famously embodied in the scene in the 1960 film where the recaptured slaves bravely refuse to identify their leader and instead assume his name (and by implication his identity), by chanting ‘I am Spartacus’. It is one of the most famous lines in cinematic history, parodied, imitated and satirised across different genres.

Yet, although *Spartacus* still features the phrase (it cannot be avoided, since it is now arguably part of the Spartacan reception ‘canon’), it does not resurrect this iconic scene. More importantly, in what appears a clear break with this tradition, the hero spends most of the series overtly rejecting the name. Given the huge significance attached to the name of ‘Spartacus’ in the popular imagination, this seems an unusual, and deeply significant choice.

---

370 There is a similar moment when the slaves are offered reenslavement if they betray Spartacus (S0210). They refuse to do so for personal reasons, namely a desire to defend their freedom on their own terms. In any case, Glaber already knows who Spartacus is. ‘I am Spartacus’ is later used as a ruse to confuse the Romans, an obvious homage, but nothing more (S0310).
Andrew Elliott has argued that Spartacus rejects his name out of an implicit desire to ‘renounce the mantle of Kubrick’s intertextual legacy’. This is a valid argument and reflects many other distinctive features of the Starz series’ approach to the story. However, such a radical distancing from the film still seems an unnecessary over complication, particularly since the series still keys into the reception tradition of the name’s inspirational significance for other downtrodden slaves. For example, a short time after the initial uprising, the fugitives launch a raid on a Roman villa; as soon as the frightened slaves hear that Spartacus is responsible, their faces light up in hope of rescue (S0202). There are several examples of Spartacus’s name being used as a symbol of resistance and liberty to would be fugitives. It seems anomalous for the name to have such significance and hope for others but mean so little to him.

I argue that the answer lies partly in the series’ vision of slavery as an institution which strips its victims not only of their freedom, but their very identity, as Patterson argued earlier. Whereas in the 1960 film Spartacus is the son and grandson of a slave, in the Starz version he is not born into servitude but enslaved in adulthood, a respected warrior who values his and his tribe’s freedom and independence. The name ‘Spartacus’ is later forcibly imposed upon him by his new owner Batiatus, in honour of an ancient Thracian king and a possible nod to the demeaning practice among New World slave owners of naming their slaves after high status classical or aristocratic figures. This imposition creates an immediate link between an alien

---

371 Elliott, 2011: 70.
372 This has a historical precedent, the alternative account by Florus which states that Spartacus was condemned to a gladiatorial school for deserting from the Roman auxiliary (Epitome of Roman History, 2.8).
name (it may have regal origins, but it is not *his*) and his sudden and deeply resented servile status.

Furthermore, not only does this name symbolise the systematic stripping away of his cherished freeborn identity, it also marks an adverse change in his personal life, and the attendant loss of his enslaved wife Sura. Frequent dreams and flashbacks show that their relationship is an important link with his former life; that original name is something they share, beyond the reach of their enslavers. Indeed, one of the things that Spartacus most looks forward to while planning his first (failed) escape attempt is for his wife to address him by his birth name, and ‘not the one the Romans branded me with’ (S0105). That he associates ‘Spartacus’ with other degrading features of servitude, such as branding, also suggests that it is physically painful for him to be addressed in this way. And when she is killed and he has nothing left to live for, this period is marked by temporary submission to this servile identity.

Having agreed to fight condemned men in the arena dressed as Thracians, the face of the last surviving ‘Thracian’ morphs into that of Spartacus (S0107). When Spartacus kills this (nameless) man, he also symbolically ‘kills’ his free self, and aligns with the values of his oppressors. As he cries out ‘I am Spartacus’ over the bodies of his fellow ‘Thracians’ it does not symbolise a triumph of courage and resistance, as in the film, but abject surrender and subjugation to his servile fate.

There are many other reasons for this rejection of the name. For instance, the privileging of other character arcs and teamwork over individual endeavour. The
rebellion is no longer about him alone, it also has other reasons and motivations. Pragmatism is also a possible explanation; Spartacus is a useful *nom de plume* or codename for rallying support for the rebellion so it makes sense to promote it. Also, the fact that Spartacus is a name imposed upon the rebel leader by the Roman sources themselves; we do not even know his real name. And finally, a possible desire to de-couple the name from the man who bears it because the revolt, and what it signifies, transcends him. This emotional detachment from the name is also underscored in Spartacus’s death scene where he definitively rejects it for the final time, because he associates freedom with the right to be addressed by a name of his choosing and by the wife who awaits him in the afterlife. The 1960 film Spartacus says that ‘death is the only freedom a slave knows’, so only at the ‘liberating’ moment of his demise can this modern Spartacus revert to his freeborn self. This shows that, while renaming may not be strictly physical, it plays an important role in highlighting themes around the denial of individuality and identity inherent to the series’ depiction of slavery.

**Maiming**

I complete this study by examining how physical violence against slaves is used to highlight the slaves’ lack of bodily agency, reinforcing the abusive power dynamic fundamental to the series’ portrayal of master/slave relations explored in chapter three. Although Rome was probably ‘not untypical of most pre-industrial states’, there is an abundance of literary and historical evidence to indicate a high tolerance

---

374 See Elliott, 2011: 70 on the notion of Spartacus as a ‘fragmented hero’ who only succeeds with the assistance of others. I refer back to this in chapter five.

375 Dunkle, 2008:15. Lintott suggests that attitudes were shaped by the victim’s relative value and social status rather than a Roman penchant for brutality (1968: 46).
for violence and cruelty in the Roman world,\textsuperscript{376} with slavery cited as a contributing factor.\textsuperscript{377} As the most vulnerable group, slaves would have been the primary targets of this brutality, while the threat of physical abuse must, as Bradley has convincingly argued, have formed part of their ‘everyday normality’.\textsuperscript{378} Owners could have their slaves burned alive, crucified, sent to the mines or publicly flogged, and there was no effective legal redress.\textsuperscript{379} While the degree of violence used against slaves will have varied from owner to owner and depended upon their perceived ‘value’, Noel Lenski sums up the relationship between violence and slavery when he writes, ‘at its very roots slavery is a system conceived in violence….and represents the continuous and excruciating drawn out application of violence by one human being over another’.\textsuperscript{380}

Modern TV programme makers have appropriated this evidence, and the strong link between violence and slavery, with enthusiasm, using physical violence against slaves extensively to convey the brutal realities of the system. Among the most prominent types of institutionalised violence used against slaves in modern slave dramas, and arguably the most evocative symbol of the master’s absolute power over the body of the slave, is whipping. This form of punishment has strong associations with most historical slave systems.\textsuperscript{381} The former American slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass saw the flogged slave’s body as a proxy for the suffering of all

\textsuperscript{376} Wiseman, 1985: 1-5 for a compendium of literary and historical sources on Roman cruelty to slaves and criminals, and the various instruments of torture used.
\textsuperscript{377} Hopkins, 1983: 28. George argues that the brutality of slavery informed and even defined Roman conceptions of punishment (2013: 163).
\textsuperscript{380} Lenski, 2016: 275-95.
slaves, where ‘the overseer had written his character on the living parchment of most of their backs’.\textsuperscript{382} Whipping has additional symbolism in portrayals of Roman slavery since, in the Roman world, this humiliating punishment was uniquely reserved for slaves.\textsuperscript{383} Furthermore, as Richard Saller notes, for Romans whipping was not merely about inflicting pain, but also to underscore discrepancies in civic and social status:

To the Romans the anguish was in significant measure social and psychological, the insult to the \textit{dignitas}…[since] Romans attached symbolic importance to whippings [and] the whip was used to make distinctions in the public sphere between free and subject.\textsuperscript{384}

Admittedly, whipping is used sparingly against the major characters of \textit{Spartacus} and lacks the iconic status of the whip in American slavery texts. However, it is still effective in underscoring these differences in status, while also highlighting widespread popular tolerance, and even acceptance, of casual violence against slaves. In the prequel Batiatus and his entourage pass four slaves being brutally flogged in one of the town squares (\textit{GoTA01}). The most significant feature of the scene is not the fact of the flogging, which is as brutal and humiliating as one would expect in such a violent adaptation of antiquity, but the indifference of the passers-by. This has the effect of normalising the violence.

\textsuperscript{382} Douglass, 1969 [1855]: 101.
\textsuperscript{383} Walters, 1997: 37-43.
\textsuperscript{384} Saller, 1991: 151. This is also reflected in the literature, notably in Plautus, where the scarred back was treated as a recurring joke and a fundamental characteristic of the slave (Walters, 1997: 43; Joshel, 2010: 116, 120).
Although Spartacus is threatened (see the preface to this chapter), Crixus is the only example of a major character to be beaten in the series following the discovery of his illicit liaison with Naevia (S0112). However, it is significant for advancing the revolt narrative since it marks the moment when this once favoured slave finally begins to recognise that his faith in the ludus has been misplaced. Although he bears his punishment with the stoicism one might expect from a future rebel hero, it is a humiliating moment, and even his rival Spartacus is moved to pity. Furthermore, although it is rarely used to punish, the whip itself has symbolic significance in the series since it is wielded by Doctore at the behest of his master, a proxy for Batiatus’s power and authority over the bodies of his slaves.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Atia in Rome also whips her slaves. Although it is not strictly a form of punishment for the slave’s transgressions, the scene underscores the widespread and arbitrary use and acceptance of violence against slaves in these series. The victim Castor’s resigned reaction suggests that this behaviour is not unusual, while the indifference of her son Octavian and guest Brutus (both present) to the violence recalls that of Batiatus to the public floggings in Spartacus. Similarly, when Eirene wants to get revenge on the insolent slave Gaia, she tells her husband to beat her (S0207). Her eagerness to exploit violence to enforce obedience illustrates how swiftly this freedwoman has imbibed the prejudices and ideology of servitude, for whom physically disciplining slaves is a symbol of power and authority. In the Roman world reconstructed onscreen, a ‘good’ slave is a beaten slave, not someone for whom ex-slaves should feel residual empathy or pity. These incidents, and the use of flogging as a specific form of
punishment for slaves, suggest a deliberate focus on the worst aspects of master/slave relations in these series.

While whipping features strongly in slave narratives, in Roman stories crucifixion is arguably a more prominent form of physical punishment. This is because it is associated not only with slavery in the cinematic tradition, particularly the 1960 film and the mass crucifixion of the recaptured rebels, but also the martyrdom of Christ. Like whipping, it was a punishment expressly reserved for slaves due to its combination of shame, dishonour and pain. The lower the status, the tougher the punishment. These historically attested mass crucifixions, such a strong visual feature of the mistreatment of slaves in the 1960 film, also appear at the end of the Starz series. However, the recurring presence of crucifixion elsewhere, most obviously in reprisals against innocent slaves, suggests a wider narrative purpose. It symbolises the inhumanity of slavery and the costs of revolt, but is also a vivid and brutal reminder of the slave holding class’s absolute power over the slave body. This is shown in the mass public executions of non-rebel slaves in the wake of the Spartacus uprising, where the decomposing bodies of crucified slaves line the streets of Capua (S0207). As O’Brien correctly notes, the use of crucifixion in the series symbolises slaves’ ‘ongoing defiance and its terrible penalty’. Indeed, crucifixion is so central to onscreen depictions of slavery that it also features in non-Roman texts, such as Game of Thrones. While Christianity is probably the dominant

---

385 Spartacus was (erroneously) crucified alongside the other recaptured slaves as part of the film’s Christianisation of the rebel struggle (Winkler, 2007: 183-187).
386 Coleman, 1990: 56. Although not an original Roman concept, it was eagerly embraced (Potter 2002: 9).
387 Garnsey, 170: 127.
389 127 slave children are crucified along the road to a slave city and the captured masters later suffer the same penalty (S0303). It clearly alludes to the mass crucifixion scenes of the 1960 film, and other versions.
association in most viewers’ minds when they see a crucifixion onscreen, this imagery is also useful for conveying the inherently violent and dehumanising nature of slavery, and why it should be resisted.

While whipping and crucifixion are familiar symbols, the depiction of slave mines and quarries is also a key vehicle for underscoring the abuse of the slave body. Even in antiquity these were feared places, and damnatio ad metalla (condemnation to the mines), was, together with whipping and crucifixion, again usually reserved for slaves, criminals and others of lower status. Scenes of slaves being viciously beaten and worked to death in the grim Libyan quarry in the 1960 film set the dehumanising tone of its depiction of slavery, and the mine/quarry as a particular locus of cruelty and violence against slaves is replicated in a similar fashion in Spartacus and Rome. The gladiators of Batiatus’s ludus are prepared to kill one another to avoid being sent there (GoTA04), while Batiatus instructs Doctore: ‘Bake them [the newly purchased gladiators] to brick or crumble them to the mines’ (S0102). In Rome, even the hardened Vorenus, not someone sympathetic to slaves, is horrified by the inhumanity and brutality he witnesses at the quarry where his children have been sold (S0205).

There are numerous other examples where violence is used against slaves to underscore their worthlessness. In Spartacus, captured rebel captives are tortured and dismembered (S204; S305), while random slaves are dragged from the streets to be stoned and crucified, regardless of their views on the Spartacus rebellion (S205; 390 Wiedemann, 1994: 176-7. This is reflected in the literature. Tyndarus, the heroic slave unjustly sent to the stone quarry in Plautus’s The Prisoners (Captivi), tells his master ‘There’s no hell equal to the place where I’ve been, in those quarries’ (959-1003). 391 Gustafson, 1994: 421.

151
In *Rome*, Atia threatens to castrate her loyal slave Castor and only refrains from this agonising, yet perfectly legal, punishment because eunuchs are ‘no longer the fashion’ (S0203). Lucretia also threatens to do the same to Batiatus’s bodyguard, the gladiator Barca, should her husband come to harm (S0104).

Although Robert Rushing is correct to note that *Spartacus* ‘delights in the many ways in which skin can be broken and bodies can be penetrated’, it is still a slave narrative and does not shy away from portraying the physical impact of slavery on the slave body.

**Conclusion**

Probably the most significant finding to arise from this chapter is that the representation of the slave body is a powerful canvas for illustrating the evils of slavery and a visual reminder that slave bodies were not their own. The chained, collared, tattooed, and de-named slaves of *Spartacus* and other slave narratives also highlight notions of status, a recurring theme in this thesis. As Page duBois usefully notes, ‘the bodies of slaves bore the signs of their difference’. Using slaves as domestic adornments, furniture and sexual objects or treating their bodies as commodities, tools, and props to be used, abused and then discarded, draws attention to the consequences of denying the slave’s personhood, and individual identity. This analysis also suggests a degree of conformity in terms of the representation of the slave body across the onscreen slave narrative, despite their different historical/fictional settings, particularly the use of these physical markers and characteristically ‘servile’ punishments such as whipping and crucifixion. The series

---

392 It was outlawed under Domitian (*Suet. Dom.* 7) some 150 years after the events depicted in *Rome*. However, it is a useful way of underscoring the Romans’ absolute power over their slaves’ bodies.

393 Rushing, 2016: 117. I return to the use of violence in more detail in the next chapter.

394 duBois, 2018: 262.
exploits these symbols effectively, although the nuanced depiction of branding suggests a clash between its traditionally punitive purpose and modern masculinity narratives. Hopkins and Beard state that ‘Roman civic status was written on the body’. The iniquities of slavery are also vividly written onto the bodies of slaves in these TV series.

395 Hopkins and Beard, 2005: 77.
Chapter Five

‘Kill them all!’: The Problematisation of Servile Violence in *Spartacus*

*Spartacus* depicts extreme sensuality, brutality and language that some viewers may find objectionable. The show is a historical portrayal of ancient Roman society and the intensity of the content is to suggest an authentic representation of that period.396

‘This is a bloody show. We don’t mind cutting a few throats’.397

‘War makes monsters of us all’.398

Described by one critic as offering ‘maybe the goriest [violence] ever filmed for television’,399 it is clear that the Starz series deliberately foregrounds violence in its portrayal of the Roman world. Indeed, the disclaimer cited above shows that violence is so strongly associated with ancient Rome in the minds of the programme makers, that it is even hailed as a key authenticating device regardless of what the

396 The disclaimer which introduces each episode of the Starz series (my italics). The British DVDs for both *Spartacus* and *Rome* also carry an ’18’ certificate to reflect the series’ prominent use of ‘adult content’.
397 DeKnight, DVD Commentary, *GoT*A06. On the brutal execution of the recaptured slave Diona.
399 Feeney (2010). This seems to be the critical consensus. Owen (2010) suggested that the show is meant for ‘viewers comfortable with violence, gore and nudity’, while Crace (2010) calls out the series’ ‘cartoon sex and violence’. Gilbert, 2010 disliked the stylised videogame aesthetic. However, there were dissenting voices, notably Ryan (2010) and McGee (2013).
ancient evidence says. This preconception that a *non*-violent Rome is somehow wrong or unhistorical is crucial to understanding why violence is such a prevalent feature, not only of the series, but also the depiction of slavery and slave behaviour.

There is no question that violence belongs in a story about gladiatorial servitude. Galen’s graphic descriptions of gladiators’ bodies as ‘completely deformed’ by torn muscles, dislocated and broken limbs, gouged out eyes, offers a chilling indictment of the physical damage inflicted by the games.\(^{400}\) As Jerry Toner notes in his study of Roman popular culture, these spectacles had to have a ‘wow factor’ and violence provided ‘a physical language the people could easily understand’.\(^ {401}\) Nevertheless, in the context of modern screen representations of gladiatorial slavery, even when compared to more recent texts such as the 2004 *Spartacus* or even the combat scenes in *Barabbas* (2013), the extent of the Starz violence, and its centrality to the series’ narrative and visual aesthetic, is unprecedented. Frequent, visceral scenes of gruesome slaughter, mutilation and brutal hand to hand combat dominate the series. And as a symbol of the violence, blood is everywhere, on the walls, the bodies of the gladiators and their victims, and even routinely spattered across the screen. It is difficult to disagree with one scholar’s description of the violence as ‘fetishized and eroticized’.\(^ {402}\)

What does this relentless focus on violence tell us about the series’ portrayal of slavery? As the previous chapter showed, violence is used *against* slaves to underscore their powerlessness and lack of status, as one might expect for an

\(^{400}\) *Exhortation in the Study of the Arts*, 4. (Cited in Futrell, 2006: 141).

\(^{401}\) Toner, 2009: 113-114. Plass, 1995 also sees the popularity of the games as a way of easing social tensions.

\(^{402}\) Rushing, 2016: 161.
institution ‘conceived in violence’.\textsuperscript{403} However, when we begin to analyse who uses violence, it is significant that slaves are also among the primary perpetrators, against other slaves as well as Romans. The uncompromising phrase ‘Kill Them All’ cited in the title is not used by a Roman, but Spartacus’s wife Sura (and future slave) as he goes into battle against the Getae tribe, and recurs several times throughout season one and beyond whenever Spartacus’s resolve falters, even in cases where his victims are fellow slaves. It is also the title of the final episode in which Batiatus and his guests are slaughtered by Spartacus and his fellow slaves in what turns out to be the longest and bloodiest massacre of the entire series (S0113). Meanwhile, Spartacus swears to kill ‘a thousand men’ in the arena if it means reuniting with his wife (S0102). It is clear that violence is an integral feature of the slaves’ lives, and everyone is prepared to use it.

Although this chapter follows the previous one by examining the use of violence in the portrayal of slavery, it is about violence perpetrated by slaves, not on them. I argue that the slaves’ use of violence in this particular screen reception of ancient slavery serves two primary purposes. It exposes the brutalising impact of slavery on the minds and behaviour of its victims (and their commodification as instruments of violence). It also highlights problematic aspects of the extreme and sensationalised violence which dominates much recent historical TV drama, particularly in these cable productions where it is now an increasingly anticipated feature.\textsuperscript{404} I focus on two types. Firstly, the institutionalised violence that slaves carry out in their role as


\textsuperscript{404} Elliott, 2015 explores how this violent and graphic (read sex) content is increasingly driven by industrial factors, notably the platform (network versus cable). Smith, 2018 makes similar arguments (especially pages 51-115).
gladiators, and its impact on male slave relations at the ludus. Secondly, the slaves’ use of violence during the initial uprising and the rebellion phase in seasons two and three.

**Gladiatorial Slave Violence**

Gladiators and the arena have become synonymous with the ancient world onscreen and where film goes, television invariably follows.\(^{405}\) It is almost as if a screen text without a violent gladiatorial contest is somehow not quite ‘Roman’. Consequently, whether or not they are ‘about’ this form of servitude, many recent classical TV series such as *Rome* (2005-7), *Empire* (2005), *Ben-Hur* (2010), *Spartacus* (2010-13) and *Barabbas* (2013) have featured gladiatorial contests.\(^{406}\) Single combat in the gladiatorial style is so popular with audiences that it also features widely in other, non-classical texts, notably *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), *The Last Kingdom* (2016-), and even the revisionist western *Deadwood* (2005-7). Not all of the combatants are slaves, yet most representations follow a similar pattern of portraying the arena as a site of spectacle and hyper-masculinity, but also extreme and unregulated violence, usually culminating in the graphic mutilation and death of the one or more of the opponents. The violence is brutal, but also thrilling, even erotic, and TV audiences are encouraged to revel in the bloodshed in the same way as their Roman predecessors.\(^{407}\) While gladiatorial violence has been extensively covered in the

---


\(^{406}\) Although a film series, *The Hunger Games* is also heavily influenced by the Roman gladiatorial games.

current scholarship under a range of themes, there has been less attention paid to the representation of this type of violence and its relationship with slavery.

It is immediately obvious from the viewer’s first encounter with Batiatus’s ludus that the gladiatorial slaves nurse a strong attachment to the extreme violence they enact in their professional roles as gladiators. They relish the brutal training regime, and enthusiastically applaud each blow, mutilation and kill. Their trainer, the disciplinarian Oenomaus (it is he not Batiatus who wields the whip) further inspires them to see combat as a route to personal value and redemption, using sexual terminology to emphasise the seductive and masculinising power of violence: ‘A gladiator does not fear death, he embraces it, caresses it, fucks it’ (S0102). Nor do they experience any revulsion at the murderous implications of their role in these violent spectacles. While Maximus in the film Gladiator (alongside the similarly ethics-free violence of 300, an important influence on the Starz series’ graphic portrayal of violence), was also unconcerned with the human cost of the carnage he leaves behind (and the film’s glorification of violence was also seen as problematic), he at least recognises the shallow morality of the crowd’s enjoyment of the violence when he shouts in contempt: ‘Are you not entertained?’ By contrast, in the Starz series, violence, and the capacity to inflict it on others, has an almost


409 Grant called them ‘bloodthirsty human holocausts’ (1967: 124).

reverent and seductive quality, where the arena and training grounds, the primary locus of the carnage, are described as ‘sacred’ places. Far from problematising the crowds’ bloodlust, these men are encouraged to see glory and honour in violence, and to place the brutal and exploitative ideology of the ludus above any moral or ethical concerns over the killing of fellow slaves against whom they have no grievance. As Gardner and Potter argue, ‘these gladiators smile at the prospect of a good kill and the prestige earned’.

This is perhaps not surprising in the context of the onscreen sword and sandal genre. As Elia argues, these films are ‘intended to decontextualize and glorify violence without recognizing its costs’. However, it is still incongruous in the context of their status as slaves, particularly when compared against the 1960 film, where the spectacularised violence associated with the arena, and the Roman slave system that supported it, is firmly rejected by Spartacus and the other slaves. What has led to this radical shift in the depiction of arena violence perpetrated by slaves upon other slaves as something to be praised? Part of the answer may lie in attempts to authenticate the ‘real’ Roman gladiatorial experience. The gladiatorial games were enormously popular in the ancient world, and the gladiators’ reputation as ‘incarnations of a potent masculinity’, is a feature that the series has mapped onto its depiction of gladiatorial slavery much more firmly than in the film (where freedom from combat is seen as a definition of liberty).

As noted in chapter two, Cornelius argues that violence in combat forges male identity in the series (2015b: 21). He explores in detail the imagery of the sands (2015c).


The scholarship on these ‘murderous games’ (Hopkins, 1983: 1-30) is substantive. See Barton, 1989; Coleman, 1990: 44-73; 1997; Plass, 1995; Jushka, 2005; Kyle, 1998; Dunkle, 2010. For the most comprehensive analysis of the lure of the arena in Roman culture, see Fagan, 2011.


Cornelius, 2015: 19.
gladiators’ (assumed) ability to face down death with courage was envied and admired in some quarters. Although we have little evidence of how the slaves saw themselves (they were condemned men after all, and there is evidence that not all were enthusiastic about killing), this temporary adulation may have encouraged them to regard themselves as more than savage killers.

Further extending the ‘accommodation’ paradigm from chapter two, embracing and even sanctifying the violence also makes the slaves’ task more bearable. Despite its seductive portrayal, gladiatorial violence is still an unavoidable assault by slaves upon slaves and generic to a profession to which they are forcibly bound; questioning its ethical implications is arguably a reductive exercise, as hinted at in Gannicus’s comments about ‘the burden of choice removed’ cited earlier. Indeed, this lack of agency over who and when to kill might be seen as an indirect way of underlining the slaves’ absolute disempowerment. This is illustrated in Spartacus’s later justification for his killing of Varro in the exhibition fight: ‘Hands were removed from choice’ (S0111). Even the 1960 Spartacus recognised the dilemma of the gladiatorial life:

Crixus: Would you try to kill me?

Spartacus: Yes, I’d kill. I’d try to stay alive and so would you.

---

417 Some were flogged back into the arena (Potter, 2007: 78).
Spartacus: The Killing ‘Machine’.\textsuperscript{418}

Although the secondary slave cast plays an important role in complicating servile violence (and will be explored in greater detail in the next section), it is still Spartacus who sets the moral standard and his attitude to violence is therefore crucial to understanding how far this problematisation of the 1960 film’s violence extends.

As stated earlier, a distinctive feature of the film is Spartacus’s vehement rejection of Roman arena culture and the empty, dehumanising spectacle that underpins it. As noted in the study of his status as a resistance icon in chapter two, the Starz Spartacus makes a similar speech, but under very different circumstances and not, significantly, to his fellow slaves. When Spartacus requests additional supplies to feed the enslaved Roman population of Sinuessa, whose city the rebels have captured, the amoral pirate Heraclio (who will later betray the slaves to Crassus) is puzzled by this display of compassion: ‘Do you think they [the Romans] would treat your people with such kindness?’ Spartacus replies with conviction, ‘We are not Romans, nor shall we become them by acts of unnecessary cruelty’ (S0304). I argued earlier that this speech highlights Spartacus’s moral dissociation from the Romans, but his use of ‘unnecessary cruelty’ is nevertheless intriguing. It suggests that violence or cruelty in itself is not implicitly wrong, it just depends upon who is perpetrating the violence and, crucially, why, issues I explore in more detail below.

Yet this Spartacus who, against the advice of his more vengeful confederates Agron and Crixus, forbids violent reprisals against Roman non-combatants, still contrasts markedly with his character’s extensive use of violence elsewhere in the series.

\textsuperscript{418}Apparently, one of the writers of Gladiators, William Nicholson, claimed that before he arrived Maximus ‘was just a killing machine’; his character was changed to give him a more complex motivation – love (Russell, 2007: 167).
Spartacus’s first entry into the arena in episode one not only sets the standard for the series’ graphic portrayal of arena barbarism, but also his own potentially problematic relationship with violence. After initial reluctance and encouraged by Sura’s uncompromising invocation to ‘kill them all’, Spartacus brutally slaughters four seasoned opponents. Throughout the scene, shots of Spartacus’s blood drenched face are inter cut with the hysterical cheering of the bloodthirsty crowd. Similar savagery is enacted across the season as he rises up the ranks of the gladiatorial cohort, his success built upon the slaughter of fellow slaves. Yes, he has no choice, but the relish with which he kills is nevertheless discomforting.

These scenes tell us that this version of Spartacus is completely at ease with extreme violence. He does not merely kill, as required, but mutilates, dismembers and eviscerates his opponents. Nor are any ethical concerns voiced over the slaughter of men who are essentially, fellow slaves and, like him, also exercise little choice or agency over their lives. Furthermore, despite his expressed dislike of the games (see chapter two), he does not engage in any agonised pre-fight conversations about the human consequences of the carnage he enacts for the profit of others. It is true that reunion with his wife is represented as the ‘prize’ for his victories, but this does not fully explain the savagery of the killing. This emotional detachment also contrasts with the subsequent concern and pity for the welfare of the Romans at Sinuessa, people against whom he has - arguably - a more valid grievance.

---

419 As Rushing has noted, this is consistent with other ‘peplum’ heroes (Maximus, Hercules) where the murder of families or loved ones provides a narrative pretext and even justification for the violence (2016: 161).
How does the series reconcile these two aspects of his personality? Partly through his implicit acknowledgement of the slaves’ lack of agency and a desire to survive/escape, themes explored in detail in chapter two, but equally by the way the fight scenes are filmed. As the hero it is impossible for him to act dishonourably, therefore Spartacus is always the primary point of view, and his physical and emotional pain foregrounded. By contrast, his opponents are forcibly anonymised and unsympathetically portrayed as brutal, primitive and snarling caricatures, indifferent to the cruelties they inflict upon other slaves. Concealed behind masks and helmets, voiceless and nameless, they cease to be relatable people. Indeed, one of gladiators Spartacus finally defeats in the ‘underground’ arena (S0104) is doubly dehumanised because of his gruesome habit of removing and later wearing the faces of his victims (one of them being Kerza), Hannibal Lector style. This theatrical horror not only adds to the aestheticised artificiality of the scene, but also encourages viewers to side with the perpetrator (the hero Spartacus) and ‘enjoy’ the spectacle unproblematically, even though all of these men are also victims of slavery and Roman oppression. Since the hero must become champion in order to secure the respect and support of his confederates, and thereby launch and lead the subsequent uprising, it is essential that audiences are prevented from identifying, physically or emotionally, with any of Spartacus’s (literally) faceless opponents.

This forcible de-individualisation of his opponents also connects with the namelessness of Spartacus and identity issues explored in the previous chapter. It allows Spartacus the man to distance himself from the persona of the violent

---

420 In Silence of the Lambs (1991) the cannibal antagonist escaped by wearing the face of the police officer he killed.
gladiator who bears this name. This in turn helps to diminish any ethical concerns arising from the violence he perpetrates because he is merely ‘performing’ the role of gladiator without having to assume its morally ambivalent identity. Significantly, this depiction of Spartacus as a figure steeped in the slaughter of anonymous fellow slaves contrasts with other recent approaches to ‘classical heroism’ and its reception, particularly in the *Iliad* where the (many) dead are often not particularly fleshed out but are not entirely nameless either. Alice Oswald’s 2011 poem *Memorial* shifts the spotlight away from Achilles and the other Greek and Trojan heroes and gods towards the nameless dead of the Trojan War, seeking to recoup and individualise ‘the men who have been caught up in this war’,421 not those who precipitated and led it. *Spartacus* cannot afford to have the hero overtly question his conduct, or, by implication, the violence that the series revels in, so it de-individualises and even dehumanises his servile opponents instead.422

Rachel McCoppin claims that by the end of the first season Spartacus and the others have finally come to recognise that ‘killing other slaves is unjust’.423 Spartacus’s justificatory speech to the slaves following the massacre of Batiatus’s Roman guests at the *ludus* cited in chapter two - ‘I would not see another heart ripped from chest or breath forfeit for no cause’ - clearly represents an unequivocal rejection of arena culture and the human slaughter which underpins it. On the other hand, his invocation ‘blood demands blood’ signals that the rebel movement will not be

422 Manea makes a similar point about the slaughter of helmeted Roman soldiers, rendered ‘narratively meaningless’ because ‘their sole purpose is to offer the main characters a chance to shine’ (2015: 40).
mirroring his cinematic predecessor’s rejection of vengeful (as opposed to military and defensive) violence. Furthermore, this rejection is somewhat belated, even contradictory, in view of the orgiastic scenes of violence in which he has enthusiastically participated. It might have been a more convincing conversion if he had expressed these concerns earlier, or been brought to recognise the injustice of the killing before having to kill his best friend Varro, whose death (along with the murder of Spartacus’s wife), provides the primary impetus for the revolt.

These contradictions are also evident in production level tensions surrounding Spartacus’s use of violence. DeKnight admits that the Starz channel expressed concerns, particularly scenes of Spartacus ripping out the throat of a gladiatorial opponent with his teeth; while it was deemed acceptable for one of the other gladiators to behave this way, ‘they just didn't want the hero doing it’. These inconsistencies suggest that the series’ producers want to characterise him in a certain way, namely as a proud warrior condemned to gladiatorial servitude and forced to kill to survive and reunite with his wife, but they also want to have their ‘cake and eat it’ with liberal amounts of spectacularised violence (now increasingly a ‘required’ feature of the genre), overlaying each episode.

**Slave on slave violence**

While we would expect gladiators to fulfil their role as killers (even if their enjoyment of it is problematic), another distinctive feature of the series (when compared to the 1960 film) is the way this institutionalised violence spills over into

---

424 McGrath, 2010.
425 Elliott, 2011: 68. He was discussing Maximus in *Gladiator*, but his arguments apply to the Starz series.
everyday slave/slave relations. These are much more belligerent, fractious and violent than in the film, playing into the series’ more ambivalent portrayal of slave behaviour. Fights, and deep seated personal, and ethnic rivalries are commonplace and create open division within the slave community. As noted in chapter two, similar to prison dramas the ability to control others through violence and intimidation sets the tone and creates a climate where brutality and indifference to suffering are normalised.426

This is most evident in the training scenes where the killing of gladiators is greeted with indifference, even derision. During the first of several bouts between the rivals Crixus and Spartacus a new recruit is killed in the crossfire (S0102). Furious at this act of human wastefulness (we never even learn the victim’s name, further underlining the recurring theme of namelessness as a way of de-individualising slaves), Oenomaus rounds on the culprit Spartacus: ‘your foolishness has cost a life’. The other gladiators simply laugh. Oenomaus later tells Crixus to ‘bash in’ Spartacus’s head when he refuses to yield. The men react in a similarly callous way when another slave is killed during the ‘test’ for entry to the ‘brotherhood’.

DeKnight has suggested that scenes of gladiatorial death are deliberately inserted in Spartacus ‘to show how cheap life is’,427 and the slaves’ indifference to the violence they perpetrate against other slaves is one way of conveying this. Regret for those they have killed in combat is also perceived as weak. When Spartacus sheds tears over the death of his friend Varro, he gains little sympathy beyond empty platitudes about dying with ‘honour’ and is even mocked by Crixus for this display of

426 A prime example is The Shawshank Redemption (1996), where the strong prey on the weak and even the main character is not spared. Recent TV example is Prison Break (2007-17), or the hugely successful Orange is the New Black (2013-19).
427 DeKnight, DVD audio commentary S0102.
perceived feminine ‘weakness’ (S0111). Perhaps we are meant to see Spartacus’s own lack of reflection on the implications of his violence, notably the potentially problematic killing of Pietros’s abuser cited in chapter two, as a by-product of this aggressive culture.

Similar to the portrayal of gladiatorial violence, and building upon earlier arguments around the slaves’ ‘acceptance’ of servitude, it could be argued that this brutality and indifference to suffering more accurately represent the realities of the gladiatorial world than the 1960 film, where inter-slave differences are mostly submerged in the interests of collective unity. Even if the cinematic gladiators do not ‘make friends’, they at least try to unite in common hatred of their master, and Draba does ultimately refuse to kill on command. Returning again to the ‘prison’ analogy, becoming inured to indiscriminate violence is an inevitable consequence of being confined within a lawless and primitive environment, where inmates are encouraged (or even forced) to internalise and even embrace a way of life that celebrates violence. William Fitzgerald has argued that one of the reasons cinema is so interested in the gladiatorial genre is because it forces the men into a ‘murderous competitiveness’ where a suffering comrade ‘is a threat to your life’.428 While the aggressive behaviour of the slaves could partly be seen as masculine posturing and a need to foreshadow future disputes during the rebellion phase, this idea of belligerent men locked in a deadly rivalry and primitive race for survival also shapes slave/slave relationships in the Starz series.429

428 Fitzgerald, 2001: 43.
429 This argument is advanced in Elkins’ study of analogies between American slavery and the absolute control exercised by the commandants of German concentration camps (1968 [1959]: 109-10).
On the other hand, this might equally be attributed to the series’ particular vision of the ancient world. Although he cites no ancient evidence, DeKnight claims that ‘the Romans had a very different view of violence than we do’ and ‘were brought up that flinching from blood and violence was a sign of weakness’. This view of Roman society as endemically violent, also incidentally shared by others involved in screening the Roman world, may have dictated DeKnight’s approach to the portrayal of slaves and slavery. It implies that the violence and aggression which characterise servile behaviour outside the arena happens because of the conditions of being a gladiator and a slave in an inherently brutal society where ‘modern’ notions such as compassion and pity are perceived as weak, even dangerous.

Nor is this slave on slave violence unique to *Spartacus*, which might indicate a broader shift in recent productions towards the representation of slaves as more violent. The slave prostitute Gaia in *Rome* behaves brutally in pursuit of her own interests and the primary victims of her violence are not Romans but other slaves or ex-slaves, whether the young prostitutes whom she beats and exploits, or her master’s wife, the freedwoman Eirene, whom she physically threatens and later kills (S0206). Other characters, for instance the slave prostitute Duro, or Caesar’s amoral secretary Posca, also place their own ambitions above the needs of others, and if fellow slaves impede those goals, then they are dealt with. Similarly, although solidarity and friendship rather than violent antagonism are still more prevalent in most onscreen slave narratives set under later slave systems, particularly American,

---

430 Interview in Loggins, 2010.
431 The *Rome* consultant Jonathan Stamp makes similar (unsubstantiated) assertions about Romans’ lack of pity and mercy: ‘One thing the Romans weren’t was weak. They exist in a world where…might is ultimately right’ (DVD Season One Extras, ‘Roman Worship’).
432 Duro’s attempt to poison Atia leads to the death of the slave cook; she is collateral damage.
there are also more morally ambivalent behaviours. Although they mostly leave the violence to their masters, the desperate slaves of *Underground* are not above putting their own interests above those of their comrades. The amoral overseer Cato kills another wounded escapee because his injuries will slow them down, while a mother kills her new born child.\textsuperscript{433} On the other hand, since there is no competitive, gladiatorial element to these texts (the only equivalent is the Mandingo fight scene in *Django Unchained*), actual slave on slave violence is perhaps less likely. However, it still contrasts with the overt antagonism that pervades relations in the *ludus*, or other recent portrayals of the Roman world such as *Rome*. This suggests that the violence between the Starz gladiators not only reflects their status as trained killers, but also a perception that the Roman world was inherently primitive and brutal, which these series (as DeKnight’s comments suggest) consciously foreground.

‘Violent delights have violent ends’:\textsuperscript{434} Slave violence, post-slavery.

I now turn to an examination of servile violence perpetrated during the rebellion phase. Whereas the violence of the arena might be driven by circumstances beyond the slaves’ control, their violent behaviour after liberation is potentially more problematic. Furthermore, it again contrasts sharply with the 1960 film which, although by no means pacifist, unequivocally rejects all acts of vengeance against former masters as ‘unheroic’.\textsuperscript{435} Firstly, let us examine some specific examples.

\textsuperscript{433} One exception is the slave mother Ernestina in *Underground*. She poisons a recaptured slave to ensure that her fugitive daughter’s location is not disclosed.

\textsuperscript{434} *Romeo and Juliet*, II.6.9. It is also the ‘trigger’ for the extremely violent rebellion of the enslaved robots of *Westworld*, containing scenes of barbarity very similar to *Spartacus*.

\textsuperscript{435} Paul, 2013: 202-3.
The series’ portrayal of the ludus uprising gives viewers a strong clue about how the slaves intend to conduct the rebellion (S0113). In the 1960 and 2004 versions, Roman guards and other allies of the master are killed, but Batiatus escapes and the slaves flee. Liberty, rather than vengeance, is their principal goal. The Roman sources also state that the slaves broke out of the ludus, rather than killing their masters.\textsuperscript{436} By contrast the Starz series devotes nearly fifteen minutes to the graphic slaughter of Batiatus and his Roman guests. Described by one reviewer as a ‘metatextual bloodbath’, the carnage is visceral.\textsuperscript{437} The majority of these Romans, while certainly morally complicit in the perpetuation of slavery, are unarmed male and female civilians. Atrocities include Crixus killing his unborn child after deliberately stabbing Lucretia in the stomach, a scene somewhat charitably explained by the trauma of rape,\textsuperscript{438} and the beating to death of a teenage boy. Even DeKnight admits that they struggled to convince the studio to accept the killing of women, and had to ‘stylise’ the violence.\textsuperscript{439} While it could be argued that Batiatus’s own murderous actions led to this outcome, the extent and savagery of the violence, in which Spartacus fully participates - and which Oenomaus significantly questions - is nevertheless disturbing.\textsuperscript{440}

Slaves also sexually abuse Roman civilians. Following the rebels’ capture of the city of Sinuessa, a German slave Nemetes kidnapns, tortures and rapes a young Roman woman, Fabia. Covered in blood, bound and gagged, her body subjected to brutal lacerations for each rape, this savage assault upon a defenceless woman suggests that

\textsuperscript{437} Feeney, 2010.
\textsuperscript{438} Strong, 2016: 139.
\textsuperscript{439} DVD Audio Commentary, S0113.
\textsuperscript{440} Rushing describes it as a ‘genocidal response’ (2016: 162).
some slaves see the rebellion as a pretext for settling personal scores or even outright sadism, not liberation. As Nemetes darkly boasts: ‘This precious jewel once stood domina in this city. She had many slaves. They attended her every need. She now attends ours’ (S0304). Since many slaves are also sexually abused in the series, her treatment could be interpreted as an extreme example of retributive violence by a brutalised and dehumanised slave as he projects his sense of injustice onto the body of his enemy. However, it still contrasts sharply with the 1960 film and even in the realistic 2004 version, where slaves behave much more violently, yet still desist from the violation of Roman women. In other scenes, captured Roman civilians are forced to fight in deadly ‘mock’ gladiatorial contests (S0304), slaves run amok in the captured rebel city, Sinuessa, indiscriminately slaughtering the terrified Roman population (S0304), and Roman prisoners are starved, chained up, insulted and beaten, despite Spartacus’s demands that they be spared.

The slaves are equally uncompromising in their conduct of the war. Where the film Spartacus spares Glabrus after defeating his army and sends him back to Rome, the Starz Spartacus and his followers butcher the Roman generals sent to face them. The slaves, Spartacus included, are also shown ambushing and slaughtering Roman slave convoys, and whenever Roman villas are raided, the inhabitants are usually killed and their homes destroyed. In one disturbing scene, the bodies of slaughtered Romans, both civilian and military, are unceremoniously flung onto a pile while the drunken slaves raid, loot and kill (S0202). None of this appears in the 1960 film. Romans are forced to hand over their wealth, but the film emphasises the slaves’ honourable behaviour and moral superiority through their rejection of vengeance. No
mindless, retributive violence is permitted to besmirch the justice of the servile cause.

Significantly, Spartacus himself enthusiastically participates in the slaughter. During one raid, he lunges a sword through the head of a Roman guard (S0202). He also perpetrates one of the series’ most shocking acts of violence when he literally slices off the face of a disputatious German slave, Sedullus, whose predatory and aggressive behaviour has provoked a mass brawl (S0204). How do we interpret this violence? There is little doubt that it plays a role in compensating viewers for the absence of gladiatorial violence from season one. Yet, I argue that it is equally important for highlighting several recurring themes in the series’ depiction of slavery: underscoring the moral ambivalence of the slave characters; the complication of the reception tradition, particularly the 1960 film’s rejection of retributive violence; and an attempt at injecting a degree of historical and psychological realism.

There is a valid argument that the violence offers a more authentic picture of the servile war, where atrocities would have been committed on both sides, and reflects the moral complexities of armed conflict. Slave brutalities are attested in historical sources and include descriptions of slaves raping Roman women and killing civilians.

---

441 Incidentally, this scene has, to date, garnered over 1.7 million views on Youtube. It is appropriately named ‘Spartacus gives Sedullus a shave’. Available at (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amrmWyKz48k). (Accessed 20th June, 2019).

442 Several Roman historians draw attention to the atrocities committed by the slave army, notably in the more hostile accounts by Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.14.116 and Orosius, *History Against the Pagans*, 5.24.1-8. It could be propaganda, but it is equally feasible that newly liberated and desperate slaves did rampage across Italy.
At once the runaway slaves started to rape young girls and married women, against the express command of their leader. Others . . . Now those who resisted . . . and they tried to get away, at the same time [mistreating their enemy] in an inexpressibly horrible manner by twisting the blade in the wound, and sometimes left the mangled bodies of half-dead people behind; others threw firebrands onto roofs.\textsuperscript{443}

Since Sallust also notes that Spartacus attempted to prevent the violence, these acts also highlight the limits of Spartacus’s leadership and the practical difficulties of uniting disparate groups with different personal and ideological agendas around a common goal. The fugitives clearly deserve to be free given what has been done to them, but it does not mean that they will use that freedom for moral reasons or to liberate others. These slaves are complex, even unlikeable, but they are probably more historically authentic than their cinematic predecessors, and their willingness to commit acts of violence against the weak and defenceless is a way of drawing out those distinctions.

Nor is the slaves’ enhanced use of violence entirely unusual in the Spartacan reception history and shows traces of an earlier, more ambivalent depiction of the slave rebellion and servile morality. Koestler’s 1939 novel \textit{The Gladiators}, depicts slaves indulging in often senseless and sadistic acts of violence against men, women and children, whether slave or free. There has been little consideration of this potential influence given the distance between the publication of the novel and the

Starz production, but the influences are worth exploring. The historically informed Kubrick apparently wanted to introduce aspects of Koestler’s vision to the 1960 film, specifically the portrayal of atrocities on both sides, but was overruled.\textsuperscript{444} Although there are many ways that the Starz series is different, notably the non-targeting of slaves and final unification around Spartacus, the massacre of Roman captives at Sinuessa could be seen as indirectly influenced by the wanton destruction of Nula and other Roman cities described in Koestler’s novel. This highlights not only the series’ clear differentiation from the 1960 film, but also possibly an attempt to engage with the wider reception tradition.

The violence could also be interpreted as a way of articulating and expiating the psychological trauma of servitude, highlighting how slavery continues to shape the slaves’ behaviour even after liberty has been secured and drawing further attention to the human costs of servitude explored elsewhere in this study. Described by the lead writer as ‘deeply, deeply disturbed’,\textsuperscript{445} Naevia is a major perpetrator/instigator of servile violence. Traumatised and brutalised by memories of rape (‘they [the Romans] have taken everything from me, even your [Crixus] touch’ (S0206), she and other slaves embark upon a campaign of vengeance, indiscriminately killing Romans regardless of their slave-owning or civic status. When two starving Roman civilians are chosen to fight for a precious piece of bread, she responds to Gannicus’s objections with disdain:

\textbf{Gannicus: You fall to fucking games now?}

\textsuperscript{444} Cooper, 1991: 34-35. See Davis, 2000: 25 on Kubrick’s familiarity with the sources. \textsuperscript{445} Steven S. DeKnight, DVD audio commentary, S0206. He does not specify the reasons for Naevia’s trauma, however his comments accompany violent flashbacks of sexual abuse.
Naevia: The Romans forced you and Crixus to such for their amusement. We but return favour.

(S0303)

She is also a major player in the Sinuessa massacre. One might argue that having these brutalised slaves act in this way is not only psychologically plausible, but presents a more realistic trajectory for the slave rebellion than the 1960 film (and to an extent Starz) Spartacus’s utopian vision of mass emancipation and solidarity. Naevia and even arguably Nemetes target the generic group that they see as responsible, the Romans. This shows that the rebellion is not completely driven by the abolitionist agenda of Spartacus, but rather reflects the political and ideological diversity of its membership, complicating the unifying messages of the 1960 film. The violence is also used to show how the rebellion is not merely a race for survival or a quest for liberty, but is also a vehicle for slaves to fulfil valid personal desires and settle scores. This is made clear by Crixus when he announces their decision to confront the Romans:

Spartacus: You would have us march to our end?

Crixus: I would have us free, truly free…we have challenged the idea that a slave must always know his place, accepting rod and lash because he was taught to accept it. We built their mighty Republic with our hands and our lives. And we can see it fall, at equal cost.

(S0308).
While these differences are narratively necessary to presage the final split with Crixus in season three, they also complicate slave attitudes to liberty, making space for different, competing visions of what the rebellion means and how liberty should be used. Additionally, these examples of servile violence potentially highlight the difficulties of any revolutionary movement to control the violent forces it has unleashed, themes present in Koestler’s work but sublimated in the rush for idealism which characterises the 1960 film. Slavery and its attendant human brutality cannot just be cast aside in a triumph of human liberalism and emancipation as often appears in the Spartacus narrative. And nor is this entirely unusual in recent slave narratives. It has been argued that the black hero’s violent revenge in Quentin Tarantino’s slave film *Django Unchained* is about ‘wish-fulfilment’, and that it is ‘cathartic’ to see a white plantation owner ‘literally blown to pieces on screen’.446 Audiences might see the vengeful actions of the Starz slaves in the same way, as examples of ‘retributive hero violence’, a variation on disposition theory which allows for the meting out of violence against those who deserve it.447 According to this model, slaves such as Naevia and Crixus engage in ‘righteous maiming and killing’ because of what has been done to them.448

Another way of looking at servile violence is to examine how far it is morally justified in comparison with violent acts perpetrated by the Romans, the series’ principal antagonists. Analysis suggests that it is much more extreme, indicating that the series’ problematisation of servile violence has certain limits depending upon who is perpetrating it and why. This also goes some way towards mitigating or even

446 Ball, 2015: 316.
447 Fagan, 2011: 244.
justifying the slaves’ own use of violence. For instance, much of the initial slaves’ violence is defensive, and driven by military necessity and a desire to avoid re-enslavement (or worse), rather than overt aggression or wanton destruction.

Relentlessly pursued by the Romans, audiences would expect slaves to fight back, with both men and women playing an active part in the defence of their liberty.\textsuperscript{449}

Furthermore, while the Sinuessa massacre is problematic when compared to the 1960 film, it is largely instigated by an incognito Caesar who manipulates the slaves’ anger and grievances to sow dissent and thereby facilitate Crassus’s retaking of the city.

The slaves’ violence is also very different to that deployed by their enemy. Where the Romans torture and execute slave captives (S0305), the slaves generally avoid sadistic acts. While Spartacus crucifies a Roman captive, it is the only such example and is used to remind his followers that this is what will happen if they are defeated (S0309). Although this incident does not appear in the 1960 film, presumably as part of its ‘no-revenge’ narrative focus, it does feature in the Fast novel and the 2004 production, where Spartacus overrides Varinia’s (modern influenced) moral objections with the pragmatic reply, ‘this is about survival’. Furthermore, although Naevia’s violence towards Roman prisoners and soldiers is extreme and perhaps unjust, she never attacks or kills slaves and her targets are always Roman males, while her actions are openly censored by other slaves, including Gannicus.

Other examples of more measured violence include giving the Roman captives an opportunity to die with agency and honour when they are matched against the slave

\textsuperscript{449} Foka, 2015.
gladiators at Crixus’s funeral games (S0309), a much more benign arrangement than the mass crucifixions attested in the sources.\textsuperscript{450} Even Spartacus’s killing of the slave Sedullus mentioned earlier can be explained on pragmatic grounds. Like his fellow German Nemetes, Sedullus is a deeply unpleasant and violent individual, whose attempted rape of the newly rescued (and vulnerable) Naevia not only transgresses an important achievement of the rebellion, namely the slaves’ right choose their own partners and avoid sexual molestation, but threatens the very unity of the rebel cause. Spartacus’s instilling of discipline through the sacrifice of this individual does unite the slaves behind his leadership. This Spartacus is also more in line with contemporary heroes who deploy violence as a ‘necessary evil’ without necessarily compromising their moral superiority,\textsuperscript{451} while his behaviour is counterbalanced with the more measured and ‘reverent’ use of violence evidenced in the comparatively compassionate treatment of Roman captives cited earlier.\textsuperscript{452}

Finally, where slaves do overstep and behave sadistically, they are themselves subjected to retributive violence. Consistent with the ‘irredeemable’ status of rape in TV drama cited in chapter three, Nemetes is killed (S0304) as is another serial rapist, the violent slave antagonist Ashur (S0210). Violent elements exist in order to complicate or even authenticate slaves’ behaviour, but they are not permitted to dictate the moral character of the movement. Ensuring that the sadism of ‘bad’ slaves like Nemetes is summarily dealt with is also essential for audiences to continue to

\textsuperscript{450} Appian, \textit{Civil Wars}, 1.117.
\textsuperscript{451} Symonds, 2008: 2. This trend is also present in Christopher Nolan’s resurrection of ‘darker’, morally ambivalent features inherent to the Batman reception history in his trilogy of films (2005-12), notably the hero’s complex relationship with violence and when it is morally appropriate to use it (Johnson, 2014: 953).
\textsuperscript{452} Elia, 2011: 76-77. He defines ‘reverent’ violence where the perpetrator ‘takes no joy in killing’ and respects the humanity of his enemy.
align with the rebels against the Romans. On the other hand, it helps, as Rushing notes, that the Romans are depicted as ‘cartoonish villains’, ‘degenerate, dishonest, manipulative, sybaritic, wealthy elites devoid of honor or integrity’. 453

The slaves’ use of violence in the Starz series may reflect a conscious rejection of the 1960 film’s idealistic legacy of servile behaviour, and a desire to insert a degree of historical and psychological realism and complexity into the story. Yet, it also draws attention the series’ contemporary cultural context, particularly Starz’s status as a premium cable channel. 454 It is not that violence in the visual media is unusual. Its popularity in cinema (and latterly television), and attempts to understand its appeal, have been the subject of numerous studies, 455 (although not without controversy). 456 What has changed is its ubiquity, and almost accepted status as a regular feature in modern visual culture. In her analysis of television violence, Symonds even argues that it is ‘the lifeblood of contemporary storytelling’. 457 Gladiatorial slavery and armed rebellion undeniably justify the depiction of violence by slaves, yet there is no denying its obvious commercial benefits, as programme makers include the kind of gore and bloodshed viewers have come to expect from shows of this kind. DeKnight himself is clear about the advantages of the uncensored

453 Rushing, 2016: 163. This also links to the strong video game aesthetic of the show, identified by Simmons (2011) where the deliberate artificiality of the violence could also be seen as undercutting any moral reflection on Spartacus’s actions or audience emotional investment in the fate of the victims, regardless of their status.
454 Elliott, 2015 sees industrial factors, notably broadcast platforms, as essential for dictating content. Glynn, 2015: 171 also draws attention to the increase in violence on cable dramas set in the past.
456 Some defend its use in TV, notably Edgerton and Jones, 2008: 325. Others are more circumspect. Defino accuses the industry of ‘force-feeding an audience’s bloodlust’ (2013: 114), and Symonds refers to the TV industry’s ‘lurid voyeurism’ (2008: 85).
457 Symonds, 2008: 1-2. There has been much less attention paid to TV violence in the scholarship. Desilet, 2014 looks at both media, although there is no analysis of classical or slave texts, only modern series.
cable television model for his particularly brutal vision of the story, since he does not have to ‘cut away from it’ [violence, sex], or ‘water it down’.  

Although he was well aware that gladiatorial bloodletting on the scale depicted in the series is ahistorical, he chose to ignore it for dramatic reasons, since representing the slaughter authentically might interfere with his stated aim to ‘unleash the violent part’ of the Spartacus story. Furthermore, while insisting (with some justification) that ‘shy[ing] away from the violence does the story [of gladiators and war] a disservice’, he also admits that ‘bloodfuck’ was written on the scriptwriters’ board to remind everyone involved of the series’ core narrative and visual priorities, regardless of the historical evidence. The centrality of violence to the visual aesthetic is also echoed by others involved in the series, even to the extent of shaping characterisation. Violence is clearly a major commercial selling point for the series, as it is for many recent receptions of the classical world.

This enhanced servile violence could also be seen as part of a wider representation of history as inherently violent, a phenomenon usefully described by Jerome De Groot as ‘histploitation’. Television dramas set in the past seem to be deliberately

---

458 Radish, 2011.
459 Estimates suggest that one in five bouts likely ended in death, with missio (surrender) a much more likely outcome (Futrell, 2006: 144, Dunkle, 2008: 31).
460 DVD Audio Commentary, S0101.
463 Doyle, 2015.
464 The carnage has also been questioned. Recent forensic evidence shows that gladiators were not mutilated, but died from the hammer blow designed to finish them off (Kanz and Grossschmidt, 2006).
465 One of the directors Max Beesley admits to liking the slave girl Mira’s character in season two because ‘she is capable of the extreme violence we want in the show’ (DVD Audio, S204).
466 In the DVD extra to Centurion (2010), appropriately titled ‘Guts and Gore, the director Neil Marshall cites the ‘barbaric times’ as justification for the film’s ‘bloodletting’. The set designer notes that they began filming with 200 litres of fake blood and had only twenty four left at the end.
467 It entails dramas using ‘outrageous storylines from the past to present material that is sexually explicit, gory, visually excessive, and often extremely violent’ (2015: 176).
selecting particularly brutal or primitive periods or contexts to justify the violence. It also gives the protagonists a pretext for their own use of violence as defensive, retributive or merely necessary in societies characterised by social injustice, conflict and political corruption. Recent periods include civil war and rebellion (Rome, Spartacus, Pillars of the Earth (2010), Camelot, Game of Thrones), the Reformation (The Tudors, 2007-10, The Borgias, 2011-13), Danish hordes (Vikings, 2013-, The Last Kingdom, 2015-), the Jacobite Rebellion (Outlander, 2013-), and the lawless American West (Deadwood, 2004-6). In all of these texts, graphic scenes of physical and sexual violence are portrayed as everyday realities, whether due to the breakdown of civil, political or moral order, or the mass enslavement of the populace.

Slaves’ use of violence may additionally reflect changing perceptions of heroism in modern popular culture, where violence is deemed a more acceptable attribute than hitherto. In his useful analysis of the ‘fragmented’ modern hero, Andrew Elliott suggests that ‘a society based on a culture of violence and iniquity’ (and slavery is an obvious example of this) will produce ‘appropriately violent and iniquitous heroes’.  Although Elliott says little about the use of violence by the Starz Spartacus (except to reference his ‘unchecked aggression’), his and the other slaves’ use of extreme violence fits this model of complex heroism. The slaves of Spartacus are engaged in a race for survival, and as gladiators and fugitives and react accordingly. It also connects to the prevalence of the flawed, morally compromised protagonist model in contemporary television dramas, or even its more extreme

---

468 Elliott, 2011: 58. The ‘fragmented’ hero ‘embodies a complex range of traits’, including ‘a fundamentally ambivalent attitude to violence’.
version, the anti-hero.\textsuperscript{469} This ‘type’ is a particularly strong feature of recent cable dramas, from Walter White (\textit{Breaking Bad}, 2008-13) to Don Draper (\textit{Mad Men}, 2007-15), and the questionable morality of the police officers of \textit{The Wire} (2002-8). Even the nominal ‘good guy’ Sheriff Seth Bullock in the revisionist western \textit{Deadwood} lacks the idealism of his cinematic predecessors, and has a complex, even unsettling relationship with violence; nor is he always willing or able to assist the downtrodden and oppressed.\textsuperscript{470} On the other hand, since much of the current literature still hasn’t looked at modern receptions of ancient heroes there may still be obstacles to the ‘relatability’ of these ancient characters and that the slaves’ violence may in fact reflect perceptions of the primitiveness and ‘otherness’ of antiquity.\textsuperscript{471}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Watching cruelty and torture, including gladiator battles, has been recognised as ‘a perennial source of entertainment in our culture’,\textsuperscript{472} and the Starz series undoubtedly exploits this fascination for commercial ends. The set designer admits to using digital tools to kill and dismember characters ‘in new and interesting ways’, while DeKnight acknowledges that ‘the kill is always paramount, the bigger the weapon the better’.\textsuperscript{473} These comments and others cited throughout this chapter suggest that the series’ frequent and graphic gladiatorial violence is driven primarily by a desire to satisfy audience expectations for a type show where aggressive male combat is

\textsuperscript{469} Paraphrasing Murray Smith’s 1999 study of characters, Mittell describes the antihero as ‘a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behaviour and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance’ (Mittell, 2015b: 142).

\textsuperscript{470} Vaage, 2016 advances similar arguments about modern television audiences’ attraction to morally ambiguous characters.

\textsuperscript{471} Martin, 2014; Mittell, 2015a.

\textsuperscript{472} Morris, 2010: 43.

\textsuperscript{473} Both in \textit{GoTA ‘Making Of’ DVD feature} (2013).
glorified, and a culture of sensationalised violence drained of ‘viable ethical and political substance’ pertains.\textsuperscript{474}

Nevertheless, while violence is a central feature of servile behaviour in the series (unlike the 1960 film), it can still be interpreted in different, even contradictory ways. The ubiquity of male combat scenes shows that the series cleaves to the established cinematic tradition of representing gladiatorial spectacle as a ‘guilty pleasure’.\textsuperscript{475} On the other hand, it also uses gladiatorial violence for wider narrative purposes, notably to explore the impact of slavery on the mentality of the slaves and how an environment shaped by an imposed culture of violence dictates their treatment of one another. It could also be seen as projecting a possibly more authentic vision of servile behaviour and attitudes than the idealised unity of the 1960 film, while showing that the enslaved do not emerge from slavery unscathed. Nor is violence for the purposes of revenge or retribution necessarily condemned or rejected, as long as it is not used for sadistic reasons. Furthermore, while transgressions inevitably occur in the ‘fog of war’, the violence is never as extreme or cruel as that deployed by the Romans, and the series attempts to rationalise or explain why slaves resort to such measures, whether as a consequence of brutalisation, mental trauma or basic survival.

\textsuperscript{474} Evans and Giroux, 2015: 31.  
\textsuperscript{475} Fitzgerald, 2001: 26.
Chapter Six

Slavery and Race in *Spartacus*: The Complication of a Tradition

Racial diversity in *Spartacus* is an important feature of the series’ depiction of slavery. The principal Roman characters Lucretia and Batiatus have black and white slave attendants (as do their Roman guests), and both their body slaves are played by black actors, one of whom, Naevia, is the most prominent female slave character in the series. Their trainer Doctore, the future slave rebel Oenomaus and a prominent character, is also played by a black actor, while there are also several black gladiators. Yet, DeKnight has stated that ‘race is meaningless’ in the series’ depiction of gladiatorial slavery, and that only ‘your skill, cunning and strength’ matter in the treatment of slaves.\(^{476}\) Can we really discount race when it comes the representation of Roman slavery onscreen? Or, as Richard Dyer has claimed, should we recognise that race is ‘never not a factor, never not in play’?\(^{477}\) This chapter aims to unpick the issues that lie behind these conflicting positions, and determine whether we can really discount race in any modern portrayal of slavery regardless of its historical or fictional setting.

Described as ‘the primary black character in Spartacus, [who] embodies many positive traits’,\(^{478}\) Oenomaus makes a perfect subject for assessing the validity of

---

\(^{476}\) DeKnight, 2010.  
\(^{478}\) O’Brien, 2014: 152.
DeKnight’s claims and provides the principal case study for this chapter. He is also the character to whom DeKnight was referring in his comments above. While it is not clear whether DeKnight is aware that Roman slavery was non-racialised, it is technically accurate, as I examine below. However, his claim challenges the established scholarship on race in the visual media, which posits that race is an important factor in shaping how characters and stories are received by audiences. As Rocchio states, ‘The contemporary status of race in mainstream American culture is intimately bound to the process of representations within and through the mass media’.479 Oenomaus also provides a useful touchstone for exploring the wider representation of race in modern popular culture, particularly in classical receptions, and the different ways his portrayal might represent progress (or not) on the admittedly sparse tradition of black slave characters found in earlier classical media texts. This chapter concludes with an examination of the series’ major female slave character, Naevia whose blackness also makes her an important subject for the study of racial slavery in televisual receptions of antiquity.

The Contemporary Context

Before beginning this analysis, it is worth examining some of the possible factors driving the series’ racial visibility, and the cultural, political and ideological contexts through which depictions of race in modern popular culture (including the ancient world) should be viewed. It could be seen as a way of rebalancing the lack of interest in portraying racial diversity in earlier TV receptions. Slave auctions might include a few black slaves (for instance *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1984), black semi-naked dancing girls appear in *I, Claudius* (1979), while gladiatorial texts often feature black

slaves in the background, but the main heroes and villains are traditionally white. Yet, Roman slavery was ethnically diverse. Through successive wars of expansion and conquest, the territorial reach of Roman power extended across the Mediterranean and North Africa and slaves came to Rome from Greece, Gaul, Carthage, Egypt, Spain, Britain, Thrace (modern Bulgaria), Syria, Germany, the Balkans, and Pamphylia (a province in Southern Asia Minor).\textsuperscript{480} In short, ‘slaves could and did come from anywhere’.\textsuperscript{481} By featuring black slaves, the Starz series offers a potentially more authentic reflection of the racial diversity of the institution.

It may also be shaped by a growing trend towards so ‘colour-blind’ casting, with writers increasingly creating roles for black actors, or featuring them in parts traditionally assigned to whites.\textsuperscript{482} This is particularly noticeable in series set in real or fictional pasts. \textit{Merlin} (2008-12) restyled Guinevere, Queen to King Arthur, as ‘Gwen’, a black maidservant to Morgana, not the foreign princess who appears in earlier literary and screen adaptations of the Arthurian legend.\textsuperscript{483} There are numerous other examples, from \textit{The Three Musketeers} (2014-16), \textit{Black Sails} (2014-17), \textit{Howard’s End} (2017), \textit{Britannia} (2018), \textit{Les Miserables} (2019) to \textit{The Spanish Princess} (2019). It is significant that many of these black characters are still servants, soldiers, people of low status, or former slaves (as with Porthos on \textit{Musketeers}), a theme to which I return later in my analysis of race and free/slave status in \textit{Spartacus}.

\textsuperscript{480} See McLaughlin (2010) on the import and export of slaves between Rome, India, China and other eastern regions. On the Roman slave supply see Harris, 1999 and Scheidel, 1997; 2005.\textsuperscript{481} Dee, 2003: 164. \textsuperscript{482} Warner, 2015 is the most recent and fullest study of the politics of colour-blind casting in television. She is sceptical of its impact, and even condemns it for ‘reproducing and denying the systemic inequality that is alive and well in Hollywood’ (47). However, she only uses contemporary set dramas in her case studies. Prince mentions this factor in the Starz series but does not explore it (2016: 196).\textsuperscript{483} Swank, 2015.
Probably the most important recent example of ‘racialising’ the past for the study of classical receptions is Troy: Fall of a City (2018). This latest retelling of the Trojan War cast black actors in major roles, including Achilles (David Gyasi) and Zeus (Hakeem Kae-Kazim), the most powerful male characters in the story. Patroclus, Aeneas and Nestor as well as the warrior goddess Athena are also played by black actors. The casting of a black Achilles provoked considerable controversy, demonstrating not only the limits (and tensions) inherent in this drive for racial diversity onscreen, but also why race in the portrayal of antiquity is not a neutral subject (and why this present study is necessary). Some on the political right expressed outrage at this apparent affront to European culture, although classical scholars were quick to defend the series, or at least point out the fluidity of race in ancient Greek culture. A black Achilles or Prince Aeneas of Troy clearly represents progress on the all-white line up of Wolfgang Peterson’s 2004 film, but it was mainly seen by the producers as an opportunity to show that ‘diversity is at the heart of our casting’, perhaps indicating a desire to diffuse these tensions.

Nevertheless, the presence of black characters in prominent roles in Spartacus is still not fully explained by progressive racial casting. It also reveals something important

484 ‘A direct insult against Greeks and all European civilisation’ being one of the mildest A summary of the main responses and links to the various sites can be found here: http://pages.vassar.edu/pharos/2018/04/06/further-racist-backlash-against-black-achilles/. (Accessed 27th April, 2019).
486 Clarke, 2018.
about the way contemporary popular culture now conceptualises race in antiquity, with scholars beginning to challenge enduring (and fiercely defended) myths about racial homogeneity in the ancient world. These entrenched perceptions have been encouraged by the increasingly visible far-right/alt-right appropriation of the discipline that Donna Zuckerberg’s recent study of online activity has done so much to expose. Death threats against the classicist Sarah Bond following the publication of her research on how white supremacist thinking informs the reception of classical statuary, or the backlash against Mary Beard’s defence of an animated 2016 BBC series which featured a high ranking black soldier to represent a ‘typical’ Roman family in Briton (his slaves are white), illustrate widespread hostility to classicists’ attempts to reshape misplaced attitudes to race in antiquity. All of these contemporary debates, many expertly documented in leading scholarly blog sites such as Pharos and Eidolon, might seem somewhat removed from a TV series which ended in 2013. However, by featuring several black characters in its depiction of the Roman world, Spartacus is part of this process of ‘re-racialising’ antiquity and reclaiming the classical past from these white-centred ideologies.

Furthermore, given the appalling legacy of American racial slavery in contemporary society, race is always going to be a sensitive issue in the context of any representation of slavery onscreen, which is why the depiction of black slaves in modern receptions of the ancient world is such an important issue to explore. It is

487 Assumptions about classical antiquity as the cradle of white European civilisation and liberty were appropriated by American pro-slavery advocates (Malamud, 2015: 4, 104).
488 See Zuckerberg on how Greek and Roman ‘whiteness’ is promoted by white supremacists, 2018: 6.
489 Cavalli, 2017.
490 Beard, 2017. She was subjected to extensive online abuse, leading her to temporarily suspend her twitter account.
491 Bonilla-Silva, 2018.
true that Romans were ‘equal opportunity enslavers’,\textsuperscript{492} who, unlike their American counterparts, did not see a link between being enslaved and ethnicity, skin colour or race.\textsuperscript{493} However, it is probable that the average viewer is unaware of this crucial distinction, and is more likely to ‘read’ the portrayal of slaves in the series through the prism of the much more familiar (and frequently screened) American slave experience, where race was the defining factor in terms of who was enslaved.\textsuperscript{494}

This fundamental difference between the absence of racial categories in Roman enslavement practices, and the virulent racism of American slavery, will be key for how we need to analyse the depiction of race and its perception in the show.

Race in the media is a vast, complex and contentious subject and a full appreciation of its representation in recent ancient world TV drama is beyond the confines of this thesis. And the decision to focus on Oenomaus, given his narrative prominence, does not mean that there are not other, related and important avenues for further study. For instance, how the multi-ethnic make-up of the Spartacus slave population and the deep divisions and rivalries it provokes, plays into the series’ ambivalent portrayal of slave-on-slave relations; it also foreshadows some of the major ideological and political challenges facing Spartacus in his attempts to creative a cohesive rebel movement. Another intriguing feature not yet given much prominence in the literature is the absence of Jewish slavery in Spartacus. This is

\textsuperscript{492} Lenski, 2018: 137.
\textsuperscript{494} In my 2018 email interview with Sam Leifer, the co-writer of the ITV3 comedy series \textit{Plebs} (2015-), which features a major slave character, confirmed to me that the forthcoming American version would need to ‘tread carefully’ when dealing with race. This highlights the existence of a conscious sensitivity around race and slavery onscreen on the part of TV writers, but not, significantly, DeKnight. The British series features no black slave characters, whereas a Roman character (Stylax) is played by a mixed race actor. I intend to pursue these issues in a future project on Roman comedy onscreen.
particularly significant given the importance of the Jew David to the Fast novel, a role resurrected and given greater prominence in the 2004 TV film.\textsuperscript{495} While the series is under no historical obligation to include Jewish slaves, since no Jewish rebel leaders are attested in the Roman sources, it marks a key departure from the 1960 film. Although the script downgraded the part, Kirk Douglas (the son of Jewish immigrants) consciously absorbed the character of David into Spartacus,\textsuperscript{496} and it is agreed that the film alludes visually and narratively to many ‘Jewish’ themes.\textsuperscript{497}

While the presence of different ethnicities are important features of the series, this chapter will focus on a specific aspect of this, its predominantly African-American characters, and specifically Oenomaus.

The Black Male Gladiator

One of the main ways male black slaves have traditionally been represented in classical cinema is as the ‘sidekick’, helper or ‘African buddy’,\textsuperscript{498} to the white gladiator hero. The most prominent are King Glycon (\textit{Demetrius and the Gladiators}, 1954), Draba (\textit{Spartacus}, 1960; 2004), and Juba (\textit{Gladiator}, 2000). Atticus, rival and later friend to the white slave hero Milo in \textit{Pompeii} (2014) continues the tradition, a testament to its enduring popularity. Usually played by physically imposing actors, their primary function is to provide advice and spiritual and/or moral guidance to their white friend, the film’s central protagonist. They may sometimes be required to die so he might live, or in order to safeguard the cause he espouses. They are also

\textsuperscript{495} There is also a Jewish slave in Grasson’s novel, named Gershom. Perhaps reflecting anti-semitic attitudes of the period (1930s) he is an unpleasant character.
\textsuperscript{496} Douglas, 1988: 370. One of the reasons for Douglas’s interest in Fast’s novel was a perceived connection between his own strong Jewish heritage and the struggle of Spartacus to free the slaves, claiming ‘I come from a race of slaves. That could have been my family, me’ (1988: 276-77).
\textsuperscript{497} Abrams, 2015: 283; 287-294. Wyke argues that Jewish suffering becomes more important than black as the film progresses (1997: 68).
\textsuperscript{498} Blanshard and Shahbudin, 2011: 226.
strong, capable, wise, and morally courageous, but enjoy little narrative
independence beyond their relationships with other white characters and are often
the only black slaves onscreen. They are in many ways classic examples of the
subordinate ‘interracial buddy’\textsuperscript{499} a trope prevalent in film and television from the
1980s onwards and condemned by one scholar as ‘wish-fulfilment fantasies for a
nation that has repeatedly hoped to simplify its race relations’.\textsuperscript{500}

Although there have been numerous reconfigurations of this trope in modern popular
culture, from teenaged demigods, medieval outlaws, cop thrillers and superheroes,\textsuperscript{501}
in terms of the ancient world it dates back to the peplum films of the 1950s and
1960s. King Glycon is the first major example of this type, and traces of his
character are discernible in Oenomaus. Played by the blacklisted,\textsuperscript{502} actor William
Marshall, Glycon is an experienced African gladiator who strikes up a strong
interracial friendship with the enslaved white hero Demetrius, played by Victor
Mature, reprising his role from \textit{The Robe} (1953). After suffering the indignity of
being defeated by the inexperienced white hero, he is spared when Demetrius refuses
to kill him on religious grounds. Later freed by Demetrius, he then spends the rest of
the film facilitating and enabling the hero’s return to the Christian faith.

\textsuperscript{499} Bogle, 2016: 245. See Artz, 1998: 71 for a list of how widely the genre extends.
and the implications for the representation of black masculinity onscreen.
\textsuperscript{501} Examples include the satyr Grover Underwood, Percy’s sidekick in the two \textit{Percy Jackson} films
(2010; 2013) and Batatus, a black confederate of the hero in \textit{The Last Legion} (2010). Morgan
Freeman as Azeem in \textit{Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves} (1991), a role assumed by Jamie Foxx (Little
John) in the latest 2018 film. The BBC TV series also features a black actor in the role of the wise
Friar Tuck. For a non-scholarly overview of its ubiquitous use in the superhero genre, see Thomas,
2016. On TV the scholarship is limited. See Jowett, 2010: 107-10 on the black female companion Bill
in \textit{Doctor Who}. I have found no literature on its role in classical films, only modern ones.
\textsuperscript{502} Bourne, 2003.
Glycon is not an ‘ideal’ black role model. His concern for Demetrius’s well-being still has some elements of the so-called ‘magical negro’ stereotype, broadly defined as ‘the noble, good-hearted black man or woman’ whose practical advice and common sense helps the white character overcome a crisis.503 His language is also problematic by modern standards, telling Demetrius ‘you are my superior’ (although as his freedman, it is technically correct). Nor does he not feature in the film’s all-white trailer, despite his narrative importance. However, given the film’s wider cultural and political context, when black American citizens were still being routinely terrorised and lynched by white southerners, it is a commanding and powerful performance and deserves to be better known.

Saër Maty Bâ argues that ‘issues of race and freedom permeate black presence in epic films’, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the 1960 Spartacus which features arguably the most famous of these black gladiators - and certainly the most significant for this analysis - Draba.504 Played by the imposing former athlete Woody Strode, fresh from his lauded performance as the sympathetic black soldier falsely accused of rape and murder in the John Ford western Sergeant Rutledge (1960),505 Draba is an experienced gladiator who defeats Spartacus in a private fight. However, refusing to kill Spartacus as commanded, Draba instead attacks the contest editor Crassus, who kills him. Inspired by this noble act of resistance to the Roman spectacularisation of violence, and outraged by the desecration of Draba’s body,
which is hanged from the rafters of the gladiator cells - clearly and provocatively evoking lynching imagery - Spartacus initiates a slave uprising.

A peripheral figure in terms of narrative time, but pivotal as the catalyst for revolt, race is central to modern interpretations of Draba’s character. According to Lowe and Shahabudin not only was Draba a ‘noble catalyst for Spartacus’s rebellion’, but he also expressed ‘contemporary black concerns [primarily the Civil Rights movement] through the parable of Roman slavery’, a view shared by most of the classical scholarship on the film. For Burgoyne, the film showed that ‘slavery and race are at the centre of US history, as slavery was at the center of the history of Rome’, a claim worth bearing in mind when analysing how audiences are meant to respond to the depiction of racial slavery in *Spartacus*. However, despite praise for Strode’s performance, Draba is still an enigmatic and idealised figure, defined by his race but little else, his thoughts, motivations and desires articulated by the white man he saved. Furthermore, significantly for the study of race in these texts, where classicists have been keen to ascribe a modern political and cultural significance to Draba’s character, the leading black media scholar Donald Bogle (whose work I cite widely in this chapter) regarded his performance in rather different terms, as just another iteration of the ‘black buck’ stereotype. This shows that interpreting race onscreen is a highly subjective process, and shaped by a range of factors, including cultural preconceptions and even authors’ own racial backgrounds.

---

506 Lowe and Shahabudin, 2008: 94.
508 Burgoyne, 2008: 73 (see 69-72 for a fuller analysis of Draba’s racial significance).
509 O’Brien, 2017: 1 He called it one of the two best film performances of all time.
510 Bogle, 2016: 168.
The next important example is Juba from *Gladiator*, a film which did so much to revive the cinematic epic genre and continues to influence portrayals of gladiatorial servitude in modern popular culture, including Starz’s *Spartacus*. Given the film’s strong intertextual debt to the 1960 *Spartacus*, the inclusion of a black gladiator slave is perhaps inevitable, yet the role and purpose of the film’s only black male slave is different from these earlier iterations. Indeed, Juba, played by the Beninese/American actor Djimon Hounsou - who gave such a powerful performance as the enslaved African Cinque in *Amistad* (1997) and which may have influenced his casting here, - is in some ways a regression, not only in terms of his narrative significance but also the downgrading of his relationship with the white hero. This might be surprising given the increasing visibility of black actors in major roles from the early 1990s onwards, but his character is entirely consistent with the ideology of the black ‘buddy’ who has no independent existence beyond making ‘the [white] hero look good’.

This is shown in several ways. For instance, unlike Draba in *Spartacus*, it is the white hero, the enslaved Roman general Maximus, who dies in the name of freedom and resistance to tyranny. Nor is Juba the most important of Maximus’s slave allies, with others, for example the German Hagar, competing for Maximus’s attention; indeed, it is Hagar who dies trying to save Maximus, not his black buddy. His survival could, of course, be seen as progress and is probably a conscious rejection

---

511 Richards, 2014: 22 views Juba as a visual counterpart to Draba but does not examine the racial connotations of the casting. Also Bâ, 2010: 347.
512 Described as a ‘striking’ and ‘virile’ presence (Bogle, 2016: 367).
513 Bogle, 2016: 414.
of the self-sacrificing black male found in earlier films such as *The Defiant Ones* (1958).  

Juba’s subordination is also visually underscored. At key moments during the fight scenes, he stands behind Maximus, his hand resting on the white man’s shoulder for support. This is a potentially unsettling image of racial inferiority which compares unfavourably with the relative agency of his cinematic forebears Glycon and Draba, both experienced gladiators who fight independently or even against the white hero. Essentially, Juba follows his predecessors by providing sage advice and moral guidance, although it is equally clear that Maximus can take care of himself. Not all scholars see Juba as a mere appendage to the white hero. Bâ suggests that, unlike Draba, Juba represents a type of ‘antiracist screen persona’ whose story is entwined with that of Maximus. Burgoyne also sees the Juba/Maximus relationship in racial terms. Nevertheless, he is still the junior partner who exists primarily to advance the central revenge narrative of the white protagonist. Daniel O’Brien, one of the very few media scholars to critically examine the depiction of race in the peplum genre, dismisses Juba as ‘marginalised’, ‘tokenistic’ and stereotypical of the ‘loyal sidekick’ convention, an assessment with which it is difficult to disagree.

---

514 Survival is much more common in recent ‘black buddy’ films such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (1996) and the superhero *Avengers* franchise (2008-19).
515 The film’s gender politics are also problematic, with black female gladiatrices being slaughtered in the arena scenes.
517 Burgoyne, 2008: 73.
In terms of recent televisual receptions, the 2004 *Spartacus* TV film could be viewed as a ‘bridge’ between these other portrayals and the recent Starz version. Draba, played as usual by a physically imposing actor, Henry Simmons, best known to TV audiences for his role in the ABC police drama *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005), follows a similar narrative trajectory to the film. Significantly, however, the film moves away from the idealised and slightly enigmatic figure of the 1960 production, by complicating his character and motivations and emphasising his human qualities, doubts and frailties; as O’Brien correctly observes, he is more man than symbol. He agonises over the decision to resist, seeking heavenly guidance. Nor is he the first slave to show agency and defiance; it is the white David who refuses to finish off his mortally wounded opponent in a mirroring of the 1960 Draba/Spartacus scene.

Perhaps more importantly in the context of the black gladiator tradition, Draba is not the only representative of black male slavery in the TV film (although there are still no black women). Since Draba dies relatively early, it is the African Nordo (a character created especially for the film) who actually assumes the black buddy role. A strong, wise and moral character, he plays a major and decisive role from the beginning and dies alongside Spartacus in the final battle. Furthermore, although he supports Spartacus’s elevation to rebel leader, he is not subordinate, and his opinions are as valued as those of his white counterparts Gannicus, Crixus and David. More than mere symbolic representatives of their race, Draba and Nordo are certainly consistent with the tradition of the black gladiator: heroic, virtuous, strong, but not leadership contenders. Conversely, they also introduce a semblance of racial equality.

---

519 O’Brien, 2014: 151-152. He is the only media scholar to analyse the film’s depiction of race.
and depth unusual to the genre, but befitting a more egalitarian political and cultural context.

Despite the texts’ different political and cultural backdrops, this analysis suggests that the black gladiator fulfils a relatively straightforward narrative purpose: helper, moral guide or sacrificial victim for his white counterpart, wise and strong, commanding the respect of others. On the other hand, he is still a subordinate character in stories dominated by white men and usually the only example of black servitude of either gender in the text. Finally, and crucially for this analysis, race is often overtly referenced in his portrayal. In the 2004 TV film Batiatus specifically chooses ‘a black man’ to be executed in retribution for Draba’s ‘treachery’, effectively singling out the African slave cohort for punishment, while the 1960 Draba is chosen by one of the Roman women on account of his race.

**Oenomaus: Historical and Cultural History**

Although he is actually a historically attested slave, the Starz Oenomaus shares certain features with these predecessors. He has strong interracial friendships with first Gannicus and then Crixus, and scholars have remarked upon the undeniable physical resemblance between the actor who plays him, Peter Mensah, and Woody Strode.\(^{520}\) And, like Juba, he is played by an African rather than American actor, further suggesting indirect parallels with the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. Yet, his character, portrayal and narrative purpose depart radically from these earlier versions in what seems a conscious attempt not only to break with the conventions of

---

\(^{520}\) O’Brien, 2014; Prince, 2016. Mensah is probably best known for playing Xerxes’ effeminate messenger in *300* (2007). He also resembles King Glycon and the 2004 Draba and is aptly described by one critic as ‘ferociously watchable’ (Ryan, 2010),
the ‘black gladiator’ tradition, but, crucially, to eradicate his racial status. The rest of this chapter examines how successfully the series achieves that aim.

In common with other co-leaders of the slave rebellion to feature in the series, accounts of the historical Oenomaus are scant and none is contemporaneous with events. All we know is that he was a Gaul and one of the named gladiators who escaped with Spartacus and Crixus from Batiatus’s ludus in 73 CE, perishing in the early stages of the rebellion.\footnote{The principal source is Lucius Annaeus Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*, 2.8 (3.2) writing some 200 years after the Third Servile War. Another is Paulus Orosius (*History Against the Pagans*, 5.24) whose account of his death in battle appears even later, in the fifth century; he also provides details of his ethnicity.} He has made a few appearances in popular culture. In Arthur Koestler’s novel he retains his Gallic origins, but, while more positive than his more venal comrades Gannicus or Castus (‘good’ slaves of different ethnicities in the Starz production), he is depicted as a young, well-meaning, but essentially shy and passive ‘silent nonentity’,\footnote{Location 3569 in the Vintage Classics kindle version of the novel.} who says little and contributes nothing to the strategic direction of the rebellion. He is later crucified for opposing Spartacus as the rebel leader resorts to increasingly draconian measures against his ideological opponents, the ‘victim of his own timid righteousness’.\footnote{Location 3966.} On the other hand, at least Koestler and Grasson acknowledge him.\footnote{He also plays a minor role in Grasson’s novel.} Presumably for reasons of narrative efficiency, Oenomaus, together with several other named rebel leaders, does not appear in the Howard Fast novel (which devotes equal if not greater space to telling the stories of Roman characters). This means that Kubrick’s film and the 2004 TV mini-series also ignore his contribution, although both texts still find space to include other, fictional characters such as Antoninus (1960) and Nordo (2004). The lack of
any strong reception tradition for Oenomaus may also have made his exclusion easier, with the Galic slave contingent ‘represented’ by Crixus. The most recent popular literary reception of the slave war, *Spartacus: The Gladiator* (2012) by Ben Kane, follows the spirit of the Starz TV series by resurrecting Oenomaus, but restyles him as a leader of the *German* gladiators, a broadly sympathetic figure whose support Spartacus secures early in the uprising. Overall, his popular reception history is relatively benign, if somewhat sparse. He also seems to have experienced several ethnic transformations, further demonstrating that this minimal historical significance makes it easier to ‘remould’ him.

**The Starz Oenomaus**

Similar to the other historical rebel leaders Crixus and Gannicus, Oenomaus in the Starz series is a fleshed out character with considerable narrative agency. More significantly, he is also given a comparatively nuanced narrative arc, which transforms him from loyal slave in season one to reluctant rebel fugitive after Spartacus overturns the *ludus*. Conflicted by his role in destroying the *ludus*, his spiritual home, Oenomaus undergoes a period of catharsis, fighting in the underground ‘pits’, before being recaptured, tortured, condemned to the arena, and finally rescued by the rebels. He dies bravely in the defence of his freedom and that of his fellow slaves at the end of season two.

While viewers familiar with the 1960 film or, more likely *Gladiator*, might be inclined to connect Oenomaus’s blackness with the tradition of the black slave gladiator, Starz *Spartacus* builds upon but also rejects fundamental aspects of these earlier versions, resurrecting his importance to the rebellion, reconfiguring his
character (such as it is) and considerably strengthening his screen presence and narrative agency. The most obvious change in terms of Oenomaus’s reception tradition is his transformation from a Gaul to a dark-skinned Numidian (the sources for Spartacus’s uprising do not mention the presence of any African gladiatorial slaves). Additionally, although we do not know what position the original Oenomaus filled at the ludus, in the Starz production he is not represented as an ordinary gladiator (as in the case of his black predecessors) but occupies the privileged position of gladiatorial trainer (or ‘Doctore’), responsible for the instruction and disciplining of the men and answerable only to the master. This change is significant since this role is traditionally played by white actors, notably Strabo in Demetrius and Marcellus (1960) and Cinna (2004) in Spartacus, altering and subverting the traditional superior/inferior dynamic between the white Roman/ freedman and black slave protagonists.

In many ways, DeKnight’s main assertion, that talent and skill rather than race determines slaves’ experiences, is vindicated by Oenomaus’s representation. From the audience’s first encounter with him, it is clear that the Starz Oenomaus is an imposing figure whose unsurpassed mastery of the arts of gladiatorial combat, natural authority and sheer physical presence distinguish him from everyone around him, slave or free. He also constitutes an impeccable black role model, strong, tough and uncompromising, but confident, talented, and, due to his position as chief trainer, possessed of agency and authority far beyond that enjoyed by his white counterparts. This is underscored in several ways. For instance, he is privileged with

525 Koestler does not specify his skin colour or ethnicity, but nor does he suggest that he might be African. In Grasson’s novel he is Gallic.
526 Notably, in Koestler’s novel Crixus is the gladiator trainer and joins the rebels.
his own quarters, briefly has a slave wife, and enjoys relative freedom of movement and uninhibited access to the master. Indeed, as an exceptional individual, and a black male in charge of a mostly white gladiatorial cohort, in some respects Oenomaus recalls not the black gladiatorial tradition but a more recent cultural ‘type’, the tough black drill sergeant who instils discipline in his white recruits.527 His closest cultural predecessor is arguably Sergeant Foley in the film An Officer and Gentleman (1982), played by the distinguished black actor Louis Gosset Jr, who mocks his white underlings, and, Bogle claims, operates within a white cultural environment ‘without losing his own personal cultural identity’.528 As a slave Oenomaus’s authority ultimately depends upon the goodwill of his white master, just as the sergeant has superior, white officers, but it is nevertheless a progression in agency and status from his predecessors, who were sometimes victimised and abused by their white superiors.

Unsurprisingly for a series which foregrounds the representation of the physical body, Oenomaus’s authority is also relayed in strongly visual terms. As he enters the training grounds of the ludus the camera slowly and deliberately scans his powerful body from foot to head, emphasising the character’s unquestioned stature and authority. This is symbolised not only by the whip he carries but the awe and respect of the men which greets him as he delivers his customary ‘welcome’ speech. His breastplate sculpts to the muscles of his torso, his enviable physique as impressive as those of his predecessors Draba or Glycon, yet now symbolising not only his bodily

527 Broadly defined as turning a ‘bunch of maggot recruits that are the regulars into lean, mean fighting machines’ (TVTropes.org; accessed 23rd September, 2019). A more recent example is the science fiction film Ender’s Game (2013).
528 Bogle, 2016: 244, in a surprisingly positive assessment of black representation onscreen. O’Brien, 2014 and Prince, 2016 also make this connection.
strength but his elevated position. A firm but seemingly just disciplinarian, honest in his dealings with everyone at the ludus, respected and held in high esteem, and addressed reverently as ‘doctore’, he seems to transcend his slave status. Indeed, such is his authority that it is not immediately clear to viewers that he is in fact a slave, a possibly deliberate obfuscation which further undermines any connection between race and slavery. Even his owner Batiatus listens respectfully. Far from being resented or feared, as were his white predecessors, he is instinctively obeyed, his exalted position seemingly acknowledged as a consequence of merit rather than favouritism. As Meredith Prince argues, he ‘stands at the top of the hierarchy, straddling slave and Roman’.  

However, there are problematic aspects to this mixed status, which Prince’s unexplored statement about his ‘Romanness’ unconsciously alludes to. Supporting and being loyal to a ‘system’ that enslaves and brutalises men against their will complicates his portrayal, although O’Brien’s claims that he is complicit in slavery may be overstating his character’s agency. Prince argues that Oenomaus’s representation in the series shows how ‘a black man can exhibit the highest morality and discipline than others’. However, whether we can describe a man whose first loyalty is to his master, who shows no inclination to resist enslavement and who glorifies the exploitation of fellow slaves, as ‘moral’ is highly questionable. Furthermore, what ‘morality’ is there in being a trainer of gladiators who are subject to a violent death against their wills, where the person in question is part of a system

---

529 DeKnight sees him as ‘a tough but fair father figure’ (DVD Commentary, S0113). Mensah concurred.
530 Prince, 2016: 196.
532 Prince, 2016: 208.
that violently subjugates others? Oenomaus may exude a natural authority, but he still represents and, moreover, consciously reinforces, a system built on violence, unthinkingly embracing the dubious ethics of the arena and the Roman gladiatorial code which underpins it. Not only has he internalised the values of the *ludus* which glorify gladiatorial servitude and encourage duty, honour and obedience but, more egregiously, he enthusiastically instils those beliefs in others, indirectly encouraging the men to accept and even *celebrate* the conditions of their enslavement: ‘You have been *blessed*, each and every one of you, to find yourselves here at the *ludus* of Quintus Lentulus Batiatus, purveyor of the finest gladiators in all the Republic’ (S0202). He even regards gladiatorial slaves as superior to freeborn men: ‘Forget everything you learned outside these walls, for that is the world of men. We are more, we are gladiators!’ (S0303). The black slave, whom one might expect to embody resistance, given the strength of the cinematic tradition outlined earlier, becomes the principal enabler of Batiatus’s ruthless social, political and financial ambitions.

More egregiously perhaps, not only does he support the system, Oenomaus actually works against his fellow slaves. He threatens Spartacus with crucifixion should he attempt to escape again and both Varro and Spartacus rightly see him as the principal barrier to the latter’s escape plans: ‘Next time you seek escape, you’d best kill me’ (S0107). Later, he tries to circumvent the killing of Batiatus and his guests on the day of the gladiatorial revolt, using his whip to pull Spartacus back from the balcony and allowing Batiatus to flee, if only temporarily (S0113). Only Crixus’s cutting of the cord, thereby severing the source of Oenomaus’s power, prevents Spartacus’s
fatal fall from the balcony. Not only does this scene underscore Oenomaus’s dubious moral position vis-à-vis the right to resist tyranny, it also has problematic parallels with Draba’s attack on Crassus in the 1960 film. Whereas Draba preferred death to further complicity with Roman slavery and its systematic exploitation of their bodies in the name of entertainment, Oenomaus moves to preserve it. These actions alone undermine the relationship between his blackness and the moral imperative to resist so strongly underscored in the 1960 film.

One could argue that these complicating behaviours and attitudes are not unexpected in a drama which frequently displays slaves reacting to servitude in ambivalent ways, as earlier chapters on the problematisation of violence and resistance narratives suggested. Oenomaus might represent just another example of the ‘accommodation’ to slavery paradigm explored in chapter two. Yet, Oenomaus’s character is unusual in the context of a tradition which customarily portrays the black gladiator as among the most virtuous, morally inclined, defiant or rebellious of the slave characters. More importantly, it also subverts trends in modern film and television depictions of American slavery which invariably show black slaves opposed to and resentful of their masters, even where they are forced to collaborate. Kunte Kinte in *Roots* (1977; 2016), Cinque in *Amistad* (1996), Django in *Django Unchained* (2012), Noah in the TV series *Underground* (2016-17) or Nat Turner in *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) are all prepared to risk punishment, torture and death to

---

533 See Raucci, 2016: 102 on the significance of this moment as a changing of the guard, as the symbol of Oenomaus’s authority (the whip) is also destroyed alongside the identity he forged at the *ludus.*
defy or escape the humiliations of servitude which they regard as unnatural and unjust.534

On the other hand, this problematisation only works if we see Oenomaus as a natural successor to his cinematic counterparts. O’Brien argues that this black slave’s loyalty to the ludus ‘marks a minimal progression on Strode’s Draba fifty years earlier’. 535 Since he expects the designated ‘Draba’ figure to resist slavery in accordance with the tradition of the black slave, then Oenomaus would certainly represent a problematic discontinuity with the past. Furthermore, since O’Brien views the racial profile of actors and the legacy of racism as fundamental factors in their reception by audiences, he is much more likely to reject any claim that a character’s race is unimportant. As he states, ‘their [black actors] very presence invokes and refracts a history of colonialism, enslavement, segregation and resistance’. 536

Yet, perhaps reflecting his view of race as a meaningless factor, DeKnight and the production team never directly cite the 1960 film’s Draba, or its depiction of race, as reference points for their series. These contrasts between Draba and Oenomaus that O’Brien seeks to draw, and his criticism of Oenomaus’s representation as evidence of ‘[a] less positive black male stereotype[s]’ hinge upon whether we are meant to see Oenomaus as a direct racial and moral descendent of Draba.537 This is not obvious. For instance, whereas Oenomaus derives pleasure and satisfaction in training and encouraging men to die in the name of empty spectacle, Draba openly

534 The portrayal of the strong black resistance hero in the Turner biopic could also be seen as a reaction to the notorious portrayal of sexualised/passive black slaves in Griffiths’ 1915 film (the director, Nate Turner, is black).
abhors the values of the arena. Oenomaus embraces servitude and life at the *ludus*,
Draba actively rejects it. Furthermore, it is a white male (and an indentured Roman
to boot), Varro, who assumes the Draba role to be ‘sacrificed’ in the private contest
(see chapter four) which leads Spartacus to reject the values of the *ludus*, and begin
to plot the uprising.538

Essentially, according to the Starz version of the story and its black characters,
Oenomaus is restyled not as an idealised symbol of political and moral resistance,
but a flawed and ambitious slave wedded to his ‘profession’ and who only belatedly
comes to recognise the consequences of this misguided allegiance. Instead of the
resistance icon, the series presents a morally complex individual imbued with
relatable motivations and desires who seeks to make the best of his situation.539 Even
Spartacus, the nominal ‘resistance’ figure, embraces his circumstances, if only
temporarily. Oenomaus accepts the promotion to Doctore with humility (*GoTA02*),
but soon comes to believe that it is earned and takes his responsibilities seriously,
successfully training two champions of Capua, and is later rewarded with
manumission and elevation to *lanista* (S0112).

All this would seem to bear out DeKnight’s claims that status and talent are more
important than race. In many ways, through his advancement at the *ludus* Oenomaus
represents an inspiring contemporary black hero: tough, strong, authoritative, and
capable. His portrayal largely (but not entirely – he is rescued from the burning arena

538 See chapter two for a fuller analysis of this scene, and the narrative importance of Varro’s death.
539 And this is not unusual in recent slave narratives. *Django Unchained* also features a black male slave
(Stephen) who serves his master with sycophantic loyalty against the interests of other slaves.
While criticised as ‘Uncle Tom on Steroids’ (Vognar, 2013: 30), the character has also been discussed
as an extreme example of the insidious internalisation of the ideology of slavery by its victims
(Dunham, 2014: 412).
by his white former pupils Crixus and Gannicus, S02E05) subverts the white saviour stereotype, broadly defined as an ‘implicit and explicit racial stereotype[s] […] employed to structure the inter-racial interactions where one character labors to redeem another’, and a widely criticised feature of many contemporary onscreen slave narratives. In short, by severing the link between race and resistance established in the earlier film tradition, Oenomaus’s blackness ceases to define his character or experience of servitude. While this is consistent with modern television trends towards ‘colour-blind’ casting, it also serves to distinguish the series from earlier versions. Oenomaus is just a slave (albeit a privileged one) with relatable human frailties, motivations, hopes and needs, not a symbol of his race or defined by skin colour.

However, I argue that this strategy is not entirely successful and, indeed, DeKnight could even be seen as disingenuous for his claims that race is irrelevant. Race remains a factor in shaping the representation of slavery in this series and can be ‘read’ into Oenomaus’s portrayal, albeit in subtle and sometimes inconsistent ways. I acknowledge throughout that the following interpretations are open to competing readings, however I hope to demonstrate that the black slave Oenomaus receives preferential treatment in the narrative when compared to white and other ethnic counterparts. To support my contentions, I examine four themes:

541 Older, 2013; Berlatsky, 2014.
542 This denial of the importance of race by white writers is not unusual. Ari Handel, the screenwriter of Noah (2014), defended the film’s all white casting by claiming that, since the story was ‘functioning at the level of myth’, ‘the race of the individuals doesn’t matter. They’re supposed to be stand-ins for all people’ (Chasmar, 2014). Zack Snyder, the director of 300, deployed a similar defence (‘it’s a work of fantasy’) when challenged over his film’s much criticised, derogatory portrayal of Persia (modern Iran) (Gloyn, 2019: 100).
- His positioning within the ‘white’ trainer tradition.
- The ‘whitewashing’ of the slave rebellion.
- The depiction of black slave sexuality
- Contrasting portrayals of other ethnicities, specifically Syrian slaves.

**The Trainer Tradition**

A central feature of gladiatorial films is the existence of a venal, even sadistic trainer or *lanista* who acts as a moral opposite to the hero. Examples include Marcellus (*Spartacus*, 1960), Torvald (*Barabbas*, 1961), and Cinna (*Spartacus*, 2004). Sometimes his actions lead to an uprising, or simply by killing him the hero performs an act of retributive justice. The former gladiator/freedman Marcellus is one of the most feared antagonists in the 1960 film, renowned for humiliating and killing new recruits, and his murder by Spartacus precipitates the revolt. His successor in the 2004 film Cinna is equally vicious, constantly reminding the men of their inferior status (he is styled as a Roman), referring to them as ‘slave’ rather than name; like Marcellus in the film, he singles out the defiant Spartacus for derision.

The later film *Pompeii* also resurrects this tradition with the treacherous character Bellator. They are all played by white actors. By assuming this role, we might expect the black gladiator/trainer Oenomaus to behave in a similarly aggressive, duplicitous and sadistic manner, especially since, like them, he overtly aligns with the interests of his master.

Yet the series avoids unflattering parallels between the black Oenomaus and his white predecessors. Yes, he mocks Spartacus for his attachment to his Thracian
identity and finds his resistance to training personally insulting. He also encourages conformity with the system. However, unlike some of the white slave gladiators at the *ludus*, he is never wantonly cruel, petty or dishonourable. There are several other differences. Rather than belittling the men, Oenomaus imposes tough training with a mixture of mentoring and encouragement, hence Crixus’s and the others’ reverential respect for him. His military style punishments (a few hours in the sewage dump) are comparatively mild, and his whip is used to keep the men in line, not to cause suffering or maim; he carries out the whipping of his mentee Crixus efficiently, but with reluctance and sympathy (S0112).

Even the revelation of his true name - Oenomaus - serves to underscore this break with tradition. Whereas those white trainers were identified by their own names, thus lending their status a solidity and permanence, this black trainer is only superficially associated with the role through an assumed job title (‘Doctore’). Once he sheds it after Spartacus’s destruction of the training school, he is free to re-assume his former *pre-ludus* identity, a process which leads to his eventual embrace of the rebel cause and its resistance agenda. If his race is meaningless then why position him as a sympathetic trainer in contravention with the tradition? Surely a more radical approach might have been to demonise him (as in the case of another beneficiary of the system, Ashur), but the series shrinks from this.

Furthermore, the series devotes considerable time to ‘explaining’ the motivations for his allegiance to Batiatus. This mitigates the impact of his ‘collusion’ and orients viewers towards a more sympathetic assessment of his character as a man making the best of his situation. Through a series of flashbacks, the series relates the teenage
Oenomaus’s arrival at the ludus following his purchase by Batiatus’s father, a sympathetically drawn Titus (S0202). A deracinated slave with few prospects, Oenomaus is offered an essentially impossible choice: submit and accept his new life, or die painfully and dishonourably in the notorious underground ‘pits’ from whence he came. Alison Futrell correctly argues that by aligning with the Roman values of the arena, Oenomaus has ‘found his place, his destiny’, yet Titus’s rather ominous statement ‘one must kneel if one is to rise’ also highlights the way servitude forces the enslaved to abandon their individuality in order to survive. He accepts ‘Romanisation’ but not as enthusiastically as his similarly privileged counterpart, Ashur, whose much more hostile portrayal is examined later.

Oenomaus emerges rather well from this backstory, as a man whose attachment to the ludus is predicated partly on acceptance of his situation, but equally a deeply human need to belong, rather than self-interest, personal ambition or material success. As he confides to his wife, ‘My life bore no meaning before I was brought here. This house is the foundation upon which I was built’ (GoTA05). This black trainer is not the thug or sadist of the gladiatorial tradition, but a complex, conflicted individual who cleaves to the ludus because he genuinely believes that he has been ‘rescued’ from dishonour by the Batiatus family, a naïve and ultimately misplaced position, but not a venal one. Furthermore, once Oenomaus rejects the ludus, his commitment to the rebel cause, and its goals of freedom and social equality, is unequivocal and absolute.

---

543 DeKnight sees their relationship as akin to father and son (DVD Audio Commentary, S0203).
544 Futrell, 2016: 22-23. Shillock, 2015: 122-3 also reads this embrace of Roman martial values as essential to his and the other men’s reconstruction as ‘gods’.
Spartacus [seeking his help in training the men]: Open their eyes to what man can do given cause.

Oenomaus: As you have opened mine.

(S0207)

Of course, this transformation is narratively necessary. Sadists who belittle and dehumanise others are never heroic, so the future rebel slave Oenomaus must be portrayed differently from his predecessors. Yet, it is significant that the series’ only powerful black male slave is permitted to redeem himself from a transparent alignment with the institution that enslaves him, indicating that resistance to Roman slavery (similar to Draba) is still part of his make up even if it does not define him.

'#slavessowhite'^{545}: The Whitewashing of the Rebellion

Another complicating factor is how few major black slave characters actually feature in the series. While the presence of black slaves is clearly much more prominent than in previous receptions of the ancient world, and the series has been praised for its multi-ethnic cast,^{546} the overall numbers are relatively small. This might, of course, be read as a signal that race is irrelevant, as DeKnight would wish us to, but it does not explain the privileging of the white slave experience (for one black Oenomaus, we have a white Gannicus, Crixus, Agron and Spartacus). We might also expect to see more talented and powerful black slaves emerge, yet Oenomaus is the only one who succeeds in reaching the position of ‘champion of Capua’. And whereas a more

---

{545} A corruption of the hashtag #oscarssowhite, a protest by prominent black actors against an all-white slate of nominees at the 2015 Academy Awards.

{546} Prince, 2016: 140.
recent series give us a black Achilles, there is no black Spartacus. Nor does the series reconfigure the next most important slave character, Crixus (also a Gaul) as a Numidian. The majority of the rebel slave leaders are also white, and there is no black male slave to represent African interests within the rebel movement, as in the 2004 film.

In addition, if talent trumps race, then why do we not see successful black slave owners at Batiatus’s parties? Similar to Merlin and its reconfiguration of Gwen/Guinevere as a servant, the series only shows black people as slaves and white people as freeborn slave owners. It is true that many Africans would have arrived in Rome as slaves. However, the relative frequency of Roman manumission and master/slave marriage, together with the absence of racial prejudice, means that black people became Roman citizens with access to all the wealth-enhancing opportunities available to their white counterparts. Furthermore, not all blacks were slaves and ‘many voluntarily migrated in search of a better life’ or for commercial and trade reasons (similar to Syrians, Jews, Greeks and others). Yet, despite the attested presence of black people in the ancient Mediterranean and the skills attributed by DeKnight to men such as Oenomaus, there is no black equivalent to Batiatus, Glaber or Crassus, men of power, status and wealth within the Roman society depicted onscreen. These latter characters were real men in the historical record, which imposes certain historical constraints on how they are portrayed, but

---

547 This is not so outlandish. As stated in chapter two, the Haitian slave rebel leader Toussaint L’Ouverture was known as the ‘black Spartacus’.
549 Lenski, 2018: 138. For an unrivalled survey of the evidence and the reasons, see Mouritsen, 2011: 120-205.
550 The emperor Lucius Septimius Severus (193-211 CE), was of African descent.
so was Oenomaus. So, although black slaves are strongly present in the series’ *visualisation* of slavery, the absence of other major black characters, whether slave or free, automatically marks Oenomaus as exceptional.

There is a belated and rather half-hearted attempt to address this racial imbalance. Once Oenomaus is killed at the end of season two, in accordance with the historical record, his ‘place’ as the premier symbol of black slavery is assumed by Castus, a character presumably based on the attested Gallic rebel leader of the same name, and here, once again, reconfigured as a Numidian. As with the other named rebels, we know little about him, except that he was killed alongside Gannicus at the Battle of Cantenna in Lucania in 71 BCE. Arguably, as with many other historical figures, including Oenomaus, this lack of detail makes it easier to reconfigure his identity. Yet Castus, played by the Australian actor Blessing Mokgohloa, is a strange confection. Firstly, his hasty inclusion seems a clumsy attempt to replace Oenomaus as the ‘token’ black rebel and ensure that the rebellion is not a white only affair. Secondly, he is not even a slave but a Cilician pirate who deserts his leader to join the rebellion after falling in love with the Syrian Nasir (S0304). Lacking any servile background or historical association with the other rebel leaders, he never achieves the depth or complexity of Oenomaus. Nor, crucially, is he ascribed any importance within the rebel leadership from which black faces are conspicuously erased, in contrast with Nordo in the 2004 TV film. This in turn undermines the idea that talent rather than race matters, since it suggests that only white males (there are no women either, admittedly), are capable of leading the military response.

---

553 The 2004 *Spartacus* at least addresses the misogyny of the rebel leadership, when Crixus criticises Varinia’s participation in decision making. Not a single woman is included in the inner council of the Starz rebellion.
Sexuality

Probably the most significant feature of Oenomaus’s different treatment, compared with his white counterparts, is that he is spared sexual exploitation, one of the key mechanisms for conveying the inhumanity of slavery and disparity in status within the series, as explored in chapter three. It is not that Oenomaus is ‘de-sexed’. He enjoys a passionate relationship with his slave wife, and has a healthy, strong and sexually attractive body. However, unlike Crixus and Spartacus, he is never ‘summoned’ to be subjected to the objectifying female gaze of Roman women, stripped naked for their voyeuristic pleasure or forced to perform humiliating public sexual acts. Nor is he sexually commodified. Only white men suffer these indignities. This is significant since any differentiation in the treatment of black slaves by Romans would have been historically unlikely in the context of Roman slavery, where racial distinctions were immaterial and only status mattered; sexual commodification would have been just as probable for black slaves as it was for white ones.

For a series that features full-frontal nudity of both sexes, excluding black male slaves from overt sexual objectification is an intriguing omission. It also departs from the 1960 film version where black male sexualisation was overtly referenced, in Helena’s ‘racially-tinged’ selection of the ‘big black one’ (Draba) to fight against Spartacus. As noted earlier, not only is her choice driven by sexual desire but also, clearly, his race. The most obvious explanation for this elision is sensitivity

---

554 O’Brien, 2014: 150. See also Cyrino, 2005: 118 on the overt racism of the scene.
555 See Hark, 1993: 154 on the sexual significance of this scene.
and squeamishness around the portrayal of race and sexuality in contemporary television. The writers may have sought to avoid discomforting parallels with the derogatory racist stereotype of the hypersexualised black ‘buck’, defined as ‘big, baaddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh’. This way of looking at black males was endemic to the era of Anglo-American slavery, and continued to influence filmmakers. By removing race as a factor, the series denies the presence of this kind of abuse, drawing back from the 1960 film’s overt engagement with a stereotypical but culturally entrenched association between race, sexuality and slavery.

Moreover, it is not as if black male slaves are never portrayed as sexual objects in recent film and television dramas. *Pompeii* (2014) depicts the black gladiator Atticus (played by the British born actor Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje) blithely submitting to being fondled by his master’s female patrons, and they are neither young nor attractive. As he advises his disgusted white comrade Milo ‘you might even enjoy it!’ It is arguable that Milo is being kept ‘pure’ for his future liaison with the noble white lady Cassia (as befits the black sidekick, Atticus has no love interest) but at least the film portrays black slaves being sexually compromised. The slave Cato in the TV series *Underground* is also ‘selected’ and forced to have sex (off screen) with an older female slave owner. It is possible that Oenomaus simply avoids sexual exploitation for other narrative reasons, namely his elevated status, and that racial sensitivity is not to the fore in a series not otherwise marked by its sensitivity to

---

558 See Plath, 2018: 128-9 on the negative response to the controversial film *Mandingo* (1976) and its portrayal of a white woman’s lust for a black slave. The most infamous depiction was G. W. Griffith’s racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915).
sexual matters (although there are no scenes of him being subjected to sexual abuse prior to his promotion). One could even argue that Batiatus does sexually abuse his favoured slave by proxy rather than direct means, first by controlling access to his slave wife Melitta, and then forcing her to have public sex with Gannicus, as discussed in chapter three. It may also be a case of wanting to be distinctive. Whereas the sexual exploitation of black African slaves is the norm in film and television adaptations of the Antebellum slave experience, ancient slavery provides an opportunity to display this in the context of white slaves, which may explain why Crixus is targeted. Nevertheless, compared with the depiction of slavery in other contemporary dramas, a degree of racial sensitivity seems to shape Oenomaus’s sexual treatment, further undermining the notion that race is irrelevant to his portrayal.

**Other ethnicities: Ashur the Syrian**

The final part of my argument explores how Oenomaus’s depiction compares and contrasts with that of another ethnic minority slave character, the Syrian Ashur and the series’ principal slave antagonist. Played by the Lebanese-born American actor Nick Taraby, Ashur could also be viewed as someone who openly colludes with the slave system, and whose first loyalties lies with his master Batiatus rather than in solidarity with the other slaves. Similar to Oenomaus, he possesses the requisite intelligence, cunning and resourcefulness necessary to rise through the slave hierarchy, his talents and service to his master’s interests appreciated and rewarded with a place in the villa and the pick of the slave women.
However, the series represents these characters very differently. Despite their parity in status and privilege, Ashur is the moral antithesis of his black counterpart. Where Oenomaus is honest in his dealings with others, Ashur is devious, covert and self-serving. Where Oenomaus respects women and enjoys healthy, reciprocal sexual relations with his wife, Ashur is a serial rapist, standard code for an irredeemably unsympathetic character. Since black slaves never rape or sexually abuse (they can be victims, as in the case of Pietros, but not perpetrators), this means that they cannot be demonised in the series. Finally, where Oenomaus does not seek elevation (he is surprised by his promotion to Doctore, and later to lanista via manumission), Ashur is openly ambitious and is willing to destroy others to achieve status and privilege.

Ashur’s ‘difference’ is also underlined through his treatment by others. Cultural and ethnic disparagement and rivalries are commonplace at the ludus, part of the series’ representation of slaves as morally complex. Yet racial and ethnic slurs, insults or even references to colour are never directed at Oenomaus, Naevia or Pietros. This is presumably because racial slurs in this context are more difficult to write into a contemporary script which actively seeks to downplay the importance of race. However, by explicitly avoiding them the series actually draws attention to the preferential treatment of black slaves. By contrast, there is a lot of ‘othering’ of Syrians. After tormenting Spartacus with the gang rape of his wife Sura, Glaber confirms she was then sold to ‘an unpleasant Syrian’ (S0102). Lucretia calls Ashur ‘that fucking Syrian’ (S0111), but she never denigrates Oenomaus’s Numidian origins or even draws attention to his servility. Indeed, where she feels personally insulted that her trusted body slave Naevia should be given to Ashur, as noted in

559 Foka, 2015: 186.
chapter three, she was happy for her previous slave, Melitta, to marry the Numidian Oenomaus.

This singling out of Syrians has some basis in the literary sources, where they were common targets of Roman contempt and cultural prejudice.\(^{560}\) Livy writes in a speech attributed to the Roman consul Quinctius in 192 BCE, that ancient Syrians were ‘far better fitted to be slaves on account of their servile dispositions, than to be a race of warriors’.\(^{561}\) Other disparaging traits ascribed to Syrians included immorality, deceit, greed and love of luxury (Tacitus),\(^{562}\) as well as unreliability and cunning (Cassius Dio).\(^{563}\) There is of course no direct evidence that the series’ writers took notice of ancient prejudices in the construction of the slave characters, and there is a difference between Roman stereotypes, which pervade popular culture (oversexed and violent), and the less prominent ones associated with Syrians. Furthermore, there is a distinction between modern Syria, the state, and the general region of Syria in antiquity, the territory of which shifts depending on usage and time, as well as racial and ethnic differences (Syria at the time of the rebellion was a Hellenised kingdom). However, it is significant that some of these stereotypes, particularly greed and deceit, are ascribed to Ashur, whereas Oenomaus’s character does not reflect (admittedly obscure) pejorative Roman views of Numidians.\(^{564}\)

There could also be a more simple dramatic explanation for this. All successful dramas need convincing antagonists to act as foils to the heroic characters, and the

\(^{560}\) Isaac, 2004: 336.  
\(^{561}\) Livy (35, 49.8).  
\(^{562}\) Tacitus, *Histories*, 3.5.  
\(^{563}\) Cassius Dio, 5.11.  
\(^{564}\) Cicero, in a letter to his brother Quintus (1.1.27) denigrated ‘Africans, Spaniards, or Gauls as savage and barbarian nations’.
duplicitous Ashur makes an excellent villain. Like Nemetes, the German slave whose torture and rape of the Roman woman Fabia was so important in undermining the slaves’ moral reputation, Ashur could just be an evil person, a slave who happens to be Syrian, and an irredeemable rogue element who is fittingly punished for his transgressions. Nevertheless, there has been little consideration of why the series chose to cast a Syrian as the series’ principal slave antagonist and whether this might reflect contemporary cultural attitudes around the ‘othering’ of middle-eastern characters present in other TV series broadcast since the 9/11 attacks, notably 24 (2001-10),66 and Homeland (2011-).66 There is limited research into the depiction of Arabs in film and virtually nothing on television outside 24. What exists nevertheless suggests a problematic history of negative and derogatory stereotyping very similar to the treatment of their black counterparts in film. Note the critical and scholarly reaction to the film 300 (2007) and its apparent demonisation of Persians as ‘other’ (not Arabs but broadly ‘Middle Eastern’ in appearance which was sufficient to condemn them in the hostile post 9/11 cultural and political climate).567 Similarly, a 2003 survey of the depiction of Arabs in 900 American films found that the most common attributes included sexual assault, greed and love of luxury, the same traits ascribed to Ashur in Spartacus.568 Although the study did not include any ancient world examples the author noted that, from the mid-1980s, films even began to ‘protect’ black characters at the expense of their Arab counterparts, with black heroes confronting and killing ‘reel Arabs’.569 Given America’s painful legacy of

666 For critical reviews, see Durkay, 2014 and Roberts, 2015 regarding the series’ negative portrayal of Muslims.
slavery, *Spartacus’s* mainly American producers may have felt uncomfortable ‘othering’ black African slaves, and instead displace any negative traits onto ‘easier’ ethnic targets such as Syrians.\(^{570}\) Admittedly, not all the Syrians in the series are venal. Agron’s lover Nasir, a young Syrian body slave who is liberated by Spartacus in season two (see ‘naming’ in chapter four) is courageous, selfless and compassionate, and becomes a committed disciple of the rebel cause. Still, the lack of any really bad black slave and freeborn characters (Pietros’s rapist is white, as are all the Roman sexual transgressors) indicates some inequality in the treatment of race and ethnicity in the series.

**Naevia**

As a postscript to what has been, perhaps inevitably for a series about gladiatorial servitude, a male-dominated analysis, I now explore the portrayal of the series’ major black female slave character, Naevia. Her transformation from compassionate young woman to divisive, pitiless avenger,\(^{571}\) and eventual redemption via conversion to Spartacus’s cause, is central to understanding how slavery impacts in different ways on the emotional and physical lives of slaves. Having already deployed her character as a case study in the series’ depiction of sexual slavery, I use this section to examine whether her blackness plays any significant role in her treatment in the series.

Naevia is played by two black actresses, the South African Lesley Anne Brandt in the prequel and season one and by Cynthia Addai-Robinson, an American/Ghanaian

\(^{570}\) Atallah, 2018.

\(^{571}\) Even Augoustakis’s sympathetic review describes her in somewhat ambivalent terms as a ‘cold-hearted heroine’ capable of extreme violence (2016: 149).
actress in seasons two and three.\textsuperscript{572} As with Oenomaus, it is significant that Naevia is also played by African actors, not Americans. This potentially distances the series from associations with American slavery, although it is equally unlikely that the audience would have made that connection. Since there is no ‘tradition’ in the representation of female black along the lines of the ‘gladiator’ trope slavery (or indeed black women in the Roman world generally), we cannot ‘ground’ her character in terms of what has gone before. This makes the classicist Meredith Prince’s claim that Naevia (and Oenomaus) ‘update[s] the portrayal of race in antiquity’\textsuperscript{573} somewhat puzzling, unless we see it as ‘updating’ by establishing a character tradition where none existed before. However, in terms of narrative importance and character depth, Naevia still represents a progression on earlier portrayals. Outside the antebellum slave narrative genre, even named black female slave characters are rare and particularly sparse in television dramas set in ancient Rome. Prior to Spartacus, the presence of black women was largely confined to anonymous attendants in series such as Rome, or eroticised topless dancing girls in I Claudius. There is not a single black female slave in a named or speaking role in the 1960 film or the more recent 2004 TV movie. This is why Naevia’s prominence is so significant.

Like Oenomaus, Naevia’s race appears to be superficially unimportant and suggests that we are not meant to see it as in any way a defining part of her characterisation. For example, she undergoes similar trials to her white sisters. Both Naevia and her white friend Diona are subjected to an intrusive ‘inspection’ by Cossutius, leading

\textsuperscript{572} It is understood that Brandt decided not to renew her contract due to scheduling conflicts, rather than any conscious attempt on the part of the producers to reflect her character’s development through a change of actor (Andreeva, 2011).

\textsuperscript{573} Prince, 2016: 208.
him to select the latter for the rape scene described in chapter three (GoTA03). That he chooses Dionia because she is ‘tighter’, implies that Naevia being spared is accidental and entirely due to the client’s individual sexual preferences. Furthermore, although she is directly involved in the massacre of civilians at Sinuessa described in the previous chapter, Naevia is not the only female slave character to resort to extreme violence. Kore kills her abuser Crassus’s son Tiberius rather than allow Spartacus to ransom him (S0309), Aurelia viciously stabs to death a Roman boy Numerius for ordering the killing of her husband Varro (S113), while the ‘warrior’ slaves Mira and Saxa pitilessly slaughter scores of Romans in defence of the rebel cause and their own liberty (S02/03). All of these women are played by white European actresses, with the exception of Mira who is of Taiwanese heritage.

As outlined earlier in this thesis, Naevia’s sexual abuse is a uniquely horrific experience by any standard and is not endured by any other enslaved woman in the series, black or white. Yet, it is precisely in the depiction of sexuality and the body where racial politics surface in the portrayal of Naevia, as they did in the case of Oenomaus. Firstly, the white Dionia is the series’ only example of public servile rape (she is also raped by a white male), and no other female black slave is used in this way, including the unfortunate women forced to service the sexual needs of Lucretia and Batiatus. Serial and commonplace sexual abuse is displaced onto white slaves. Secondly, while Naevia suffers the series’ most violent and sadistic sexual assault (with ‘tools’ as she relates to Crixus, S0306), her ordeal is still only recounted, not explicitly shown, and nor do we see her rape by Ashur.
Thirdly, Naevia’s sexual virtue is deliberately foregrounded in season one. The series represents Diona as the ‘sluttish’ one, keen to lose her virginity to one of the gladiators; she gets her wish, but not as expected and is ‘punished’ for these desires by being raped by the ugliest male gladiator in the ludus. By contrast, Naevia is coded as chaste, initially rebuffing Crixus’s tender advances and only agreeing to sleep with him after ascertaining that he is motivated by love not base sexual need. Their love is passionate, but tender and grounded in mutual affection and respect. There is a narrative reason for this. The fallout from Naevia’s sexual ‘despoliation’ by Ashur (she is sold; Crixus is flogged) induces Crixus to re-assess his views on freedom (namely to get her back) and her loss incentivises him to join Spartacus’s uprising. Yet, her preferential sexual treatment still contrasts with the objectification endured by her white sisters. As in the case of Oenomaus, Naevia is spared sexual public humiliation and objectification. This could be viewed as an attempt to avoid problematic connotations with the same, notorious stereotypes, namely the notion of black women as ‘jezebels’ or sexually promiscuous women, which was used to legitimise the rape of black female slaves in the Antebellum South.⁵⁷⁴

Whether any of this is driven by race or merely designated character traits - Naevia’s violation is so egregious primarily because of her relationship with Crixus and the need to show how slavery undermines kinship relations - is a difficult issue, and the textual evidence points both ways. Because Naevia is played by black actresses it is tempting to map contemporary racial politics or meaning onto her character, when, in reality, her slave status really does define how she is treated, and the racial politics

⁵⁷⁴ White, 1999: 38-39. It could also, as suggested above, be explained by the possibility of exploiting more fully the more unusual scenario of white slavery.
of the film tradition simply do not apply to female characters. Compared to Oenomaus, Naevia certainly has a more disturbing experience of slavery. Furthermore, her positioning as the series’ primary symbol of the psychological trauma of sexual slavery indicates that her character is arguably the worst treated among the women, although the tragic narrative trajectory of the white Dion, whose abuse is visualised rather than merely alluded to, might challenge such a reading. Nevertheless, it is still significant that no black woman is shown suffering explicit sexual abuse, nor are they shown full frontally naked. In view of the series’ ubiquitous nudity, sparing Naevia can only explained by an implicit recognition that her racial profile is a factor.

This analysis of race in slavery, together with material presented in earlier chapters, suggests that, as the primary black representatives of Roman servitude in the series, Naevia and Oenomaus are not one-dimensional paragons of virtue, and nor are their motives and actions always open to straightforward readings. Oenomaus sustains and endorses the slave system, even encouraging others to surrender their ethnic identities and embrace the Roman values he has already internalised. He also comes late to the rebellion and, as O’Brien correctly notes, finds himself marginalised within the movement, displaced by his former (white) gladiatorial subordinates.\textsuperscript{575} Naevia, unintentionally or otherwise, facilitates the split between Crixus and Spartacus, dealing a fatal blow to the slave military cause. Essentially, as fictionalised characters they operate within a narrative geared towards preparing the grounds for a mass (justified) slave rebellion. This makes them primarily victims of injustice, not universal representatives of racial slavery.

\textsuperscript{575} O’Brien, 2014: 151.
On the other hand, it could be argued that their blackness still inevitably puts them under a greater spotlight. Given our own viewing situation and cultural history of slavery, there are inevitable issues and ambiguities associated with the collaboration of a black character with the institution of slavery, rather than a white character, which the series attempts to neutralise the importance of race cannot entirely expunge. These texts cannot avoid the cultural, racial and political prejudices, values and preconceptions of the societies that produce them, since these contexts inevitably shape our view of what we are seeing, and how we then reflect that back onto our idea of what antiquity was like. Snowdon is correct to note of the Roman world that ‘both blacks and whites were slaves, but blacks and slaves were never synonymous’. However, we are still conditioned by the more recent history of mass black enslavement, and its reflection in modern popular culture, to regard being black and a slave as precisely that - even in fictional media texts set in antiquity - and find it difficult to discount racial factors.

While race was not important in determining who was enslaved under ‘colorblind’ ancient societies, it was a defining factor in the much more familiar New World slave systems. Indeed, the inability to avoid these associations, and the painful legacy of modern racial slavery when black slaves are on screen, was also tacitly acknowledged by the programme makers themselves. The executive producer Rob Tapert recalls how the set designer was ‘incredibly culturally sensitive’ in scenes

577 Snowdon, 1997: 45. Although he does note that blacks were often employed in occupations ‘at the lower end of the economic scale’ including the arena and agriculture.
578 See Lenski, 2018: 134-137 for a comprehensive analysis of the key differences and why race was such a defining feature of American slavery.
where the bodies of re-captured black slaves (Tychos and Fortis) are shown being hanged in images sharply reminiscent of lynched black Americans from the post-Reconstruction era. One is branded with ‘FUG’ and hanged upside down, the other by the arms (S0204). Not only does this directly allude to popular perceptions of slavery and abuse of the slave body as a uniquely black experience (only black males in the series are lynched), it also surely deliberately references the lynching of Draba’s body in the 1960 film and its crucial role in drawing audience attention to contemporary racial inequality and oppression. Unfortunately, there is no record of how the designer set up the scene, but the fact that this association was acknowledged (even if DeKnight himself makes no reference to it, further evidence of a possible lack of awareness and/or sensitivity towards the cultural implications of his reading of racial slavery), offers compelling evidence that race is entwined within the series’ depiction of the institution.

Nor is Spartacus alone in finding the displacement of racial factors in depictions of slavery problematic, pointing to a wider issue within the modern entertainment industry. Game of Thrones also frequently portrays slaves as predominantly darker skinned, while their high status ‘liberator’ Queen Daenerys is white. Furthermore, the only former or current slave characters with any real narrative agency, Daenerys’ advisor/translator, Missandei and the ‘Unsullied’ soldier Grey Worm, are both played by mixed race actors. These racial differences are also underlined in the narrative. Despite their efforts to be accepted, both are openly shunned by the superstitious all-white residents of the northern stronghold of Winterfell (S0802),

---

579 DVD audio commentary, S0204.
580 This lynching of Draba is regarded as a key image in the film’s critique of racial oppression (Hoffman, 2000: 68).
while the controversial, public execution of Missandei later in the season not only removes the series’ sole black female character, but her final moments - shivering in chains - is an unsettling and depressing reminder of her former slave status. This has prompted accusations that the fantasy genre has a problem with diversity.\textsuperscript{581} One commentator not only criticised the discomforting ‘racial perspective’ of such scenes, but also the fact that the ex-slaves call Daenerys ‘mother’,\textsuperscript{582} invoking the problematic infantilisation of black slaves during the Antebellum era.\textsuperscript{583}

The makers of a more recent TV series about female sexual servitude and forced breeding cited in chapter two, \textit{The Handmaid’s Tale} (Hulu, 2017-), also faced criticism when they removed the overt racism from Margaret Attwood’s original novel (all African Americans were exiled), only to cast black actresses as handmaids and domestic staff, the most oppressed characters in the series.\textsuperscript{584} According to one critic, this ‘diminishes some of the novel’s comments on race, patriarchy and white supremacy’.\textsuperscript{585} Similar to DeKnight’s attempts to neutralise race in \textit{Spartacus}, the series’ lead writer claimed that ‘fertility trumped everything’ (including race),\textsuperscript{586} but commentators remained unimpressed, particularly given that black actors were still being cast in ‘servile’ roles. Fans of the original novels also criticised the decision to feature black actors in several important (previously white) roles when Suzanne Collins’ implicit ‘Spartacus’ narrative \textit{The Hunger Games},\textsuperscript{587} was transferred to the

\textsuperscript{581} Jones, 2019.
\textsuperscript{582} Lushkov, 2017: 199.
\textsuperscript{583} Slaves’ ‘childlike attachment’ to their masters was a key feature of the ‘Sambo’ stereotype of racial inferiority used to justify black enslavement (Elkins, 1969: 82). The image of the slave as ‘perpetual child’ (legally and culturally) was also prevalent in the Roman world (Mouritsen, 2011: 31).
\textsuperscript{584} Bastien, 2017; Mathis, 2018. It also recalls earlier discussions about portraying black people as servants and slaves, several of whom are also killed.
\textsuperscript{585} Gordon, 2017: 2.
\textsuperscript{586} Interview with Mittovich, 2017.
\textsuperscript{587} On the film’s classical influences, including gladiatorial combat, see Mills, 2015.
big screen (2012-15). All this suggests an unconscious but undeniable connection between slavery and being black in modern dramas featuring slave narratives. These examples also highlight the enormous difficulties involved in ‘de-racialising’ servitude within the wider representation of slavery onscreen, regardless of genre or historical period.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of race and its complication in *Spartacus* has shown that the series’ portrayal of race in the context of slavery is messy and fraught with inconsistencies, and it is impossible to come to any firm conclusions about whether the series intentionally engages with modern racial politics in its characterisation of black slaves. DeKnight’s ‘colourblind’ approach to the portrayal of Oenomaus, which posits that ‘individuals have the ability to make it on their own, without the assistance of others,’ is broadly successful and historically authentic. Oenomaus is different because he is not Draba, Glycon or Juba, and largely subverts the traditional role of the black gladiator sidekick. His moral complexity is also a key differentiating feature. Yet the contrasting interpretations highlighted here suggest that there are cultural and racial sensitivities over what can and cannot be shown in the context of black enslavement, and that slavery is very difficult to disconnect from race.

Returning to Dyer’s claim that race is always a ‘factor’, this analysis has shown that no casting decision is ever neutral, particularly if we accept the role of the media in

---

588 Moore and Coleman, 2015:948.
589 Smith, 2013: 784.
constructing for audiences ‘a definition of what race is …[helping] us to classify the world in terms of race’. It is hoped that this examination of race in the context of classical slavery on television has opened discussions into what is a complex and sensitive topic, particularly in the current political and cultural climate, where white supremacists are increasingly turning to the classical world to justify their narrow ideological positions. It is all very well for DeKnight to claim that race is irrelevant when media receptions such as this are inevitably complicit (and inextricably linked with) wider media discourses about race, which in turn have an impact on the lived daily experience of contemporary societies. This analysis has shown that it is not so easy to disconnect modern political and cultural sensibilities around race from depictions of slavery, even if they are set in a distant and fictionalised past.

Chapter Seven

Slavery: The Roman Perspective

Illythia: You are a praetor Gaius, hunting errant slaves is beneath you

(S0201)

I conclude this study by shifting the primary focus away from the slaves towards the Roman characters to examine how they illuminate aspects of the series’ depiction of slavery. This chapter examines two major themes. First, in what is a striking and unusual feature of many popular cultural receptions of ancient Rome, Spartacus features several (mostly female) examples of the enslavement of elite mainstream Romans. While these reversals in status are partly about narrative excitement and tension, they are also valuable as a lens through which we can come to a better understanding of what slavery ‘means’ more broadly in these modern narratives.

Second, how Roman attitudes towards, and treatment of, slaves convey key features of the Romans’ character, and determine how audiences are meant to interpret them. By comparing and contrasting these portrayals with Romans in other contemporary slave narratives, this chapter attempts to define what makes a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ Roman character in terms of their relationships with slaves. While exploring several characters and texts, it focuses particularly on the Starz series’ reception of Crassus whose complex rivalry with Spartacus was such a key feature of the 1960 film, and
fundamental in conveying many of its core political, moral and ideological messages.591

**Status and Servility**

There exists a fine and delicate line between slavery and freedom in *Spartacus*. Without the means to survive, or the protection of the powerful, loss of status and even descent into slavery is portrayed as a real threat. One of the new gladiators Kerza says of life on the ‘outside’: ‘freedom’s piss without the money to keep it’; as noted in chapter four, his forehead tattoo ‘fugitivus’ indicates that he speaks from experience (S0102). While the freedman Gannicus notes to a young slave girl enthused by Spartacus’s ‘cause’: ‘No man is ever truly free’ (S0207). Several Roman characters, including the plebeian Varro and his wife Aurelia, are also forced into servitude through poverty and circumstance. Even the middle class Batiatus and Lucretia struggle financially and are forced to humiliate themselves by seeking patronage from wealthy and well-connected members of the senatorial elite. Indeed, their abuse and exploitation of their slaves (and its consequence – revolt) largely stems from a desire to survive and thrive in Roman society.592 There are also contemporary resonances, as DeKnight has indicated:

Basically it’s [*Spartacus*] all about a class system – you have the middle class and the very rich and the very poor, which really mirrors society in this day

592 Lucretia’s poisoning of her father in law Titus stems from his decision as *paterfamilias* to disinherit them (*GoTA05*). She even cites the loss of slaves as a reason to act.
and age. When you feel privileged and can strip away someone else’s humanity, which we see so often these days.\textsuperscript{593}

As noted in the introduction, status in Roman society was relatively straightforward: if a person was not free, then he/she was a slave and vice versa and there was no middle ground. Freedom or \textit{libertas} meant different things to Roman citizens, depending upon social class and circumstances, however a key feature was non-subjection to the will of others.\textsuperscript{594} As Brunt notes, freedom ‘as a legal status raised the dignity of its possessor, however poor’.\textsuperscript{595} This distinction shapes the attitudes of the majority of Roman characters towards slavery as an inherently shameful condition to be avoided at all costs, and against which they measure their own sense of identity. It also partly explains the systematic othering of slaves in the series as detailed throughout this thesis. Note Batiatus’s incandescent response when he discovers the identity of his would-be assassins: ‘You sent common slaves, who tried to kill me, to fuck me like a whore!’ He then beats the slave trader to death (S0105). The use of these social inferiors is deeply injurious to his dignity as a Roman male ‘of family’ and may also remind him of his comparatively lowly place within the series’ rigid social hierarchy.

Such is the importance of status, that to be confused or even associated with slaves is also considered a grave insult. When Batiatus reproaches Lucretia for returning a piece of jewellery without discussing the matter with him first, she replies contemptuously: ‘Command it? You mistake me for a slave!’ (S0204). Her keen

\textsuperscript{594} Wirszubski, 1950: 1; Arena, 2012: 9.
\textsuperscript{595} Brunt, 1988: 287.
sense of status (probably a reflection of her own lack of family connections),\textsuperscript{596} is mirrored in her disgust at Batiatus’s rapprochement with Spartacus when she sees them socialising together: ‘To drink with a slave! Spartacus is merely the beast that you ride upon!’ (S0110). Batiatus reminds her that the money earned from Spartacus’s victories is crucial to retaining that status, but she is unmoved. Other Roman characters make similarly disparaging remarks about slaves as inherently worthless and inferior beings. But what happens when this prized freeborn status is threatened, undermined or even removed?

This shift in status usually occurs in response to an abrupt change in social or personal circumstances, or war. It is also, significantly, women who suffer these reversals of fortune and the main vehicle is rape. This is appropriate given how rape is used across the series to underscore the lack of status and powerlessness of female slaves, as I argued in chapter three. In the case of the Roman women Laeta and Lucretia, sudden widowhood (their husbands are both, significantly, killed by slaves, further enhancing their shame) and the attendant loss of male protection precipitates their change in circumstances. This highlights not only the importance of male power and authority in dictating the lives of women in the patriarchal societies depicted onscreen, but also the particular sexual vulnerability of disempowered women.\textsuperscript{597} Their treatment surely deliberately mirrors that of the sexualised slave characters described in chapter three, after both women are ‘given’ to other men to serve the ambitions of the Roman males who have assumed control and authority over them. While we do not see Laeta’s relationships with her slaves, Lucretia’s

\textsuperscript{596} This leads Titus to command his son to divorce her (see footnote 739).
\textsuperscript{597} The principle of male guardianship was much diminished by the Late Republic (around the time of events depicted onscreen) so Lucretia’s powerlessness may be exaggerated (Pomeroy, 1994 [1975]: 151). See Grubbs, 2002: 219-69 for a compendium of legal sources on widowhood.
descent into sexual slavery, when an emboldened Ashur (now enjoying Glaber’s patronage) exploits her vulnerability and rapes her, is steeped in irony.

Lucretia: You forget your place!
Ashur: No I secure it.
[she slaps him]
Lucretia: You secure nothing without me, you fucking Syrian. Move against my commands again…
[he throws her against the wall]
Ashur: Your commands are shit and piss. I am Glaber’s man now
(S0106).

The rape is brutal, shot entirely from her perspective, and her fear and agony at this violent, and sudden change of circumstances, is palpable. For the slave Ashur, sex with Lucretia is primarily about power and the humiliation of a former mistress, not desire and he clearly enjoys this ascendancy. Suddenly, the sexual indignities and abuse she imposed on the bodies of her female slaves Mira, Naevia, Diona, as well as the countless other silent, brutalised women who serviced her sexual needs in the Batiatus household in season one, are now being inflicted upon her. Particularly degrading but highly symbolic of her ‘new’ status, is being forced to address a man she regards as a social inferior as *dominus*. It is through rape and sexual control that Roman women - similar to their servile counterparts - are forced to recognise the degrading condition of slavery.

598 McGee, 2012b suggests that the ‘light goes out’ in Lucretia’s eyes at this moment, perfectly summing up the brutality and shame of her descent.
Lucretia’s choice of name is also significant here. By representing her rapist as a slave, the series implicitly references her historical namesake, the virtuous Lucretia, who was forced to sleep with the villainous patrician Sextus after he threatened to kill her and place her naked body beside the body of a murdered slave. Dishonoured, this Lucretia commits suicide, her self-sacrifice instrumental in the creation of the Roman Republic after her rapist’s family is deposed. There are several differences between the experiences of these two Lucretias. As this study has shown, the Starz Lucretia is neither sexually chaste nor honourable, and – in keeping with her character – adopts the survival route over suicide. She also turns the tables on her rapist, avoids the marriage arranged for her, and lives to see him killed (S0210). Nor does this experience encourage a more enlightened view of the condition of slavery; such an evolution would be out of character for this cunning and independent minded woman, and unlikely in the context of the series’ largely bleak depiction of master/slave relations (which I detail below).

However, Lucretia’s rape and treatment at the hands of a slave, together with that of another Roman woman, Fabia, explored in chapter five (interestingly, paralleling Livy’s heroine, she prefers to die rather than bear the pain and humiliation), highlights the degradation that must have been felt by the series’ many, often silent sexually exploited slave women. As in the story of Livy’s Lucretia, the shame is more devastating precisely because the perpetrators of these rapes are slaves, the most disempowered and despised class in Roman society and onscreen. As Anise

599 Livy 1.57-60. See Joshel (1992) and Arieti (1997) on the significance of this incident in Roman history and the construction of Roman values.
Strong notes in her analysis of Lucretia’s ordeal, rape for the Romans was about power, committed by the powerful against the powerless, and this scene is a pertinent illustration of what happens when that power dynamic is reversed. Finally, while it may be tasteless to suggest that there is a certain poetic justice to Lucretia’s sexual humiliation, this adverse shift in her circumstances offers a perfect metaphor for the precariousness of status and bodily violability, both everyday realities for female slaves in these series.

While Lucretia is the most important and complex example of this status reversal, other female characters undergo similar ordeals. This underscores the theme’s importance but also draws further attention to the centrality of rape in the lives of virtually all women in the series; it is the primary vehicle through which status is refracted. Laeta, young widow of the Roman aedile of Sinuessa and a woman of status, is ‘sold’ to the Cilician pirate Heraclio in part exchange for his assistance in helping Crassus re-take the city (S0306). Fortuitously rescued before being sexually violated, she finds refuge with the rebels where Spartacus’s mantra ‘all are equal here’ contrasts with the status-obsessed society to which she once belonged. As noted in chapter four, Varro’s destitute widow Aurelia also enters voluntary servitude at the Batiatus household to pay off her deceased husband’s debts and becomes vulnerable to the predatory advances of the favoured slave Ashur (S0111). She had earlier suffered rape because her husband’s servitude at the ludus stripped her of his protection. The reversal is not always sexual. When Illythia is kidnapped by Gannicus and brought to the slave camp, she is forced to into an intimate understanding of what slavery means when Mira replies to her desperate request for

600 Strong, 2016: 140.
water: ‘It is a terrible thing is it not? To live in want and fear, that is what it is to be a slave’ (S0208). These experiences posit a powerful message, namely that no status is sacrosanct. Referring back to the words of Kerza which introduced this section, freedom means nothing if one cannot defend it and it is doubly difficult for women deprived of male protection.

This theme of loss of status and freedom is not unique to *Spartacus*. In *Empire*, when the future emperor Octavian is stripped of political, social and bodily rights and reduced to the condition of a slave following a highly implausible descent into gladiatorial slavery (the series is riddled with narrative and historical inconsistencies), he discovers that prior status means nothing; he is also threatened with rape, further underscoring this trope’s importance for illustrating the consequences of losing one’s freedom. *Rome* also uses rape in this way and, like *Spartacus*, focuses on female sexual vulnerability since this more closely reflects the social and gender inequalities of the Roman world. Temporarily sold into slavery when her father Vorenus abandons the family home, the middle-class Roman woman Vorena is prostituted on account of her youth and beauty (S0113). The traumatic impact of this decline in status is starkly underlined by the brutal indifference of her ‘clients’, and the passive, vacant expression with which she greets her rescuers.

Kirsten Day sees Vorena’s ordeal as an example of ‘social mobility’ in the Roman society depicted onscreen, where characters can both rise and fall depending upon their circumstances and cites the contrasting experience of the manumitted slave
Eirene.\textsuperscript{601} There is some validity in this juxtaposition of their contrasting stories. However, the modern term ‘mobility’ seems incongruous in the context of slavery. Nor does it capture the permanent stigma of sexual servitude that Vorena continues to face. Despite the image of the sexually voracious \textit{femme fatale} promoted in popular culture, Roman sexual morality was much more complicated, and retaining one’s sexual integrity was considered a valuable asset for Roman women, prized above other virtues or qualities.\textsuperscript{602} By contrast, slaves’ permanent sexual availability ‘reinforced and validated their debased status, acutely distinguishing [them] from free Roman women’.\textsuperscript{603} The importance of female sexual integrity in the transition between free and slave is reflected in Vorena’s treatment post rescue. Technically free, her reputation is forever tarnished and she is denied the chance of marriage, her ‘value’ permanently destroyed. Even temporary enslavement is shown to have long lasting consequences and a permanent diminution in status. The enslavement of these freeborn Roman women highlights for audiences not only the precariousness of social and sexual status but draws attention to the true social and psychological impact of sexual slavery.

Reflecting earlier discussions around the disproportionate gendering of sexual slavery, status reversal for male characters in \textit{Spartacus} does not involve sexual exploitation. There is just one example, telling in itself, and this is driven by economic failure. There are historical precedents for impoverished freeborn Romans or \textit{auctoritati} who relinquished their civic rights and entered gladiatorial servitude,\textsuperscript{604} usually because of debt or simply the practicalities of survival in a society with no

\textsuperscript{601} Day, 2015: 142.
\textsuperscript{602} Perry, 2014: 1; Edwards, 1993: 34-62 on Roman sexual mores.
\textsuperscript{603} Perry, 2014: 8.
\textsuperscript{604} See Brunt, 1988: 286-7 on the status of these enslaved Romans.

238
welfare state. In Starz Spartacus, debt also forces the Roman Varro to become a gladiator, where he experiences first-hand what it means to belong to a despised class of men described as ‘crude, loathsome, doomed, lost’, and ‘altogether without worth and dignity, almost without humanity’. He endures many of the same humiliations as ‘real’ slaves, including sexual commodification, and the deprivation of kinship and bodily rights, and freedom of movement. He cannot prevent the rape of his wife by a family friend and conjugal visits are both proscribed and expensive. These restrictions, culminating in a futile death on the orders of a teenaged boy, as described in chapter four, reinforce the idea that, although freedom is an important value (and Varro admits that his own inadequacies have placed him in this position), retaining that liberty is not straightforward and frequently depends upon circumstances beyond one’s control.

All of these characters’ different experiences highlight the precariousness of status and the limits of liberty in the Roman society depicted onscreen, and what awaits those unable to protect or defend them, be it debt, social vulnerability, sexual disempowerment and eventually enslavement. This problematisation of liberty also brings into sharp focus the treatment of the weak and vulnerable in contemporary societies. We in the modern world take our own civic rights for granted, rights which can be so easily removed when social, political or economic circumstances change, as hinted in DeKnight’s comments cited earlier.

---

605 Futrell, 2006: 134. On the evidence and key reasons, including financial and a desire for fame, see pages 133-135; Dunkle, 2010: 30-38 on recruitment; most gladiators joined involuntarily.
606 Barton, 1989: 12, 31. Cicero described them as ‘the lowest in condition and fortune’ (Milo, 34). On their shameful status as infames, see Futrell, 2006: 130-131.
Roman Treatment of Slaves

Roman attitudes to slaves, as with much else when we examine the surviving evidence, were more nuanced than many popular receptions (including *Spartacus*) would have us believe. Based on these series, it would be easy to assume that all master/slave relations were uniformly antagonistic, and characterised by systematic cultural othering, violence and dehumanisation. Yet this does not mean that Roman slaves did not build good relationships with their masters, and, as examined in the ‘accommodation’ narratives in chapter two, there must have been circumstances under which genuine intimacy and even respect arose on both sides. Furthermore, although Romans enslaved and exploited vast numbers, and granted owners absolute authority over their ‘property’, they did recognise slaves’ humanity, and manumission, while the numbers are contested, was also regularly practised.

Furthermore, unique to historical slave systems, freedmen were granted citizenship; this must have led to greater cultural integration since the offspring of freed persons (*liberti*) had the same rights as their freeborn counterparts. This contrasts with the Antebellum United States where it became increasingly difficult to emancipate slaves due to cultural prejudice over blacks’ ‘inferiority’ and fear of revolt, while true citizenship did not materialise well into the 20th century. The presence of slaves commemorated in the Statilii family tombs also suggests that slaves where

---

609 Mouritsen, 2011: 120-205 for a comprehensive analysis of the evidence for the scale and practice of manumission in the Roman world, and the debates shaping modern perceptions of Roman ‘generosity’. He concludes that large numbers (mostly domestic, urban slaves due to their proximity to the master) were freed, but he does not regard Roman manumission practices as ‘humane’.
610 Watson, 1987: 35-45. Some legal restrictions remained, including duties to their former master.
611 Cole, 2005 put manumission rates at around 0.045% of the slave population in 1820. Berlin calculates that only 6% of the slave population in 1860 was freed, and many had to purchase their own freedom at inflated prices (1974: 135-160).
valued members of the family, although we do not know what slaves thought of such gestures.613

Conversely, it would be equally dangerous to extrapolate from a few pro-slavery sources that slaves appreciated these ‘kindnesses’ or that they were commonplace.614 Seneca leaves us under few illusions about how Romans regarded slaves, claiming that they could be ‘exceedingly arrogant, exceedingly cruel, exceedingly abusive’ towards them (Letters 47). There were many reasons for this, ranging from fear to assumptions of inferiority.615 It is fair to assume that some Romans were ‘good’ (relatively speaking), others were cruel and brutal, and most were probably somewhere in-between. Roman slavery was in no sense humane, but nor was it uncomplicatedly brutal as the affection shown in the letters of Cicero and Pliny suggests.616

This complexity is, in some ways, reflected in popular culture. There are a number of different ways that master/slave relationships have been represented in contemporary TV drama, not all of them violent or antagonistic. Unsurprisingly, many of the most common examples of ‘good’ relationships or the humane treatment of slaves can be found in stories of Christian Rome, where persecuted groups (slaves and Christians)

614 Even Bradley, who foregrounds what he sees as the inherent brutality of slavery in his analyses, admits this, although he qualifies his statement with the claim that everything ultimately depended upon the ‘benevolence’ of the master (1994: 99-102).
616 Pliny, Letters 5.19 recounts the great care taken over the health of his freedman Zosimus. Other letters show that he often freed his dying slaves and allowed them to make wills (8.16). Cicero’s regard for the talents of his slave Tiro are well known (Joshel, 2010: 11-12). This emerges in Robert Harris’s best-selling trilogy of novels on Cicero’s life (Imperium, Lustrum and Dictator), as narrated by Tiro.
often find common cause to highlight superior Christian morality. In *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1984), based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s best-selling 1834 novel, the Greek hero Glaucus and the Roman lady he loves, Ione, both sympathetic to Christian ideals, are kind towards the blind and virtuous slave Nydia; Glaucus does not molest her, while Ione refuses to treat her as a servant and in the novel she even adopts her as a sister. By contrast her ‘bad’ Roman owner, the pagan brothel keeper Stratonice, abuses and attempts to exploit her sexuality. Similarly, in *Quo Vadis?* (1985), again based on a Henryk Sienkiewicz’s eponymous 1896 novel, the heroine Lygia lives in a harmonious Christian household where slaves are well treated, and shown affection. The virtue of the Roman satirist Petronius is not only signalled through his love for the slave girl Eunice, but also an unsuccessful attempt to save the lives of the 400 slaves of the murdered city prefect Lucius Pedanius Secundus, condemned to crucifixion under Roman law for failing to prevent his death.\(^617\)

This use of slaves to draw out virtues in other characters is not just a feature of ‘Christian’ themed texts. A clutch of ‘Caesar’ TV films influenced by *Gladiator* (and its representation of the ‘good’ Caesar Marcus Aurelius), explored the rise of the Julio-Claudian dynasty in broadly sympathetic terms, and this is partly conveyed through the relatively benign treatment of household slaves. In *Julius Caesar* (2002) the Greek slave Apollonius, tutor to Caesar’s daughter Julia, is a much loved, admired and respected member of Caesar’s extended family. Jon Solomon regards the film’s ‘concentration on the condition and treatment of a slave’ as a precursor to *Rome*’s portrayal of ‘competent slaves’, and there is certainly a depth and

intelligence to Apollonius’s character rarely seen in previous classical narratives.\(^{618}\) His status as tutor-slave attracting kinder treatment may be explained by the fact that those slaves we tend to hear about positively in the Roman sources tend to be the educated (often Greek) slaves of Roman aristocrats whose worth comes from their intellectual rather than physical attributes.\(^{619}\) This respect for educated slaves is also present in other slave narratives, notably the former tutor Feenesz in *Game of Thrones* who asks permission to return to his ‘kind’ master, and the loyal Greek advisor to Caesar, Posca, in *Rome*. It also suggests a subtle contrast between treatment of (and by) slaves who are forced into combat as their ‘role’ and those who have a more cerebral function within the household (they also tend to be the most loyal, which is why they do not appear in *Spartacus*).

Apollonius’s primary role in the series is to make Caesar (already styled as a loving husband and father) look sympathetic and even socially egalitarian (an attribute also present in the Starz Crassus). Caesar does buy Apollonius in a public market (as with virtually all slaves in these series), but his manner towards him is invariably respectful and kind, and he is deeply appreciative of his slave’s erudition. Later, when Apollonius decides to fight alongside Spartacus and faces crucifixion following his recapture, a distraught Julia offers to manumit him unconditionally. Importantly for her positive modern reception, she has already expressed unlikely sympathy for the egalitarian agenda of the Spartacus rebellion, ‘from cook to general, how inspiring!’ This reference to a central tenet of the contemporary Spartacan reception tradition (equality),\(^{620}\) does her credit, since it challenges the

---

\(^{618}\) Solomon, 2008: 24.

\(^{619}\) Bodel, 2011: 204.

\(^{620}\) Futrell, 2001: 79; Wyke, 1997: 35.
notion (established in many earlier films) that all Romans are tyrannical deniers of freedom, and also shows how slaves and Romans bring out virtues in one another. Apollonius further burnishes her character by declaring that she is ‘full of everything that makes the Romans great’, although at least displays some agency in choosing the manner of his death (crucifixion) rather than accept a pardon from his owners: ‘freedom is not something you can be given, it’s something you have to take’. The virtuous and brave Apollonius’s loyalty, and the family’s genuine sorrow over his loss, goes some way to ensuring that audiences remain broadly sympathetic to Caesar. This benevolence also contrasts with the morally ambivalent Caesar’s more condescending use of his educated Greek slave Posca in Rome, which includes forcing him perform demeaning ‘body’ duties such as shaving. The Starz Caesar only has (mainly sexual) relations with female slaves, but this is perhaps not surprising since it is set during his early military career.

Although there are no master/slave relationships to highlight his qualities, the Octavian/Augustus of Imperium: Augustus (2003) is also distinguished from other Romans when he intervenes to prevent the punishment flogging of a slave. This concern for the law on slavery (where other Romans are prepared to inflict excessive punishment) helps to convey his humanity and intelligence in a series also broadly sympathetic to Octavian’s rise to power.621 Empire (2005) also uses a positive relationship with an ex-slave to highlight the moral qualities of Julius Caesar and his heir Octavian/Augustus (Mark Antony is the principal antagonist in the series). Displaying none of the arrogance and ruthlessness of his counterparts in Rome (made at the same time but positing a very different view of Caesar’s character, as will be

---

discussed below) or *Spartacus*, the populist Caesar addresses the celebrated gladiatorial slave Tyrannus as an equal. This includes seeking his political advice, and then swiftly manumitting him. This act, and Caesar’s subsequent dying request that he, an exslave, ensure the safety of his political heir, reflects well on Caesar’s character and demonstrates the serious commitment to social and political equality expressed by Caesar throughout the film. As Alison Futrell notes, the TV film invests in Octavian ‘the best qualities of the Roman character: strength, courage and honour’, and this is partly attributed to the wise tutoring of a former slave, whom the new emperor in turn comes to honour and admire.

Contemporary cinema also uses relations between Romans and the slaves around them to highlight the moral calibre of Roman characters. In *The Eagle* (2011), loosely based on Rosemary Sutcliff’s 1954 novel *The Eagle of the Ninth*, the Roman centurion Marcus is ‘redeemed’ through his growing friendship with, and appreciation of, his British slave Esca. Similarly, in *Pompeii* (2014) the noble Cassia’s genuine friendship with her own slave Ariadne, which is based on equality not servility, and love for the gladiator Milo mark her as good and kind, imbued with modern egalitarian values, and therefore worthy of the hero. Her humanity towards slaves also contrasts with the brutal treatment of Milo by the film’s chief antagonist, the irredeemably villainous Roman Senator Corvus. There are also more nuanced approaches, however, depending upon the tone and aims of the text. The relationship depicted in *Agora* (2008) between the fourth century astronomer Hypatia and her

---

623 The 1977 TV series, which was much more closely based on Sutcliffé’s novel, portrayed a closer and more equal relationship; for instance, Marcus manumits Esca unconditionally before they set off in their search for the lost standard, and Esca accompanies him voluntarily. See Magerstädt on the way Marcus stands out from his Roman contemporaries through his kindness and humanity towards both Esca and the native population (2019: 96-97).
besotted slave Davus is more realistic than *Pompeii* in the sense that she instinctively shares and articulates the Roman view of slaves, categorising Davus alongside ‘other objects’ and consistently treating him as a social inferior. On the other hand, in order for audiences to identify with her both personally and intellectually (and thus make Davus’s ‘mercy killing’ of her plausible), this prejudice is shown to have limits. While she continues to infantilise and patronise Davus, she openly disapproves of her father’s use of physical punishment against slaves inclined to Christianity and later frees (rather than punishes) Davus after he makes sexual advances towards her. We know nothing about Hypatia’s relationships with her slaves, but the invention of Davus and his genuine affection for her, aids in the film’s wider representation of Hypatia as a sympathetic victim of religious extremism and the new faith’s ‘brutal misogyny’. These recent film and TV examples suggest that, where the narrative is focused on a particular interpretation of the Roman onscreen characters, their attitudes and treatment of slaves provides a useful means of delineating their positive or negative qualities. Nevertheless, in most cases relationships are comparatively enlightened.

However, cable TV series such as *Rome* and *Spartacus* tend to put a different, often darker spin on master/slave relations than many of these other texts, which reflects their bleaker, more cynical vision of Roman society, culture and politics. For instance, with a few exceptions (a dying Julia Caesaris in *Rome* asks Pompey to take care of her slaves, signalling her ‘humanity’), cruelty or indifference towards slaves is a key signifier in the series’ characterisations of Romans. Pompey himself

---

624 He smothers her to prevent her persecutors from flaying her alive; her actual fate – probably dismemberment - is much more gruesome (see Deakin, 1994: 235-236 for a list of sources).
625 Paul, 2013: 231.
626 Significantly, she mentions her slaves first, and then her father.
refers to slaves as ‘driftwood’ and even has the audacity to envy their powerlessness: ‘How happy to be a slave and have no will, to make no decision….How restful!’ (S0105). Toscano correctly argues that this scene illustrates the failure of the patrician class to ‘see the suffering or lives of those beneath them’, but it also encapsulates the arrogance and sense of entitlement of virtually all the Roman characters in the series, traits illustrated through their dismissive attitudes and even violent treatment of slaves, as in the case of Atia’s arbitrary whipping of Castor described in chapter four.

Overall, within the elite and even among the politically disenfranchised lower orders, master/slave relations in Rome are characterised by cold formality (even the more intimate Merula/Atia, Eleni/Servilia and Posca/Caesar relationships observe the boundaries of status), contempt, cruelty or indifference. With the notable exception of Pullo, whose marriage to the ex-slave Eirene and long-term relationship with Gaia likely reflects his own servile origins, these Romans’ general disinclination to form loving or intimate relations with slaves might suggest that the series is simply less interested in nuanced, or varied depictions of its Roman characters. However, it is also possible (and more likely) that the series believes that it is more authentic to consistently depict the idea of slaves’ worthlessness, in the same way that DeKnight regards brutality and cruelty as authenticating features of Roman society, as argued in chapter five.

627 Toscano, 2008: 163.
628 Indeed, one of the few ‘good’ master/slave relationships from Roman antiquity to have been written about and described - between Tiro and Cicero - is largely elided, and where Tiro appears he is depicted as rather silly, even weak minded. Fortunately, this impression has been decisively challenged in Robert Harris’s well-researched novels on the life of Cicero, as narrated by a sympathetic and astute Tiro, Imperium (2008), Lustrum (2010) and Dictator (2016)
Before examining *Spartacus*, it is worth looking at how earlier versions of the story represent Roman attitudes to slaves, and what this reveals about their characterisation. In the 1960 film there is a fairly clear slaves=good/Romans=bad distinction, although some nuancing occurs with Gracchus and Batiatus. Monica Cyrino argues that Gracchus’s ‘humor and humanity invite the audience to sympathize, even identify, with him’. The jolly onscreen repartee between Gracchus and Batiatus (using dialogue largely written by the actors themselves), certainly conveys this impression. Yet these men still support and profit from the slave system. Gracchus buys women as sex objects, and assists the slave rebels to thwart Crassus’s dictatorial tendencies, not through any latent abolitionist tendencies or empathy for the plight of the slaves. Batiatus thinks it is entirely appropriate to watch his gladiators having sex, and willingly sacrifices the morale of his men by agreeing to Crassus’s terms that the gladiators must fight to the death. They are only redeemed by being less venal than Crassus, whose attitudes to slavery I examine in more detail below.

The 2004 version is much closer to the novel, and portrays Batiatus as a more conventional Roman villain with ‘traditional’ attitudes towards slaves: he executes a gladiator in reprisal for Draba’s ‘treachery’, attempts to rape Varinia, and plays no role in her rescue. As noted in the previous chapter, his sadistic Roman trainer Cinna shares these traits, and their mistreatment of the slaves leads directly to rebellion. Still, the series cannot resist creating a more ‘benign’ Roman in the mould of

---

629 It accords with Hollywood cinematic tradition where Romans were invariably ‘bad’, and Christians and slaves ‘good’ in order to encourage audience sympathy for the underdog (Winkler, 2001: 54).
631 Davis, 2000: 23, 141.
Gracchus, this time named Agrippa, who assumes the role of ideological and moral foil to Crassus. Similar to Gracchus, while he does not implicitly support Spartacus’s rebellion or question slavery, he condemns Crassus’s unacceptable dictatorial tendencies, notably his brutal countermeasures against slave hostages. Essentially, those Roman characters who oppose the arch villain Crassus in these texts are generally coded as having relatively ‘humane’ views on slavery, or at least avoid acts of violence, even if they do not advocate abolition or empathise with the slaves’ desire for freedom. This makes them more relatable and encourages the audience to invest in their characters.

In most respects, Starz *Spartacus* follows a similar pattern by using slaves both to highlight the main Roman characters’ traits, and influence audience perceptions of them. As this thesis has shown, the physical and sexual abuse, exploitation and instrumentalisation of slaves is a key feature of Roman characters such as Batiatus, Lucretia and their Roman rivals, and their relationships are invariably abusive, manipulative, untrusting and devoid of warmth or intimacy. This venality is essential for precipitating the rebellion in the first place so we should not be overly surprised. Nevertheless, the series still nuances this by featuring Roman characters who do not treat slaves this way, with several expressing comparatively enlightened views on slavery, social equality and civil rights, and even aligning with or joining the rebel cause. They are not necessarily straightforwardly ‘good’ Romans (i.e. they do not display ethical objections to slavery, or unconditionally manumit slaves) and their sometimes complex, even contradictory attitudes and behaviours are driven primarily by circumstance and misfortune.
Before moving onto the main case study, Marcus Crassus, I explore briefly three examples of these ‘good’ Roman characters, Lucius, Laeta and Attius, and what their decision to assist the rebels reveals about the reasons behind this nuancing of the traditional Romans=bad/slaves=good binary. Although Lucius has limited screen time, he is one of the series’ most positive characters, free or slave. A former wealthy landowner who was exiled under Sulla’s proscriptions, and saw his entire family killed, we find him scraping a miserable existence in an abandoned temple (S025-7). Initially suspicious of the rebels, as soon as he hears Spartacus’s name (again playing into its inspirational power) he welcomes them, offering food and shelter from his own meagre resources. More importantly, he instinctively and unquestioningly embraces the justice of the slave movement as his own. This is illustrated in the following exchange with the kidnapped Illythia, who appeals to him for assistance.

Illythia: You bear no brand, you are a free man?632
Lucius: I am of the Republic, as you and yours.
Illythia: Yet you stand with Spartacus against it.
Lucius: I stand for what is just.
Illythia: Just? Spartacus moves to destroy everything we hold of worth.
Lucius: Then he moves too late in my regard. Sulla seized my lands, and those of my kin, years ago, slaughtering any that resisted and giving what he stole to his most loyal men, all of them fellow Romans.
(S0207).

632 Again, playing into branding as a way of distinguishing slave and free.
After serving the rebellion in numerous ways, from providing archery training to negotiating a much needed weapons exchange, Lucius dies heroically in the style of a slave rebel, saving the lives of both Crixus and Spartacus, his final words registering his complete moral and social rejection of Rome: ‘at least it’s not a fucking Roman who takes me’ (S0206). He dies a slave in spirit if not in name.

Given how viciously Romans have treated slaves in the series, how are audiences meant to ‘read’ Lucius’s character? Firstly, his identification with the slaves’ agenda confirms the innate justice of the rebel cause. A fellow victim of Roman injustice himself, as Spartacus observes when Lucius has finished recounting his story, Lucius seems to feel spiritually at home with the rebels, recognising a common cause in their mutual struggle against oppression and corruption. Lucius’s willingness to assist the rebellion against his own ‘kind’, also illustrates the wide appeal of Spartacus’s inspirational agenda of social justice and equality, as portrayed in the TV series, and his popular reception tradition more widely. Secondly, this sympathetic portrayal of Lucius and his unconditional acceptance into the rebel fold, also draws attention to Spartacus’s superior personal qualities, notably his capacity for forgiveness, and unique ability to recognise goodness, loyalty and honesty in others regardless of their background or origin. It also marks a deliberate contrast with the majority of the Roman characters in the series and their narrow obsession with background, status and breeding. Thirdly, Lucius arguably provides a mirror or cipher for the audience watching the series. Like Lucius, we are not slaves, but that doesn’t mean we can’t share in the same agenda.
The second ‘good’ Roman is Laeta, described in the analysis of status and servility earlier. Similar to female characters in the earlier TV series, notably Julia (*Julius Caesar*) and Ione (*The Last Days of Pompeii*), her goodness and relatability are shown through (relatively) benign attitudes towards the treatment of slaves. As Augoustatakis correctly notes, this shows audiences that she is different from the Roman women of earlier seasons,\(^{633}\) although she is by no means as instinctively enlightened as her predecessors cited above. For instance, whereas the Roman women in season two are shown applauding public crucifixions of slaves or the torture of recaptured rebels, she vocally objects to such brutal reprisals (S0302). On the other hand, unlike the disenfranchised Lucius’s uncomplicated response to the rebels, Laeta’s ‘humanity’ is problematised by more ambiguous views on slavery. These illustrate how she still clings to her Roman identity as slave owner and shows traces of the cultural prejudice towards slaves common to more venal Roman characters such as Lucretia and Batiatus:

> Show a *dog* kindness and it will show loyalty until the heavens fall…you show nothing but the lash and wonder why he bares his teeth.

(S0302).

This suggests that, although she is clearly appalled by the extreme and arbitrary violence against slaves and recognises that this will only inflame further resistance, her path towards acceptance of the slaves’ right to freedom will be less straightforward, although it is probably a more realistic narrative trajectory than

\(^{633}\) Augoustatakis, 2016: 156.
Lucius’s inspiring but somewhat simplistic heroism. As she is a more important character in the series than Lucius, so her portrayal is perhaps more complicated. Like Lucius, she also plays a key role in shoring up Spartacus’s qualities.

Augoustakis sees Laeta’s and Spartacus’s burgeoning sexual relationship as the coming together of two lost souls. As exiles and fugitives, the loss of home and family undoubtedly binds them, while Laeta also conveniently fills the vacant role of love interest to Spartacus following the death of Mira in season two. Yet there is clearly more to her character than comfort woman to the lonely rebel leader. Laeta burnishes Spartacus’s already established reputation as a man with a strong sense of justice and egalitarianism, when she is unconditionally welcomed into the rebel camp as a fellow victim of Roman oppression. This endorsement of his agenda and character by an elite Roman slave owner, albeit one more inclined to accept slave humanity (if not initially endorse mass abolition), is crucial for his positive, even inspirational reception in the series.

The third example is Attius, blacksmith and close friend of Gannicus who appears in the early episodes to season three (S031-3). Although, like Lucius, a minor figure in the narrative, Attius provides a useful case study for Roman attitudes towards slavery because he is the only character who does not own slaves. He shares common traits with other ‘good’ Romans in Spartacus. For instance, he is not instinctively prejudiced towards slaves, befriending the freedman Gannicus while fully aware of his servile background. As a man of low origins with little political or social power, he may unconsciously recognise in Gannicus a fellow ‘outlaw’ from

---

634 It mirrors Seneca’s disingenuous advice to his fellow Romans to treat slaves well to ensure their loyalty and obedience, and not because it is the moral course of action or likely to minimise the suffering of the slaves themselves (Seneca, Letters, 47).
the system, a member of the left-behind underclass who has also been denied opportunities for social advancement and enrichment in Roman society on account of his status (issues also likely to resonate with contemporary audiences). Secondly, while he espouses no strong position on the ethics of slavery, like Lucius he has ‘no love for Rome’ and those who uphold the institution, complaining about having to forge ‘fucking tools and shackles to keep the slaves of those privileged fucks in hand’ (S0202).

However, it is also clear that Attius is different from the more straightforwardly heroic Lucius, or even the enslaved Laeta. Consistent with a series which nuances both heroism and virtue in its portrayal of slavery, he is portrayed as an opportunist who assists the slaves for financial gain, forging the weapons which enable the rebels to seize his home city, Sinuessa. He also reluctantly provides further assistance, and, unlike Lucius, is regarded with suspicion by the more zealous rebels, including Crixus. In some ways, he straddles the two worlds, slave and free, exploiting both but showing neither any allegiance, which may explain why he is eventually killed by Naevia (S0203). Furthermore, while Attius’s empathy with individual slaves broadly (if problematically) classifies him as a ‘good’ Roman, he also plays a key role in highlighting the moral ambiguities of servile violence I examined in chapter five. As a representative of the Roman non-slave holding class, he is in a unique position to remind the rebels that the indiscriminate persecution of all Romans for the sins and omissions of the ruling class is also unjust, and even potentially tarnishes their reputation as liberators. After the slaves injure one of the Roman prisoners, Attius rounds on a visibly ashamed Gannicus:
This man has never raised a hand to a slave or any other. How do your friends differ from the fucking villain they brand me? (S0303).

Finally, his character introduces a nuance absent in the 1960 and 2004 versions, namely that not all Roman men and women have a ‘stake’ in the survival of the slave system. Of course, having no stake in slave ownership does not mean that this isn’t an aspiration; as noted in chapter four, Vorenus and his wife in *Rome* see the acquisition of slaves as visual symbols of their wealth and social success. However, Attius’s overt distaste for those ‘privileged fucks’ indicates that he does not automatically identify with the ideology of slavery, even if his anger is partly driven by class hatred. In essence, Attius shows that ‘good’ Romans (like the slaves) are flawed, complex, even problematic figures whose conflicting motivations highlight the series’ nuanced approach to the depiction of Roman attitudes to slavery. They also, crucially, show that those sympathetic to the rebels are themselves often socially or politically disenfranchised themselves, playing into important themes around equality and rights already explored through this thesis.

**The ‘humanisation’ of Marcus Crassus in *Spartacus***

As the most important Roman character in season three and the one most closely associated with the Third Servile War in popular culture, Crassus is a key figure in the series’ representation of Roman attitudes towards slaves. He is important to this study for three main reasons. Firstly, the instrumental role he assumes in the destruction of the servile army. Secondly, his pivotal role as chief political, moral and ideological foil to Spartacus, such an important feature of the 1960 film and
replicated here. Finally, his complex relationship with the preeminent female slave of season three, Kore, and what this reveals about the series’ nuanced portrayal of master/slave relations.

What we know of the historical Crassus (c115-53 BCE) derives almost exclusively from Plutarch’s unflattering portrait, from whom we also get the most detailed account of the war against Spartacus. His life can be briefly summarised. Joining Sulla after Cinna’s death, he made a fortune under the Sullan proscriptions and later defeated Spartacus, although he did not get the credit (only an ovation to Pompey’s triumph). He became co-consul with Pompey (70 BCE) and, together with Caesar, these three men ruled Rome in an uneasy alliance until 55 BCE when Crassus embarked on a disastrous conquest of Parthia. Following military miscalculations, he was killed at the battle of Carrhae and his death helped to bring Pompey and Caesar into the open confrontation that led to the Civil War. His historical reception is also mixed. Although it is claimed that Plutarch saw Crassus as a tragic character humbled by overconfidence and lack of judgement, he nevertheless weighed his primary vice – avarice – against considerable virtues that modern readers might find attractive, notably hospitality, erudition, love for his family and lack of snobbery. These qualities also emerge in Crassus’s character in Spartacus. Plutarch’s text is the first move towards the ongoing presentation of Spartacus and Crassus as paired protagonist and antagonist, whose virtues and vices shed light on each other.

636 Cyrino, 2005: 108 refers to the 1960 Crassus’s ‘fixation’ on Spartacus.
637 See Urbainczyk, 2004: 79-103 who claims that Plutarch used Spartacus to highlight Crassus’s shortcomings. He also appears briefly in Cicero’s letters and speeches, as well as Cassius Dio (Book 54.24).
640 Crassus, 2-7.
While the scholarship on Crassus does not approach more famous contemporary figures such as Caesar or Cicero, there have been a few monographs exploring his life and legacy. The early work, notably Adcock and Marshall, tends to follow Plutarch’s unflattering portrait by focusing primarily on his greed, as well as his political career.⁶⁴¹ Eric Gruen is more circumspect, drawing attention to Crassus’s contradictory qualities - ‘greedy and beneficent, ostentatious and temperate, affable and explosive’ - while recognising that ‘his image as the money-grubbing capitalist, second-rate politician, and incompetent military man’ still shapes perceptions.⁶⁴² There is also little interest in his views on slavery in these analyses. Allen Ward’s revisionist study is, however, more generous. He not only questions Crassus’s reputation as ‘a villainous, capitalistic exploiter’, but also suggests that he was driven to confront Spartacus because of political ambition, rather than support for slavery.⁶⁴³ This more sympathetic reading, particularly the idea that Crassus was not an enthusiastic supporter of slavery, is shaped by Ward’s obvious desire to resurrect Crassus’s reputation but it resembles (and may even have directly influenced) aspects of the Starz version, as I examine below.

Crassus’s literary and media reception tends to focus on his more negative qualities (notably avarice and political ambition), and the war with Spartacus, where he is predictably the villainous foil to the slave hero. His early literary reception, given that it focuses almost exclusively on the servile war, is predictably hostile. For obvious reasons, the communist Fast portrayed him as a ruthless capitalist exploiter,

while Koestler also consistently refers to him as ‘the banker Crassus’ (although the scene between him and Spartacus is crucial to understanding the political messages of the novel). In Robert Harris’s trilogy of Cicero novels, where he is mostly liberated from his association with Spartacus, he is the man Cicero most despises. Of the cinematic portrayals, the 1960 film provides arguably our most memorable image of Crassus, not least because of Laurence Olivier’s commanding performance, and it continues to influence his popular reception. For scholars, Crassus’s relationship with Spartacus is key. Derek Elley claims that, ‘despite its title, the film is as much a study of Crassus as it is of the eponymous hero’. In terms of screen time and narrative complexity he is undoubtedly a pivotal character, and has been interpreted variously as a symbol of political extremism, tyranny and dictatorship, greed, narcissism and depravity. In terms of his treatment of slaves, Crassus’s actions show that believes them to be inherently inferior and deserving of neither freedom nor respect. He destroys the morale of Batiatus’s ludus by ordering gladiators to fight to the death; he attempts to sexually exploit the young Antoninus and then takes pleasure in watching Spartacus destroy him; he has thousands of rebel survivors crucified and then enslaves Spartacus’s wife. Yet, it is significant that all of his most important power struggles in the film are with slaves: those whom he unsuccessfully attempts to seduce, Antoninus and Varinia, and the man whose reputation he cannot destroy, Spartacus.

644 Similarly, in Steven Saylor’s novel Arms of Nemesis (1997) he is portrayed as ruthless and obsessed with military glory.
645 See Daugherty on his cinematic reception, 2016: 71-73.
646 Elley, 1984: 110.
In the 2004 TV movie, Crassus, played by Angus Macfadyen, follows his 1960 predecessor by offering a ‘clear counterpoint to the virtuous Spartacus’, but is a rather boring villain devoid of the nuance and lacking the menace of Olivier’s interpretation. However, his treatment of slaves, while typically contemptuous, adopts a more sadistic tone than the film. In a scene not featured in the Fast novel, he burns alive a cohort of innocent slave hostages in order to provoke Spartacus into the open, a penchant for cruelty towards slaves which disgusts even his fellow Romans and shows that he lacks the complexity of previous or later versions.

**Starz’s Spartacus**

As with other historical characters, slave and free, the multi-episode Starz production has the space to offer viewers a more complex portrayal of Crassus than these earlier versions. Firmly heterosexual, strong (he practises gladiatorial combat, like Commodus in *Gladiator*), and physically attractive, sexually voracious, a skilled fighter and intelligent strategist, the Starz Crassus (played by Simon Merrills) differs fundamentally from the effete character portrayed by Laurence Olivier in the 1960 film version, and the later 2004 mini-series. Crassus is also a well-rounded figure, with a commanding onscreen presence and is a worthy adversary to Spartacus.

Most importantly for this analysis, he expresses views on slaves which are, superficially at least, markedly different from those of many of his Roman colleagues, including his ally Caesar. There is plenty of evidence to read Crassus as

---

649 Daugherty, 2016: 70.
650 Similar to the Spartacus/Crassus pairing in the film, DeKight also sought to make Crassus Spartacus’s primary antagonist by giving him the ‘juiciest’ part (McGee, 2013). Similar to the comments made about the 1960 film, Manea also sees Crassus as Spartacus’s binary opposite both socially and politically (2015: 42).
an example of a ‘good’ Roman based upon his treatment of slaves. Unlike the serial rapist Batiatus, Crassus is never shown mistreating or sexually abusing his domestic attendants. From the brief scenes in his villa, slave women are also fully dressed and not sexualised. Indeed, his tender and loving relationship with Kore (who passionately returns his affections) even rivals the intimacy and emotional commitment of the series’ slave on slave relationships. He treats her kindly, and she calls him Marcus, an unprecedented level of equality in the series, that seems to subvert ‘the complex interplay between emotional attachment and coercion’ we might expect in relationships between male Romans and their female slaves. Her innate goodness, compassion and trusting nature propel audiences to read him differently, and certainly more positively, than other Romans.

Hilarus, Crassus’s expensive slave gladiator, is also a beneficiary of these comparatively enlightened attitudes. When Hilarus fearfully apologises after cutting Crassus in one of their combat sessions, Crassus swiftly reassures him that the wound was ‘well deserved for not anticipating blow’ (S0101). Later, when Crassus commands his arrogant son Tiberius to spar with Hilarus and the boy is wounded, Crassus does not punish or even admonish his prized gladiator. Rather, he blames Tiberius for failing to learn the lessons that Hilarus, the more skilled partner, is teaching. These examples indicate that Crassus has a refreshingly ‘modern’ appreciation of others’ qualities regardless of the status or position they occupy in society. It is true that these slaves exist to be exploited and commodified. Crassus is after all a high-ranking Roman citizen whose immense wealth is based upon slave labour (although this rarely referenced, as I explore later), and we never see offers of

---

651 George, 2011: 397.
manumission or equalisation of status in these relationships, even for the valued Kore. But Kore and Hilarus are more than mere human ‘tools’, their overt and seemingly genuine loyalty to Crassus nurtured rather than imposed through fear. All this reflects well on him and suggests a radical approach to the construction of his character in Starz along the lines of Ward’s revisionist study cited earlier.

This rejection of ignorant prejudice extends to his views on Spartacus and is the most significant feature of his attitude to slaves in the series. Unlike lesser men, including his son, he does not underestimate Spartacus simply because he is a slave. This is a sensible and enlightened approach given the military strength of the rebellion (which is much more obvious than in the 1960 film), yet still an unorthodox one which attracts the censure of his more traditionally inclined social peers. When the oily senator Metellus sneers at Crassus’s willingness to ‘take instruction from a slave’ (S0301), this signals that Crassus is already different from other Romans in his treatment of slaves. Indeed, Metellus’s blind prejudice towards those whom he regards as sub-human highlights his own character’s incompetence, since it impedes him from understanding the strategic benefits of knowing one’s enemy, the real purpose behind Crassus’s elevation of Hilarus.

The following conversation with the more traditionally prejudiced Tiberius goes some way towards establishing the complexity and comparative uniqueness of Crassus’s attitudes towards slaves:

---

652 The lack of victories led some to criticise the film for being pessimistic, notably Elley, 1984: 112 and Cooper, 1991: 30.
Tiberius: You waste hours sparring with a common slave!

Crassus: Was Spartacus not once thought of as such? Would you dismiss him so casually as well?

Tiberius: No, yet for all his victories Spartacus is still a slave.

Crassus: He is a man no better or worse than any sharing title.

Tiberius: You would place him on equal footing with a Roman?

Crassus: In some regards, his standing proves even higher. You believe wealth and position grant you advantage over those beneath you?

Tiberius: I believe we tower above a slave in all things, no matter what name he bears.

Crassus: You have been well-trained in the arts of combat, surely you can best a common slave?

(S0301).

Although Crassus’s relaxed views on status contrast with other characters’ nonchalant dismissals of slave opinions as unimportant merely because they are voiced by slaves, his recognition of Spartacus’s qualities is not entirely unusual. Although he obviously exploits him, Batiatus also appreciates Spartacus’s abilities, and even defends him to his wife when she condemns his growing intimacy with him (see the wine episode earlier). Much more unusual is Crassus’s implicit questioning of the entrenched inequality and injustice of his society’s elitism, which leads Romans to despise those of a lower caste. His egalitarianism also potentially draws attention to similar injustices in our own societies, where men and women of talent and ability are impeded by background, and lack of access to opportunity and career paths only available to a rich and entitled elite (here personified in Tiberius).
Furthermore, it potentially subverts the Spartacus reception tradition of the slaves as egalitarian, and Romans as invariably hierarchical.\textsuperscript{653}

Most significantly for his complex reception in the series, Crassus also shares this meritocratic view with his adversary Spartacus, evidenced by the similarly egalitarian language used in Spartacus’s eve of battle speech:

Every man, women and child condemned to the darkness of slavery. Forced to toil and suffer, so that those of coin and position can see their fortunes grow beyond need or purpose. Let us teach them that all who draw breath are of equal worth (S0310).

Tatum has argued that the plot of the 1960 film revolves around the opposing social, political and moral positions of Spartacus and Crassus.\textsuperscript{654} These examples show that the Starz version, however, posits a strong ideological affinity between these two men. This is emphasised at their only meeting in the final episode where Crassus and Spartacus both acknowledge the deep seated moral corruption of a system which discriminates so arbitrarily against men and women on the basis of their status rather than their qualities, even if they disagree on how (or indeed whether) to resolve it:

Spartacus: There is no justice, not in this world.
Crassus: At last, a thing we agree on.

\textsuperscript{653} Hardwick, 2003: 42 on the contrast between the communitarian ‘sharing’ of the slaves and the ‘hierarchy’ of the wealthy Romans.
\textsuperscript{654} Tatum, 2004: 131.
Therefore, if their attitudes to slaves offers a means of illuminating aspects of Roman characters, then all of this looks very promising for Crassus. A key claim in Gregory Daugherty’s recent analysis of Crassus’s character in the Starz series is that he ‘voices some un-Roman’ attitudes towards the enslaved; although he does not provide any specific examples, he attributes them to Crassus’s recognition of slaves’ ‘humanity’.

Daugherty is only partly correct. When we contrast his behaviour with Batiatus, the other major Roman slave-owner from season one whose treatment of slaves is uniformly contemptuous and exploitative, then Crassus is more ‘humane’. Furthermore, his treatment of Kore and Hilarus, and grudging respect for Spartacus, are also unorthodox by comparison.

However, this favourable assessment excludes other possible, less ennobling readings. Crassus is still very different from those disenfranchised ‘good’ Romans Lucius or Laeta. Take the fate of Hilarus. As the episode concludes and Crassus prepares for the campaign against the rebels, he demands a final ‘test’ of his readiness, forcing Hilarus to fight him to the death. True, Crassus promises to erect a statue in his honour, and Hilarus rather fawningly replies ‘it has been an honour to serve you’, but this not much comfort. As Patterson has convincingly argued, ‘no authentic human relationship [could be] possible where violence was the ultimate sanction’, and it is clear from the context that Hilarus was not in a position to reject the original challenge. Moreover, he must have known that death was a

---

655 Daugherty, 2016: 73.
656 Patterson, 2018 [1981]: 12.
possible outcome since it is unlikely that the promise to spare him, should he kill Crassus, would have been honoured by Tiberius, who made his own feelings about the worthlessness of slaves abundantly clear in the exchange cited earlier.

Similar reservations could be voiced about the relationship with Kore. As mentioned earlier, their relationship is unusual in the context of the treatment of female slaves by other Romans. In contrast with her more maligned ‘sisters’, Diona, Naevia, or the many unnamed female slaves at Batiatus’s ludus forced to satisfy their owners’ depraved sexual predilections, Kore lives a comparatively charmed existence, for a slave at least. She is never beaten, chained, collared, raped or commodified by Crassus, as she admits to Spartacus after finally joining the rebellion (S0208). In return, Kore shows loyalty, companionship and affection. The inequality between them is never openly implied and, for most of the first part of season three, the tenderness of their relationship is deliberately foregrounded:

Kore: Gratitude for allowing me to be by your side.

Crassus: I would never have you leave it. Your presence gives much needed comfort.

(S0304)

Kore is submissive, domesticated and sees her role as one of comfort rather than counsel. She does not dispute his views, nor does she make him feel uncomfortable about the social and legal disparity between them. In short, she is in many ways the ‘perfect’ slave and he ‘rewards’ this loyalty by elevating her to the status of favourite, and later steward of his villa in Sinuessa. Daugherty’s description of their
relationship as based on ‘genuine tenderness and love’ which demonstrates his ‘gentle side’ seems appropriate.\textsuperscript{657}

However, in a plot reversal which exposes the limits of Crassus’s ‘humanity’, Kore is raped by his son (as mentioned earlier, representative of more ‘traditional’ views regarding the sexual availability of slaves) and feels unable to reveal the violation to Crassus because of her inferior status (S0305). This enables Tiberius to compound the crime blackmailing her into silence. Further underscoring the central theme of status in the series’ portrayal of slavery, this incident also shows how Tiberius’s position as a freeborn Roman, and legitimate heir to her master, overrides her own, tenuous servile ‘rights’. In some ways, although he is not directly responsible, the rape of Kore exposes both the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ side of Crassus’s character and his attitudes to slaves. He recognises slaves’ talents and avoids the animalising and commodifying language employed by other Romans. However, they are still socially subordinate and exist to be controlled; he denies his slaves Kore and Hilarus any real agency, directing their lives and ensuring that they serve his interests not their own, which are - tellingly - never articulated.

Furthermore, although Crassus may never remind Kore that he could kill her with impunity, as Pullo does to Gaia in \textit{Rome} (S0207), his behaviour enforces notions of ownership in subtler ways. Note his response to Caesar’s attentions towards Kore.

\begin{quote}
Crassus: She was not sent for your fucking pleasure!

Caesar: Apologies. I did not know the girl held meaning.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{657} 2016: 76.
Crassus’s jealousy seems to be motivated by patronising possessiveness rather than genuine love or esteem (and significantly he never offers manumission). Her character and role in the narrative have certain parallels with the sexually attractive body slave Antoninus from *Spartacus* (1960), played by Tony Curtis. Like her he also has the opportunity to gain favour through privileged access to his master Crassus, although it is indicative of the film’s strong resistance message that he decides to flee rather than submit to sexual exploitation (Kore flees for other reasons, Tiberius’s intimidation). It is also surely significant that Kore and Antoninus both die on Crassus’s orders, even though he had the power of reprieve, although at least Spartacus’s killing of Antoninus in combat spares him crucifixion and takes some agency away from Crassus. For this female slave, who assumed she had been ‘forgiven’ for her revenge killing of Tiberius, there is no such ‘mercy’ or agency and she dies in agony alongside the other slave rebels (S0310). Even Caesar is moved, even somewhat perplexed:

Caesar: It is hard sight to see one so loved to be among the damned.
Crassus: She was known to be among the rebellion. I have forgiven reason, but I do what I must.

(S0310).

‘Must’ here means placing his political ambition over the life of a woman he claimed to love. Kore’s relationship with Crassus founders as much on the basic inequalities between them as on his son’s violation and betrayal. Manea suggests that the series’
inability to kill off Crassus ‘without breaking the historical pact’ forces the writers to find other ways of punishing him, one of which is to make him crucify Kore to ‘save face’.\textsuperscript{658} It is a compelling argument, and certainly fits with the theme explored elsewhere in this thesis, namely that no-one, not even the Romans, emerges unscathed from association with slavery. On the other hand, Crassus’s coldness towards the suffering of someone he claimed to love also suggests that, in this version of Roman society, the master/slave chasm is unbridgeable, and further justifies rebellion. His betrayal of Kore also places him within the company of the series’ other Romans, and undermines the impression formed of his character from earlier episodes that Crassus is a more benign figure than his cinematic predecessor because of his treatment of slaves.

While it could still be argued that these servile relationships ‘humanise’ him in comparison with his counterparts elsewhere in the series, they do not mitigate the extreme brutalities he later inflicts on slave prisoners in the name of entertainment, including dismemberments and crucifixions (S0307). Or his obsessive and brutal pursuit of the slave rebels, starving them into surrender and forcing them to use the corpses of the dead to escape (S0308). Extreme violence in war is expected, and there is plenty of defensive violence used by the slaves, as I explored in chapter five. Nevertheless, Crassus’s historically attested, gruesome decimation of his men,\textsuperscript{659} also shows a willingness to sanction extreme measures against anyone who opposes

\textsuperscript{658} Manea, 2015: 43.
\textsuperscript{659} Crassus, 10.3. Description in Polybius, Histories, Book 6, Chapter 38.
him, even including his own son in the drawing of lots (S0306). Aside from Sedullus, there is no equivalent killing of slaves by the rebel leadership.

Moreover, Crassus’s desire to understand his enemy should not be interpreted as acceptance of his cause or agenda, or even acknowledgement of any social or moral equivalence between them. From his killing of Hilarus to the sale of Laeta and those brutal executions of rebel captives, Crassus shows himself to be an uncompromising and ruthless individual when his own personal and political interests are at stake. Similar to his media predecessors, he displays no moral qualms about ordering the mass crucifixion (reputedly 4,000) of the slave survivors, Kore among them. For Crassus, slavery still trumps other considerations, even love or vague notions of meritocracy. As he coldly says, ‘see them to promised example on Appian Way. And let all slaves upon road to Mother Rome know reward for turning hand against master’ (S0310).

This analysis has shown that Crassus is a complex and, in many ways contradictory figure, both sympathetic to notions of slave humanity and the social aims of the rebel movement, and single minded in his determination to destroy it and protect the material and social gains of his own class. The basis for this confusion (or complication) may lie with comments made by DeKnight, when seeking to explain his reconfiguration of Crassus’s character through positive relationships with slaves:

---

660 Decimation was rare. In the 2004 series this action was condemned in the Senate, although it does not feature in the 1960 film, presumably because it was too violent for a film which censored virtually all scenes of violence.
With Crassus, I really wanted to find a way to humanize him, and also have this huge dichotomy where he respects his slaves, unlike a lot of other Romans. Historically, Crassus was one of the largest slave owners, but he had a collection of, I guess you would call them professional slavers. Architects, teachers, scholars that he would rent out to other Romans. These people often had their own homes, weren’t kept in chains… it was more like a corporation with workers than it was a slavery. He had a bit of a different viewpoint.661

Although DeKnight does not disclose his sources, his reading was probably based on Plutarch’s description of Crassus’s management of his slave empire:

He owned countless silver mines, large areas of valuable land and labourers to work it for him, yet all this, one might say, was nothing compared with the value of his slaves. There were great numbers of them and they were of the highest quality – readers, secretaries, silversmiths, stewards, waiters. He used to direct their education himself and take part in it by giving them personal instructions. Altogether this view was that the chief duty of a master is to care for his slaves, who are, in fact, the living tools [my italics] for the management of the household…he believed that slaves should do the work, but he should direct the slaves.662

Comparing these statements exposes the problem with DeKnight’s rather muddled, modernist reading of Crassus as benign capitalist with a contented and productive

661 McGee, 2013.
662 Plutarch, Crassus, 2.
workforce. While Plutarch acknowledges that these talented slaves have ‘value’, they are still ‘living tools’, language which surely strips them of any of the agency implied in DeKnight’s baffling, contradictory description of them as ‘professional slavers’. Furthermore, that Crassus ‘instructs’ and ‘directs’ his slaves does not imply that they managed themselves, as DeKnight’s use of the term ‘corporate’ might suggest. Nor does ‘care’ for slaves imply that they were financially rewarded for their work.\textsuperscript{663} The use of ‘humanize’ is also problematic in the context of slavery, and there is nothing in Plutarch’s account to suggest that Crassus, in tune with the cultural attitudes of his time, ever thought of his slaves as anything other than commodities. This highly selective appropriation (even embellishment) of the facts is designed to fit a specific narrative agenda, namely to make Crassus look ‘good’ through his treatment of slaves.

There may be another, more contemporary political reason for DeKnight’s comments beyond a wish to humanise his subject. By restyling Crassus as the head of a corporation of contented ‘professional slavers’ rather than the nasty, oppressive exploiter of his historical and scholarly reception, the series offers an intriguing contrast with Jeffrey Tatum’s reading of the 1960 film as a eulogisation of ‘the values of American Main Street’ which entailed underplaying Crassus’s historical reputation for rampant capitalism and greed.\textsuperscript{664} Whether the writers were aware of this strand in the film’s reception scholarship is unknown. However, taking the socio-political context of the series into account, it is possible to interpret the series’ focus on the virtues of social justice and equality through the slave rebellion (which

\textsuperscript{663} Slaves might accrue savings from their work - known as a \textit{peculium} - but any right to the money was purely at the discretion of the master (\textit{Digest}, 41.10).
\textsuperscript{664} Tatum, 2004. 143.
even Crassus claims to share) as an implicit critique of capitalist, specifically American, greed, so brutally exposed in the 2008 financial crash and later critiqued during the Occupy Wall Street protests.

This is shown in several ways. Firstly, despite Batiatus’s claim that Crassus ‘shits gold’ (S0109), Crassus’s greed (although not his wealth) is underplayed in the series in favour of his social egalitarianism, in order to align his character ideologically with Spartacus. Secondly, the series’ ahistorical depiction of Crassus as a man of comparatively lowly social origins makes it easier for him to appreciate Spartacus’s desire for social and economic justice. Thirdly, while he seeks to destroy the rebellion because of its threat to Rome, it is implied that his actions are not driven by financial reasons (the loss of his slave ‘property’) but ruthless political ambition, an interpretation which links back to Ward’s revisionist approach. So where the film may have underplayed Crassus’s capitalist greed in order not to offend American audience faith in the dream of wealth and social advancement, it does the same in the Starz series but for different reasons: to make Crassus relatable to a subscriber base likely to be more critical of the untrammelled capitalism which precipitated the 2008 crash, the consequences of which may still have been felt in 2013 when the season was originally broadcast. This may also help to explain his character’s affinity with the slaves’ social grievances, even if his defence of slavery conforms to the political and ideological values of his own class.

---

665 Appian praised his ‘birth and wealth’ (*Civil Wars*, 118).
666 I have been following DeKnight’s Twitter feed for four years and he is firmly in the liberal camp of the Democratic Party, an advocate of social justice, gender and sexual equality and a capitalist system that serves everyone, not a wealthy elite.
This analysis of his character suggests that Crassus is clearly exceptional in not sharing other Romans’ instinctive contempt for the slave class, a feature of his character reconstruction which aligns with the series’ nuanced approach to the depiction of slavery as more than a simplistic ‘slaves good/Romans bad’ binary. Unlike his cinematic predecessor’s aristocratic obsession with ‘rigid ceremony’, 667 which prevents him from understanding Spartacus’s appeal, this Crassus also possesses a unique and even admirable ability to see beyond both background and status to recognise qualities in others. Paradoxically, Crassus’s attempts to understand Spartacus not only reveal aspects of his character, but also underscore the fundamental differences between them, and why the internal logic of the series prevents any reconciliation between the interests of masters and slaves. Whereas Crassus pays lip-service to notions of humanity when dealing with his own slave entourage, or equality when discussing the rights of talented slaves, Spartacus displays a genuine commitment to unconditional egalitarianism in his leadership of the rebellion. He welcomes slaves based on need, embracing and sheltering all victims regardless of prior status, skills or abilities. Where Spartacus understands and practises notions of social and political equality, for Crassus it is little more than empty rhetoric. Roman interests, which include the defence and preservation of slavery, drive his actions.

Ultimately, the reasons for Crassus’s characterisation come down to what best serves the drama. He may have been refashioned as a more approachable figure in order to differentiate him sufficiently from the proto-fascist sexual predator of the film version, a compelling but politically outdated figure for an audience with no

667 Paul, 2013: 207.
recollection of the totalitarian regimes his character references; as Gregory Daugherty correctly notes, ‘a new kind of hero requires a new kind of villain’.\(^668\) As with the film, the central Spartacus/Crassus rivalry is an important ingredient in the series’ depiction of master/slave relations, and must be convincing and dramatically compelling to attract audiences.\(^669\) By drawing parallels between them and not making Crassus a one-dimensional antagonist, it heightens tension, complicates the central slaves good/Romans bad binary, and creates the basis for a dramatic and thrilling personal confrontation on the battlefield in the season’s finale.

Conclusion

This analysis of Romans and their attitudes to slavery has revealed several important issues. The reversal in the master/slave relation power dynamic illuminates further the condition of slavery, while also highlighting the central role of rape in the lives of women in the series. It also shows the recurring importance of the theme of status in the interplay between Romans and slaves, as well as the precariousness of freedom; it is certainly a desirable goal, but it is not an unalloyed good and suggests a nuancing of the primacy of liberty in these series. Analysis of Roman attitudes to slavery from a range of texts suggest that they are key to understanding Romans’ moral character. ‘Good’ Romans (and definitions vary) treat their slaves well, because modern audiences are more likely to align with characters who recognise slave humanity. Therefore, when a film or TV series wishes to ‘heroise’ a Roman, it either ignores slaves entirely, as inconvenient reminders of the unpaid labour upon which these societies depended or positions them as friends or confidantes of the

---

\(^{668}\) Daugherty, 2016:72.
\(^{669}\) Tatum, 2004: 129. He calls him ‘Spartacus reversed’ (142).
Roman character. In *Spartacus* and *Rome*, Romans’ venality is in direct relation to their callous or indifferent treatment and ‘othering’ of slaves, and in the vast majority of cases brutality, violence and ignorant prejudice are the norm. This suggests the presence of a conventional way of representing master/slave relations which is invariably antagonistic and exploitative, if not always sadistic or cruel.

Yet *Spartacus* also features several exceptions and nuances in the depiction of Roman attitudes. Friendships with slaves, allegiance to the rebel cause or disgust at their elite compatriots’ behaviour, suggests that the series is aiming at a more complex retelling of master/slave relations than a simple binary that equates Romans with brutality and cruelty, slaves with morality and oppression/subjugation might indicate. Just as there are flawed slave characters, so there are empathetic Roman ones. This is confirmed in comments made by DeKnight that he featured ‘dissatisfied’ Romans helping the rebels because he believed that it was historically accurate, although there is nothing in the record to suggest that the slaves attracted Roman supporters. On the other hand, there are certain limits to this ‘goodness’ and relations are much more opaque and ambivalent than the simplistic approach adopted by the ‘Christian’ or ‘Caesar’ narratives cited earlier. The profile of these sympathisers also attests to the perennial injustices of the Roman system, and why the rebellion is so important (and perhaps why it failed). The majority are not powerful members of the elite, but vulnerable, social and political outcasts, disenfranchised, and excluded.

---

670 DVD Audio Commentary, S0206.
With Crassus the situation is more complicated, and his character’s ‘humanisation’ in the series is strongly linked to his relationships with, and attitudes towards, slaves. However, while he lacks the contempt and patrician arrogance of his 1960 and 2004 predecessors and empathises to a degree with the slaves’ desire for social equality, his treatment of his lover Kore and vicious harrying of the slave rebels, demonstrate that he is still as ‘Roman’ as Batiatus in his political exploitation of the slave rebellion. Whether this is just an implicit recognition of human nature as innately competitive – inequality and social injustice are ‘inevitable’ and there will always be victims – or a call to arms against discrimination based on status is unclear, and _Spartacus_ could certainly be interpreted both ways. It is hoped that this analysis of Crassus will open the way for a wider consideration of the way these texts are shaped by the social and political movements of their production contexts, and how far contemporary concerns around corporate greed and social and income inequality can be mapped onto the classical past.
Conclusion

My contention from the beginning was that Starz Spartacus offers audiences a version of slavery that reflects the series’ original socio-political, cultural, industrial and production contexts, and privileges themes and ideas relevant to the receiving culture. DeKnight himself has stated that he ‘will always opt for what delivers the most dramatic impact over strict adherence to historical fact’,\(^\text{671}\) describing his approach to the sources as being ‘historically adjacent’.\(^\text{672}\) This conscious privileging of entertainment and drama over history also, unsurprisingly, drives the series’ representation of Roman slavery and shapes decisions around content, character and narrative.

However, this analysis has shown that the series is not purely a piece of commercial entertainment, or a modern updating of the story of an inspirational resistance icon for a new generation of TV viewers comfortable with graphic sexual content and extreme violence. It also perhaps deliberately encourages its audience to reflect upon important contemporary political, social and moral issues. These include political, social and economic inequality; the fundamental importance of freedom and bodily and sexual rights, and what happens when these are arbitrarily denied; why questioning and even resisting injustice is a moral necessity, despite the costs; disempowerment and the way we treat the vulnerable and socially disadvantaged in society; status and identity; and the sometimes problematic representation of race, violence, sexuality and gender in modern popular culture. The portrayal of slavery

\(^{671}\) DeKnight, 2010.
\(^{672}\) McGee, 2013. By this he presumably means showing an awareness of the bare historical facts of Spartacus’s life and the Roman slave system, while amplifying those aspects likely to appeal to a paying TV audience.
also draws attention to the consequences, for both victims and perpetrators, of othering, demeaning, stigmatising and ultimately dehumanising entire social groups, important issues in a world where bigotry, xenophobia, racism and overt anti-immigrant feelings are on the rise.

A summary of the main findings will clarify how the series engages with these contemporary issues. Chapter two’s analysis of the series’ reception of Spartacus in the context of his reputation as a strong and unequivocal resistance figure, showed that the series largely follows this tradition by privileging resistance to slavery (and by extension any form of oppression) and even validating rebellion as the appropriate moral response to its many injustices. However, it also showed how the series complicates the influential 1960 film tradition by representing these slaves as nuanced, relatable, even morally ambivalent characters, whose complex attitudes to resistance, liberty and servitude are potentially more representative of actual Roman slaves. Chapter three established the central importance of sex, sexuality and sexual violence to the series’ vision of Roman slavery as a fundamentally disempowering and dehumanising institution, particularly for women. The disproportionate sexualisation of female slaves compared to their male counterparts, particularly the absence of male rape, also showed that women are still disproportionally the object of the male gaze in modern popular culture, an enduring stereotype that the depiction of slavery in Spartacus does little to challenge.

Chapter four showed how the series uses the non-sexual body to further underscore slaves’ worthlessness and lack of status, deploying the kinds of motifs (collars, chains, branding and renaming) widely featured in other slave narratives. It also
showed how the use and abuse of the slave body has strong resonances for our own contemporary understanding of humanity, and the notion that a free person is defined as someone immune from unfettered physical restraint, exploitation, and abuse at the hands of others. Chapter five showed how the use of violence by slaves, rather than against them, complicates servile behaviour by nuancing the 1960 film’s idealistic rejection of revenge and exploring the implications of brutalising and dehumanising the powerless. It also underscored the role of violence in modern ideas about heroism. Chapter six’s study of race showed that, while Roman slavery was not racially categorised, it is not always possible to divorce race from popular perceptions of slavery, particularly for western audiences. It also showed how the series builds upon the tradition of the black male gladiator in ancient world cinema and latterly TV, while also problematising the dominant resistance tradition embodied in the 1960 film’s Draba. Chapter seven showed that attitudes towards slaves and slavery can yield important insights into the morality or otherwise of Roman characters. It also highlighted, through the delicate line between slave and free status, what happens when social, civic or economic rights are suddenly undermined.

In terms of the primary influences shaping its vision of slavery, the series blends popular cultural, industrial and historical factors. The final audience in mainstream TV dramas is the mainstream viewer, not the historian or classical scholar, and the Starz series’ use of the ancient sources in the service of the central rebellion narrative is shaped by these commercial priorities. It has been argued the Starz channel’s approach to history is ‘characterized by blood, gore and explicit sexual content’, 673

and this accounts for the series’ foregrounding of generic cable TV tropes such as sexuality, nudity and extreme violence. These themes can be justified in the context of slavery, reinforcing ideas around status and power, but it would be naïve to assume that their ubiquitous presence is driven purely by a desire for historical accuracy. Nor does the series claim to represent the totality of ancient slavery; it was always a gladiatorial story and the depiction of the institution reflects that narrow dramatic focus. These commercial priorities help to explain why the Starz series has more in common, aesthetically, culturally and narratively, with other recent cable productions such as Rome or Game of Thrones or more recent gladiatorial slave films such as Gladiator, than the original 1960 film or the network produced 2004 version. The series’ use of generic features of many modern slave narratives, namely violence, rape, and physical markers such as collars and branding, also suggests that, despite its ancient setting, it belongs within a wider tradition of representing slavery onscreen. It uses these motifs because audiences would expect them to appear in a slave drama. Yet there is still evidence that the writers took note of the historical record. For instance, Roman attitudes to gladiatorial combat and slavery, the free/slave binary as a way of determining status, and the focus on the divisions and brutalities of the rebellion. This attests to the programme makers’ use of historical consultants Aaron Irving and Jeffrey Stevens to authenticate their vision of slavery.674

Additionally, there are several political influences of a certain type, notably liberal or even left-wing. The most significant is the championing of meritocracy through Spartacus’s speeches about rights and equality, and the reworking of Crassus as a

674 DeKnight describes their contribution as ‘invaluable’ (2010).
social egalitarian. Having followed DeKnight’s twitter feed for several years, his
depiction of the slave rebellion as a way of confronting and resisting inherent
inequalities mirrors his unequivocal condemnation of the Trump presidency and
Republican Party values, and support for liberal social and political policies and
values. These slaves’ demands for freedom, rights and equality could reflect
contemporary frustration in certain quarters about the status quo, where basic rights
are frequently curtailed or arbitrarily disregarded. It also encourages us to see the
world through the eyes of the downtrodden, the helpless and vulnerable, and people
without sexual or bodily rights in our own societies. Furthermore, while the slaves
may have lost, their resistance shows contemporary audiences why freedom is such a
cherished value in contemporary western society, what happens when it is lost, how
easily brutalised people become accustomed to their new status, and why people
have pursued and defended liberty as a fundamental human right. Finally, while
Roman society was deeply stratified and the distinction between slave and free was
fundamental to enforcing those differences, the recurring focus on social status (and
how it underpins many of the worst abuses) sheds light on the entrenched class
systems in many contemporary societies, where one’s place in the social, political
and economic order is determined by circumstances rather than talent or merit. There
are many places today where disadvantaged populations lack a social safety net and
the series’ portrayal of the fine line between freedom and servitude/exploitation
helps to expose the consequences of economic precariousness and rightlessness.

This thesis has shown that studying slavery as a theme in its own right is worth
pursuing and should no longer be a marginalised topic within the discipline of
classical receptions. Inevitably, many issues remain to be explored and future
research avenues might include: why has slaves’ importance to Roman society and economy still not been fully acknowledged in popular culture beyond the Spartacus canon? Why so little recognition of slaves in depictions of ancient Greece? What can a complimentary study of the depiction of liberty in ancient world television show us about the way this value is understood in the modern world? What can a comparative, transmedial analysis of the representation of slavery across popular culture, through other media such as gaming, reveal? And how does the depiction of Roman slavery in modern sitcoms such as Plebs (2013-) sharpen our understanding of slavery in these dramatic texts? My analysis to date of Roman comedic receptions, and this series’ depiction of slavery in relation to Spartacus, suggests that there are many untapped opportunities for research on slavery in ancient world comedy in film and television.

Finally, although this thesis belongs within the discipline of classical reception studies, it is hoped that it will encourage academic conversations about the continuing importance of the study of slavery, still a neglected subject, in modern popular culture more widely. References across this thesis to recent TV series such as Underground and Roots, or the proliferation of antebellum slave films indicate a wider public appetite for exploring the legacy and horrors of historical slave systems through fictional dramas and other popular media. The release of Harriet (2019) about the American ‘Moses’ who led fugitive slaves to safety, shows that stories of

---

675 Transmedia, defined as ‘process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience’ (Jenkins, 2011). On the benefits of games for teaching about freedom and agency, see Mukherjee, 2016 and Hammer, 2017 on how games with a slavery theme can be used to resurrect previously marginalised groups.

676 Maurice, 2017 offers a useful starting point for examining these film and TV comedic receptions together, but she only touches briefly upon slavery in relation to Up Pompeii (1969-70).
slavery and resistance continue to fascinate, and *Spartacus*, despite its ancient origins and the five year time difference, should be seen as part of wider discussions about how we represent and memorialise slavery in the modern world.
Bibliography

Television


Atlantis (2013-15). Created by Jonny Capps, Julian Murphy and Howard Overman. BBC.


Barabbas (2013). Directed by Roger Young. ReelzChannel.


Boardwalk Empire (2010-14). Created by Terence Winter. HBO

The Book of Negroes (2016). Directed by Clement Virgo. CBC.


Boudicca/Warrior Queen (2003). Directed by Bill Anderson. ITV.

Breaking Bad (2008-13). Created by Vince Gilligan. AMC.


Deadwood (2003-5). Showrunner David Milch. HBO.


Game of Thrones (2011-19). Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. HBO.
*Homeland* (2011-). Developed by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa. Showtime.

*Howard’s End* (2017). Directed by Hettie McDonald. BBC

*I, Claudius* (1976). Directed by Herbert Wise. BBC.


*John Adams* (2008). Directed by Tom Hooper. HBO.

*Julius Caesar* (2002). Directed by Uli Edel. De Angelis Group, TNT.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017-). Created by Bruce Miller. Hulu.


*The Last Kingdom* (2015-). Writers various (main writer Stephen Butchard).

BBC/Netflix.

*The Long Song* (2018). Directed by Mahalia Bellow. BBC.

*Les Misérables* (2019). Adapted by Andrew Davies. BBC.


*Merlin* (2008-12). Created by Julian Jones, Jake Michie, Julian Murphy, and Johnny Capps. BBC.


*Plebs* (2013-). Written by Sam Leifer and Tom Basden. ITV2.


*Robin Hood* (2006-9). Developed by Dominic Minghella and Foz Allen. BBC.


Roots (1977). Directed by Marvin J. Chomsky. ABC.


The Sopranos (1999-2007). Created by David Chase. HBO.

The Spanish Princess (2019). Developed by Emma Frost and Matthew Graham. STARZ.


Spartacus: Blood and Sand (2010). Created by Steven S. DeKnight. STARZ.

Spartacus: Gods of the Arena (2011). Created by Steven S. DeKnight. STARZ.

Spartacus: Vengeance (2012). Created by Steven S. DeKnight. STARZ.

Spartacus: War of the Damned (2013). Created by Steven S. DeKnight. STARZ.


Troy: Fall of a City (2018). Written by David Farr, Nancy Harris, Mika Watkins, and Joe Barton. BBC/Netflix.


Underground (2016-17). Created by Misha Green and Jo Pokasky. WGBA.

Up Pompeii (1969-70). Written by Talbot Rothwell and Sid Colin. BBC/ITV.

The Vikings (2013-). Created by Michael Hirst. History Channel.

Westworld (2016-). Created by Christopher Nolan and Lisa Joy. HBO.

The Wire (2002-8). Created by David Simon. HBO.
Films Texts

12 Years a Slave (2013). Directed by Steve McQueen. Lionsgate


The Birth of a Nation (1915). Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. David W. Griffith Corp.


The Dark Knight Rises (2012). Directed by Christopher Nolan. Warner Brothers


The Hunger Games (2012). Directed by Gary Ross. Lionsgate

The Hunger Games: Catching Fire (2013). Directed by Francis Lawrence. Lionsgate

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay 1 (2014). Directed by Francis Lawrence. Lionsgate

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay 2 (2015). Directed by Francis Lawrence. Lionsgate

The Keeping Room (2014). Directed by Daniel Barber. Lionsgate.


Ancient Works

Most of the classical references come from anthologies, particularly Winkler (2007c) and Fagan (2011). However in certain cases specific works have been consulted.


Works Cited


299
Cavalli, L (2017), ‘Classicist Receives Death Threats from Alt-Right over Art Historical Essay’, ArtForum, June 15th, [online] Available at


Chasmar, J. (2014), 'Noah' screenwriter defends white casting, says race doesn't matter in a 'mythical story', The Washington Times, April 16th [online] Available at


Clarke, S. (2018), ‘Troy: Fall of a City’ team talk casting and diversity in the BBC and Netflix epic’, Variety, February 23rd [online] Available at


Genz, S. (2016), ‘I’m not going to fight them, I’m going to fuck them!’ Sexist Liberalism and Gender and Politics in Game of Thrones’, in Gjelsvik and Schubart (eds.), pp. 231-266.


Harris, R. (2009), Imperium, Penguin.

Harris, R. (2010), Lustrum, Penguin.


Hughes, S. (2015), ‘Rape on TV: a justified look at violence against women or a crude plot device?’ *The Guardian*, 13th December [online] Available at


Hunt, P. (2018), Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery, Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons.


Jones, B. (2014), ‘*Game of Thrones, Sex and HBO: where did TV’s sexual pioneer go wrong?*’, *Jezebel*, 6th May [online] Available at https://jezebel.com/game-of-


327


Lushkov H.A. (2017), *You Win or You Die: The Ancient World of Game of Thrones*,


Older, D. (2013), ‘It’s time to take the white savior out of slave narratives’, *Salon*, 18th December [online]. Available at


338


Yuan, J. (2014), ‘Orange Is the New Black is the only TV show that understands rape’, *Salon*, July 8th [online] Available at


Appendix

List of Episodes in Starz’s *Spartacus*

**Prequel: Gods of the Arena (2011)**

Episode 1: Past Transgressions
Episode 2: Missio
Episode 3: Paterfamilias
Episode 4: Beneath The Mask
Episode 5: Reckoning
Episode 6: The Bitter End

**Season One: Blood and Sand (2010)**

Episode 1: The Red Serpent
Episode 2: Sacramentum Gladiatorum
Episode 3: Legends
Episode 4: The Thing in the Pit
Episode 5: Shadow Games
Episode 6: Delicate Things
Episode 7: Great and Unfortunate Things
Episode 8: Mark of the Brotherhood
Episode 9: Whore
Episode 10: Party Favors
Episode 11: Old Wounds
Episode 12: Revelations
Episode 13: Kill Them All

**Season Two: Vengeance (2012)**

Episode 1: Fugitivus
Episode 2: A Place In This World
Episode 3: The Greater Good
Episode 4: Empty Hands
Episode 5: Libertus
Episode 6: Chosen Path
Episode 7: Sacramentum
Episode 8: Balance
Episode 9: Monsters
Episode 10: Wrath of the Gods

**Season Three: War of the Damned (2013)**

Episode 1: Enemies of Rome
Episode 2: Wolves at the Gate
Episode 3: Men of Honor
Episode 4: Decimation
Episode 5: Blood Brothers
Episode 6: Spoils of War
Episode 7: Mors Indeccepta
Episode 8: Separate Paths
Episode 9: The Dead and the Dying
Episode 10: Victory
List of main characters in Starz’s *Spartacus*

**Slaves**

Spartacus: gladiator and rebel leader.

Crixus: co rebel leader and chief rival to Spartacus.

Oenomaus/Doctore: chief trainer and rebel leader.

Naevia: body slave to Lucretia and lover to Crixus.

Gannicus: gladiator, later freedman and rebel leader.

Agron: gladiator and rebel leader.

Mira: slave and rebel.

Kore: lover to Crassus.

Diona: executed after a failed escape.

Melitta: body slave to Lucretia and wife to Oenomaus

Ashur: gladiator and main slave antagonist.

Sura: wife to Spartacus.

Nasir: rebel and lover of Agron

Barca: gladiator.

Pietros: errand boy and lover of Barca.

**Romans**

Batiatus: lanista and owner of Spartacus.

Lucretia: Batiatus’s wife.

Illythia: senator’s daughter and ‘friend’ to Lucretia.
Glaber: praetor, husband to Illythia and responsible for enslaving Spartacus and his wife.

Crassus: Roman general and chief pursuer of Spartacus.

Caesar: ally to Crassus.

Tiberius: son of Crassus.

Laeta: enslaved Roman patrician, rebel.

Lucius: exiled Roman, ally to Spartacus.